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The Noblewoman and the She-Devil

*A Comparative Study of the Role, Treatment
and Characterisation of Women in Vǫlsunga
Saga, the Nibelungenlied and Þiðreks Saga*
Af Bern

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Julie Meyer

Abstract

The infamous Nibelung legend features some of the most impressive female characters in medieval literature. At the heart of this comparative study stand the well- and not-so-well-known women of the Nibelung story-world who through speech and agency actively take part in the events of the narratives and openly oppose the patriarchal world order. Through a close reading of the *Nibelungenlied*, *Völsunga saga* and *Þiðreks saga af Bern* the role and characterisation of women is analysed and their treatment in the sources examined. Two forms of womanhood come to the fore, the ideal Noblewoman and the challenging She-Devil, that problematise and shed light on women's lives, marriage, misogyny and the varying concepts of courtly and uncourtly love.

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Introduction

The leading women of the Nibelung legend have long been at the centre of scholarly research. This thesis seeks to not only present and analyse the well- and not-so-well-known female characters of *Völsunga saga*, *Þiðreks saga af bern* and the *Nibelungenlied*, but more importantly compare the role, treatment and characterisation of these women in their differing traditions. Furthermore, it is an attempt to affirm the existence of an extant image of pre-Christian Germanic womanhood, provide testimony over possible pre-Christian matriarchal structures¹ and the potential marginalisation of women in the 13th-century sources, as proposed by scholars such as Jenny Jochens (1996, 1998), Albrecht Classen (1991), Karin Rinn (1996), respectively.

The 13th century saw a sudden popularity of the Nibelung legend, historically rooted in the 5th-6th century, with various versions all over Europe being written down, enabling this legend to resurface in the minds of the High Medieval audience. What triggered this occurrence is unknown, but it is a legend which fascinated different people across the continent, reaching far corners such as Iceland or the Faroe Islands, thus resulting in the creation of a time- and space-overarching ‘story-world’. The individual versions of the legend can further our understanding of women’s history as well as bygone gender ideologies formed in various social, cultural, geographical and political backgrounds of the Nordic-Germanic continuum.

The sources used for this particular research are the *Nibelungenlied*, *Völsunga saga* and *Þiðreks saga af bern* by reason of being the most coherent literary works concerned with the Nibelung legend, providing an insight into various cultural backgrounds and gender ideologies. The analysis of female agency will be granted through a continuous intertextual approach, in which Old Norse and German traditions will be compared and differences pointed out, ultimately displaying how the same legend developed individually in various geographical, cultural and social spheres. Hence, I attempt to answer questions such as: Are women treated differently in the three narratives? If so, how and why? Are women in one tradition exposed to more violence than in another? Was the cultural and sociological background of Northern and Central Europe essential in the differing depictions and treatment

¹ It should be noted that the term „matriarchy“ is in this thesis not to be understood as a totalitarian societal concept that excludes the male gender, such as that of the Greek Amazons, but rather a pre-patriarchal society in which men and women could obtain equal positions and rank.

of the female gender? Do the social issues visualised by the Nordic and German traditions indeed uncover the values and mindset of the cultures behind the production of these manuscripts?

The literary analysis starts off with a discussion on the origin and transmission of the texts at hand and how the Germanic legend became a wide-spread medieval epic. The workings of the Nordic-Germanic continuum are explained further in the following chapter, as the Nibelung legend is the centrepiece of a „story-world“ transgressing social and geographical frameworks over a prolonged period of time. The texts treated in this study thus exhibit a variety of ideologies and social values, and offer a multifaceted image of women in society and the literary context. Next, the role of women in medieval literature comes into focus and through the categorisation and study from various scholars, as well as my own, the various forms of agency of female characters will be exemplified.

By way of different examples of the story’s compilations, I then attempt to compare the role and development of female characters through an extensive reading of the sources. Significant and pre-dominantly female storylines will be put in contrasting juxtaposition and it will be investigated how they differ from each other. This research is thus an examination and comparative study of the development and role of women in the Nibelung ‘story-world’ in light of different versions of that very same legend from various times and places.

The epic of the hero Siegfried, or Sigurðr, is not just a typical narrative of the heroic shaping and journey of men but it also illustrates the power and influence of women over male actions. Women play a major role in the progress of this particular story, they are no passive characters but are crucial for the ongoing storyline, motivating action and provoking conflict. Therefore, the characters of Brünhild/Brynhildr and Kriemhild/Guðrún/Grímhildr will stand at the heart of this thesis as they are active and dominant characters in the apparent story of men. Other female characters of these stories such as Signý, Sieglind/Sisibe and Helche/Erka will also enter the limelight in the course of this study². Thus, this survey on the role and treatment of female characters in the literary tradition of the Nibelung legend is attempting to be a contribution to women’s and gender studies, highlighting the cultural conditioning of these sources towards women’s literary subjectivity and objectivity.

² On the differing characters and divergence of character names, see *Appendix: Genealogy*.

Over the past century many scholars have devoted their academic career to the source material that is of value for the present study. A considerable amount of research was conducted on questions concerning historicity, intertextuality, analysis of various characters and several motives, such as the dragon slaying episode, and much more. Additionally, also the female characters of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Völsunga saga*, especially Brünhild/Brynhildr and Kriemhild/Guðrún, have been the subject of various studies, while the other women of the Nibelung legend were more or less neglected. Furthermore, the comparative study of female counterparts and their varying role, agency and treatment can be found lacking, which this study attempts to remedy.

The recently growing gender studies and women's history in association with saga and medieval epic scholarship is a relatively fast expanding field of study which still offers ample scope to analyse medieval literature in light of the newly gained insights, changing the way of *how* we read female characters. This thesis attempts to fill some of these gaps in the research on female characters forced to navigate the male sphere, and seeks to contribute to the remarkable studies conducted by scholars such as Jenny Jochens, Ursula Schulze, Albrecht Classen, Gerda Lerner, Jana Schulman or Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir.

Chapter 1. Origin and Transmission

The following chapter is concerned with the primary source material and will thus explore not only the literary, but also the historical and geographical origins of the intertwined stories of the *Nibelungenlied*, *Völsunga saga* and *Piðreks saga af bern*.

1.1. Origins And Rise Of A Medieval Epic

The essence of the stories and characters portrayed in these medieval epics and sagas originated from various historical events which unfolded in the precarious 4th to 6th century. That was a time of substantial change in the power dynamics of Western Europe, when the authority of the Roman Empire ceased and various Germanic tribes pushed further into Roman territory, initiating a period of unrest which resulted in the collapse of the northern frontier³. Settling in Central Europe, these tribes, migrating from eastern Europe, as well as Central Asia, developed into Germanic kingdoms. Among them were also the Burgundians and the Huns, on whose court the events of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Piðreks saga* unfold. What remains is the memory of this inordinate migration which not only resulted in an oral heritage, but would also come to develop into what we know today as epic poems, thus becoming an essential element of the cultural lore of Nordic societies as these legends spread across Europe⁴.

It was during this period of migration that the legends behind medieval epics developed, but it would take until the Early Middle Ages, a time when Christianity took roots in European society, that the slow secularisation of these stories occurred⁵. But it was some time in the later Middle Ages (10th - 13th century), during the blossoming period of feudal Europe, that these hybrids of legend, history and myth based in oral tradition were gradually written down in multifarious renditions and adaptations, after being restaged in a courtly medieval setting⁶.

³ Emile Amt, *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1.

⁴ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, "The Origin and Development of the Fornaldarsögur as Illustrated by Völsunga Saga," in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), pp. 59-82, 59.

⁵ Bert Nagel, *Das Nibelungenlied: Stoff, Form, Ethos* (Frankfurt am Main: Hirschgraben, 1965), 40; Ármann Jakobsson, "The Earliest Legendary Saga Manuscripts," in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), pp. 21-31, 28-29; Torfi H. Tulinius, "Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), pp. 447-461, 447/451.

⁶ Francis G. Gentry, "Key Concepts in the Nibelungenlied," in *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied*, ed. Winder McConnell (Columbia: Camden House, 1998), pp. 66-78, 66.

It should be assumed that the Nibelung legend was known to all Germanic people by any means, thus creating a common identity not just among German-speaking cultures settling along the Rhine and Danube rivers but also in Northern regions such as Scandinavia, the British Isles, the Shetland and Faeroe Islands as well as Iceland. The transmission over time would hence result in a continuous evolution and diversification of the tale. Thus, contingent upon the social, geographical and cultural background, the legend developed and expanded over time, plots changed and characters were added, resulting in an idiosyncratic derivation from the initial source material or the presumed „*Urlied*“. Ultimately, it is perfectly obvious that a disclosure of the precise origin and primal source material is futile⁷.

Determining an exact time or date in which the legend arrived in Northern Europe and was changed and written down appropriate to the Norse audience comes to naught, though it was suggested that Germanic-Nordic trade routes in the sixth century resulted in a distribution of the legend northwards until it possibly arrived in Iceland around the ninth century where it eventually was written down and preserved in various lays and poems⁸. Subsequently, a cohesive narrative originated in early 13th century Germany where an anonymous author reworked the tale into the infamous *Nibelungenlied*. That no tradition completely resembles the next is explicable through an initial oral tradition in which there is not one consistent work but a fluid, multicultural story-world⁹, which spanned over the greater territory of Middle and Northern Europe¹⁰ over an extended period of time. The concept of such a „story-world“ suggests a collective entity consisting of characters, objects, ideas, stories and locations gathering around a specific event or character. In this case it is the characters of Sigurðr/Siegfried or Þiðrekr/Dietrich, or the lives of the heroes that both culminate in the downfall of the Burgundians. A „story-world“ is a time and place overarching concept that ultimately

⁷ Daniel Bussier Shumway, *The Nibelungenlied: Translated from the Middle High German with an Introductory Sketch and Notes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), xv.

⁸ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “The Origin and Development of the Fornaldarsögur as Illustrated by Völsunga Saga,” in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), pp. 59-82, 65-66, 71.

⁹ A concept most notably established in Timothy P. Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008) and applied to Old Norse literature in consideration of both non-Christian and Christian influences in Lars Boje Mortensen, Lehtonen Tuomas M S., and Alexandra Bergholm, eds., *The Performance of Christian and Pagan Storyworlds: Non-Canonical Chapters of the History of Nordic Medieval Literature* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2013).

¹⁰ Hermann Reichert, “Welche Nibelungen Zogen Nordwärts? Oder: Wie Kamen Die Nibelungen in Norwegen an?,” in *3. Pöchlerner Heldenliedgespräch. Die Rezeption Des Nibelungenliedes.*, ed. Klaus Zatloukal, vol. 16 (Wien, 1996), pp. 157-171, 168.

attempts to explain the many variations of a particular story, depending on the composer and his target-audience. Thus, a single composer internalises a story-world, creating new elements and omitting others, adding his own viewpoints reflecting the individuals time and place (further discussed in Chapter 2.). The many manuscripts of various chronological and geographical origin must therefore be seen as individual works of literature which are closely related by retelling the same legend in light of their audiences' tastes and the variations of the initial oral tradition. Thus, the author of the German epic addressed the people of the Austro-Bavarian courts, whereas the Icelandic *Völsunga saga* was directed towards the households of landholders and the Norwegian *Þiðreks saga* towards the court of the kings of Norway¹¹.

Hence, over the course of time the Nibelung legend has been treated or mentioned in various sources through the centuries, such as the *Lex Burgundionum* (6th century), *Waltharius* (10th or even 9th century), *Beowulf* (8th-10th century), various Eddic lays written down in the 13th century (*Brot and Sigurðarkviða en skamma*, *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, i.a.), *Hildebrandslied* (9th century), *Waldere* (10th century), the *Völsunga saga* (Early 13th century), the *Nibelungenlied* (Early 13th century) the *Þiðreks saga* (13th century) and multiple smaller poems and ballads of various origins¹². The Nibelung legend is special in this respect due to the symbiosis between oral and written traditions.

Here a crucial question arises: What can we say about, and deduce from, oral tradition by only reference of 13th century written sources? As Aaron J. Gurevich once pointed out:

[...] the oral tradition of the distant past could not be directly recorded, and everything which we learn of it in the sources, the text of the literary tradition, is only an indirect reflection. What is more, this reflection of the oral through the written, which is always and inevitably transformed and distorted, has been filtered through ecclesiastical ideology¹³.

¹¹ Kaaren Grimstad, *Völsunga Saga. The Saga of the Völsungs: the Icelandic Text According to MS Nks 1824 b, 4o* (Saarbrücken: AQ-Verlag, 2005), Introduction, 15.

¹² Kaaren Grimstad and Ray M. Wakefield, "Monstrous Mates: The Leading Ladies of the Nibelungenlied and Völsunga Saga," in *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity*, ed. Sara S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 235-252, 238.

¹³ Aaron J. Gurevich and Ann Shukman, "Oral and Written Culture of the Middle Ages: Two 'Peasant Visions' of the Late Twelfth-Early Thirteenth Centuries," *New Literary History* 16, no. 1 (1984): pp. 51-66, 51.

It thus proves impossible to distinguish where orality and literacy meet in a written text and trying to separate „the wheat from the chaff“– oral from written material, is unavailing¹⁴. This thesis hence debates if the narratives at the centre of this research really transmit the specific mindset of the people from a time of orality (pre-Christian past) or if it is more perceivable that what we are left with is mostly the reverent impression of the 13th century mind on the distant, or not so distant, past. Furthermore, the narratives discussed here are the product of a „transitional culture between orality and writing“ and statements such as „*en þat er sögn sumra manna*“ or „*Uns ist in alten maeren Wunders vil geseit*“ become evidence for the „reciprocal influences between folklore and learned knowledge, as well as local and foreign traditions, i.e. Christian and classical culture“ and thus also a reference to the memory of different cultures from various moments in time¹⁵. Nevertheless, with the variations between Latin, Old Norse as well as sources in Upper and Low German this legend offers a fulminant multilingual literary corpus with various cultural influences.

Comprehensibly, not all of these sources can come into consideration in this thesis, thus the focus shall be on *Völsunga saga* (in which the Eddic lays revolving around Sigurðr, Guðrún and Brynhildr were incorporated), the *Nibelungenlied* and *Piðreks saga af bern* which represents the fullest version of the *Dietrichsepik*.

1.2. The *Nibelungenlied*

The *Nibelungenlied*, originating around 1200, is to this day the most famous and important medieval epic of German literature. In the early 13th century the poem was competing against the, then *en vogue*, Arthurian tales, which were available to the German courts through translations and French originals. When such heroic and romantic tales rose in popularity, an anonymous author, presumably from the region of Passau, began his written transmission of regional tales about love, murder and heroic battles from the Burgundian and Franconian past.

In almost 10,000 verses this anonymous poet recreated the legend of the Nibelung and the downfall of the Burgundians. The success of the *Nibelungenlied* is imminent, between the 13th and 15th century 35 different manuscripts would be composed, within the medieval

¹⁴ Gísli Sigurðsson, “Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders,” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), pp. 285-301, 291.

¹⁵ Pernille Hermann, “Key Aspects of Memory and Remembering in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature,” in *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, ed. Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell, and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, vol. 4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 13-40, 14.

German literary corpus only surpassed by Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*¹⁶. The reasons for this success are unknown, but it has been suggested that it was either the familiarity of the audience with the original material, or the phenomenon of hearing about exciting stories of love and intrigues in a geographically and historically familiar background. Or maybe it was due to a nostalgic indulgence in the once so heroic past of German history, something that the Arthurian tales did not provide per se¹⁷. Therethrough, the *Nibelungenlied* provides a different perspective of the future where intrigues, revenge and murder ultimately lead to the downfall of heroes and powerful families, a realistic if not pessimistic view that must have been a diversion from what medieval audiences were used to¹⁸.

The reputation and fame of the *Nibelungenlied* can be observed through its evolution through time. The tale of the hero Siegfried and the queens Kriemhild and Brünhild has been revised, reproduced and passionately studied through time more often than any other heroic epic¹⁹. In the *Nibelungenlied*-scholarship one differentiates between three major manuscript groups, A, B and C, stemmatically assorted by the German philologist Karl Lachmann in the early 19th century. Lachmann appointed this categorisation through the various signatures on the manuscripts and differentiated the scripts by their last verse which alternated between „*daz ist der Nibelunge liet*“ or „*daz ist der Nibelunge nôt*“²⁰. The 19th century saw a great dispute between scholars exploring the source origin as well as the categorisation by Lachmann. In 1920, Andreas Heusler finally put an end to the argument by clearly defining the different stages of transmission as well as designating manuscript B as the oldest version of the *Nibelungenlied*²¹. Though these manuscripts do not alter much in content, the later manuscript C is known to hold „more modern, rationalistic“ views than the older versions and has so-called „pro-Kriemhild strophes“ that try to take the blame for the demise of the Burgundians away from the character of Kriemhild²².

¹⁶ Felix Genzmer, *Das Nibelungenlied* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2017), 386.

¹⁷ Hatto, *The Nibelungenlied*, 342.

¹⁸ Felix Genzmer, *Das Nibelungenlied* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2017), 386.

¹⁹ Hatto, *The Nibelungenlied*, 2004, 370.

²⁰ Karl Lachmann, *Der Nibelunge Noth Und Die Klage: Nach Der Ältesten Überlieferung mit Bezeichnung Des Unechten Und Mit Den Abweichungen Der Gemeinen Lesart* (Berlin: Reimer, 1841).

²¹ Andreas Heusler, *Nibelungensage Und Nibelungenlied: Die Stoffgeschichte Des Deutschen Heldenepos* (Dortmund: Ruhfus, 1921).

²² Hatto, *The Nibelungenlied*, 364.

1.3. *Völsunga saga*

The Saga of the Völsungs, written in 13th-century Iceland by an anonymous author, is a prose epic based on heroic poetry which tells one of the greatest legends of early Scandinavia. The incredible stories surrounding Sigurðr the dragon slayer as well as the *valkyrja* Brynhildr and the whetting Guðrún derive from older Norse, or Eddic, poetry, mostly preserved in the Codex Regius, a manuscript (MS) dated around 1270 containing 29 works of poetry in the Old Norse language. If *Völsunga* saga was inspired by the Codex Regius or an earlier no longer extant MS is debatable²³. The 13th-century Codex Regius (GkS 2365 4to) holds eighteen²⁴ Eddic poems treating the legends that would later be brought together in *Völsunga* saga. It is not clear if these stories initially belonged to one coherent story-world or if various separate legends were merged to create one cohesive narrative, crossing the lives and deeds of heroes of the past. However, this manuscript, holding the most important recollection of the Poetic Edda, is not complete and within the so-called Sigurðr cycle an eight-page lacuna befalls the Codex Regius. Only the saga of the Völsungs provides a possible glimpse of what might have taken place in the aforementioned lacuna, though the content is debated²⁵. The two most notable Eddic poems are beyond a doubt *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál*, with *Atlakviða* by some scholars presumed to be dating back to the ninth century²⁶, though this uncertain. *Völsunga* saga as such is only preserved in one single manuscript (Ny kgl. Saml. 1824b 4to)²⁷.

Apart from various Eddic lays, there is a possibility that *Völsunga* saga was influenced by *Þiðreks saga af bern*, a Norwegian translation of the *Dietrichsepik* from the 13th century mainly concerned with the character Þiðrekr ('Dietrich' in German) but also dealing with

²³ Ronald G. Finch, *The Saga of the Völsungs* (London: Nelson, 1965), Introduction. xxxviii

²⁴ *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I and II, Frá dauða Sinfjötla, Grippispá, Reginsmál, Fáfnismál, Sigrdrífumál, Brot af Sigurðarkviðu, Guðrúnarkviða, Sigurðarkviða in skamma, Helreið Brynhildar, Dráp Niflunga, Guðrúnarkviða in forna, Oddrúnargrátr, Atlakviða, Atlamál, Gurðúnarhvöt and Hamðismál.*

²⁵ Terry Gunnell, "Eddic Poetry," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), pp. 82-100, 89.

²⁶ Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda. Heroic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), vii.

²⁷ Byock, *The Saga of the Völsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*, 3.

semi-mythic heroes such as Sigurðr²⁸. Thus, it has been suggested that possibly three passages are derived from *Þiðreks saga*, chapters 32, 34 and 35, or from *Sigurðar saga*. This would suggest that *Völsunga saga* would have been written after the compilation of *Þiðreks saga* which dates approximately to 1250-1260. Finch states that there is „no doubt that Sigurðr’s description, VS chapter 23, is borrowed from *Þiðreks saga* af bern chapter 291“²⁹ however, one should leave open to debate, if said passages were truly taken from either saga or if they were rather part of the same legend variation, oral or written, that inspired the aforementioned sagas as well. Ultimately, the only thing one can be ascertained about the origin of *Völsunga saga* is that it was compiled between 1200 and 1270 in relation to the so-called *Ragnars saga*, by which the saga is followed in the preserved manuscript. There are indeed Norwegian elements in the text suggesting the possibility that the Icelandic *Völsunga saga* was copied from an older Norwegian exemplar, not necessarily *Þiðreks saga*³⁰.

Rich in traditional lore, the saga outlines the epic wars between the Huns, the Goths and the Burgundians, thus the saga is like the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* inspired by historical events of the migration period in the 4th and 5th century³¹. During the Viking Period (approximately 800–1070) the legend must have risen in popularity if one acknowledges the geographical distribution and many adaptations across the North Sea and the North Atlantic. In Iceland, a society of immigrants removed from the, under Christianisation, fast-changing European mainland, enabled for many tales, among them *Völsunga saga*, to be preserved and showed that „the Icelandic community was one in closer touch with its pre-Christian roots in 1000 than almost any other contemporary society of medieval Europe³².“

²⁸ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “The Origin and Development of the Fornaldarsögur as Illustrated by *Völsunga Saga*,” in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), pp. 59-82, 69, 70; See also Carolyne Larrington, “*Völsunga Saga*, *Ragnars Saga* and Romance in Old Norse: Revisiting Relationships,” in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), pp. 251-270.

²⁹ Finch, *The Saga of the Völsungs*, Introduction. xxxvii

³⁰ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “The Origin and Development of the Fornaldarsögur as Illustrated by *Völsunga Saga*,” 69; Finch, *The Saga of the Völsungs*, Introduction. xxxviii

³¹ See Edward R. Haymes and Susan T. Samples, *Heroic Legends of the North: An Introduction to the Nibelung and Dietrich Cycles* (Routledge, 1996); Gudmund Schütte, “The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 20, no. 3 (July 1921): pp. 291-327.

³² Margaret Clunies Ross, “The Conservation and Reinterpretation of Myth in Medieval Icelandic Writings,” in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 116-139, 116.

1.4 *Þiðreks saga af bern* and the *Dietrichepik*

The Norwegian heroic epic *Þiðreks saga af bern*, compiled in the mid-13th century, contains a plentitude of *Dietrich* lore episodes in prose, recounting the adventures of the German hero Dietrich including his banishment, exile and ultimately his return and death³³. However, beside the vita of the hero Dietrich of Bern, the *Þiðreks saga* also includes stories of various other prominent characters, such as the tale of Wayland the smith (*Velents þátrr smiðs*), details on the life of Atli the Hun, a brief account on the legendary king Walter of Aquitaine (*Þátrr af Valtara ok Hildigunni*) and finally the story of the legendary hero Sigurðr, or Siegfried, and the Niflung.

At the centre of the Dietrich legends stands the hero Dietrich von Bern (or Þiðrekr af bern), a legendary figure imbedded in historical reality, though it is disputed if the hero Dietrich is indeed the infamous Ostrogothic king Theoderic the Great³⁴. Hence, heroic poetry revolving around the character of Dietrich von Bern was divided into two groups by scholars: the (pseudo-)historic³⁵ and the *aventiurehafte*³⁶, or legendary, Dietrich poetry. The historic Dietrich poetry is eponymously concerned with historical events, however the change from historical reality to epic poetry is still considered substantial. Nonetheless, various personality traits of Theoderic the Great are preserved in the heroic literary character of Dietrich despite symbolism, typologisation and dramatisation of the narrative³⁷.

Furthermore, what differentiates the Dietrich cycle from other Middle High German heroic epics is that the *Dietrichsepik*, despite their narrative diversity, was repeatedly collected in voluminous composite manuscripts, termed *Heldenbücher*; instancing the 15th century Straßburger Heldenbuch or Ambraser Heldenbuch³⁸. Apart from most *Heldenbücher*, *Þiðreks saga* combines the historic and the *aventiurehafte* Dietrich poetry. In addition, the Norwegian

³³ Elisabeth Lienert, *Die Historische Dietrichepik: Untersuchungen Zu 'Dietrich's Flucht', 'Rabenschlacht' Und 'Alphart's Tod'* (De Gruyter, 2010), 51.

³⁴ Wisniewski, *Mittelalterliche Dietrichdichtung*, 2.

³⁵ Dietrich's Flucht (Dietrich's Flight), Rabenschlacht (The Battle of Ravenna), Alphart's Tod (The Death of Alphart), Dietrich und Wenezlan

³⁶ Virginal (Dietrich's first quest), König Laurin's Rosengarten (Laurin), Rosengarten zu Worms (The Rose Garden at Worms), Eckenlied (The Song of Ecke), Goldemar, Sigenot, Der Wunderer

³⁷ Wisniewski, *Mittelalterliche Dietrichdichtung*, 5.

³⁸ Wisniewski, *Mittelalterliche Dietrichdichtung*, 10.

saga also covers Dietrich's death and the early *Hildebrandslied*³⁹. Thus, *Þiðreks saga* is considered the most extensive collection of Dietrich narratives known to scholars and provides further material on the persona of Dietrich/Þiðrekr which has been, for the most part, lost in the German Sources⁴⁰.

Additionally, many episodes of the *Þiðreks saga* refer to the Nibelungen cycle (here called Niflung) and thus contains elements of the stories of both Dietrich/Þiðrekr and Siegfried/Sigurðr⁴¹. One presumes that these Niflung episodes were compiled by use of a second source existent in medieval Norway that must have been a preliminary rendition of the *Nibelungenlied*. This second source merges a *Historia of Dietrich von Bern* as well as Low German Dietrich poetry⁴². The Old Norse *Þiðreks saga* is in comparison to other Dietrich adventures written in prose and treats not only individual episodes but brings the legends of Þiðrekr af bern to a biographical, coherent whole.

An initial source of the *Þiðreks saga* has not survived the turmoils of time, but its origins are suspected to be in the mid-13th century. The oldest surviving manuscript of the saga (Holm. perg. fol. 4) was most likely produced at the end of the 13th century in Norway⁴³. This would suggest that the timespan between the initial source and the aforementioned manuscript is relatively small. Often perceived as a reference manuscript, the Holm. perg. fol. 4 exhibits lacunae at the beginning and end of the saga. Beside the 13th century Stockholm manuscript, most other versions stem from the 17th century, such as two Icelandic versions in the Arnamagnæan Institute, AM 178 fol. and AM 177 fol.. Henrik Bertelsen named the Stockholm manuscript Mb, and the two additional Icelandic manuscripts AM 178 fol. (A) and AM 177 fol. (B). Hence, the prologue and end of the saga is only preserved in Icelandic paper

³⁹ Wisniewski, *Mittelalterliche Dietrichdichtung*, 18.

⁴⁰ Stefka Georgieva Eriksen and Karl G. Johansson, "Francia Et Germania – Translations and the Europeanisation of Old Norse Narratives," in *Francia Et Germania: Studies in Strengleikar and Þiðreks Saga Af Bern*, ed. Karl G. Johansson and Rune Flaten, vol. 5 (Novus, 2012), pp. 9-52, 24.

⁴¹ Additional heroic cycles are *Wolfdietrich*, *Ornit*, *Hildebrandslied*. Narrative elements and structures of the poems of *Ornit*, *Wolfdietrich*, *Rosengarten*, *Eckenlied* and *Virginal* are also featured in the Norwegian *Þiðreks saga*.

⁴² Hilbert Weddige, *Heldensage Und Stammesage* (Tübingen: De Gruyter, 1989), 112.

⁴³ This assumption derives from the manuscript register of the bishop of Bergen Árni Sigurðarson (1305 – 1314), where a manuscript of *Þiðreks saga* is mentioned that is believed to be Stock. perg. fol. 4. Suzanne Kramarz-Bein, *Die Þiðreks Saga Im Kontext Der Altnorwegischen Literatur*, vol. 33 (Tübingen: A. Francke, 2002), 466-471.

manuscripts A and B⁴⁴. Furthermore, the Stockholm manuscript displays the work of at least five scribes and was consequently divided into Mb1 to Mb5, whereas Mb2 and Mb3 are considered to be the main contributors⁴⁵. In addition to this, a 15th century Old Swedish work concerned with the character of Þiðrekr exists, the so-called *Didrikskrönika*, which is essentially a shorter take on the narrative from Mb⁴⁶.

Much like the Norwegian *riddarasögur*, *Þiðreks saga* is not a genuine creation and the prologue of the saga informs its reader of the Germanic background of the narrative by elaborating: *þesse sagha er samansett epter søgn þyðskra manna, enn sumt af þeirra kvæðum*,⁴⁷ or „This saga is comprised after the tales of German men, and some of their songs/poems.“ If these sources were of written or oral nature is not certain, therefore it is debatable if *Þiðreks saga* is the translation of a Middle Low German manuscript or if a Norwegian scribe compiled the saga from various sources⁴⁸. That *Þiðreks saga* is the result of a translation is ascertainable not only through the geographical setting in Germany, but also through the frequent references to German sources, German names and the usage of typical Middle Low German syntax⁴⁹. Specific features connected to the saga's Old Norwegian background are for example alliteration and sentences beginning in *þvi næst*⁵⁰. Furthermore, textual similarities and proximity to the *riddarasögur* and thus French *chansons de geste*, makes *Þiðreks saga* out to be the composite result of various literary cultures of 13th century Europe⁵¹.

⁴⁴ Eriksen and Johansson, “Francia Et Germania – Translations and the Europeanisation of Old Norse Narratives,” 42.

⁴⁵ Henrik Bertelsen, *Om Didrik Af Berns Sagas Oprindelige Skikkelse, Omarbejder Og Håndskrifter*, (Copenhagen: Chr. F. Rømers Boghandel, 1902), 1-6.

⁴⁶ Dietrich Hofmann, “Das Verhältnis Der Altschwedischen Didriks-Chronik Zur *Þiðreks Saga* – Und Zur Historischen Wirklichkeit” 20 (1990): pp. 95-110, 95.

⁴⁷ Bertelsen, *Om Didrik Af Berns Sagas Oprindelige Skikkelse, Omarbejder Og Håndskrifter*, 2.

⁴⁸ Klaus von See, “Das Problem Der Mündlichen Erzählprosa Im Altnordischen. Der Prolog Der *Þiðreks Saga* Und Der Bericht Von Der Hochzeit in Reykjahólar.” 11 (1981): pp. 90-95, 92-93.

⁴⁹ Theodore Andersson, “An Interpretation of *Þiðreks Saga*,” in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature. New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense, 1986), pp. 347-377.

⁵⁰ Kramarz-Bein, *Die Þiðreks Saga Im Kontext Der Altnorwegischen Literatur*, 345.

⁵¹ Kramarz-Bein, *Die Þiðreks Saga Im Kontext Der Altnorwegischen Literatur*, 344-345.

Chapter 2. The Germanic-Nordic Continuum

During the Middle Ages, continual cultural, economical and political transactions between Scandinavian and German people across the Baltic and the North sea brought about a specific shared culture affecting various spheres of life. Migration allowed closer personal relations, leading to intermarriage and the hybridisation between the Middle Low German, Scandinavian languages and later on Latin, affecting both writing and speech⁵². The emerging literature and connected folklore is just one of many things influenced by both peoples which ultimately create a very own new culture with distinct features. Narratives affected by this migration are being restructured, reinvented and new plots are added to create new stories appropriate to the diverse audiences between north and south, thus bringing about the formation of story-worlds, in this case the story-world of the Nibelungs. Furthermore, this contact between German and Scandinavian cultures can be considered the first notable process of so-called Europeanisation, the development of a communal European identity⁵³.

The Nibelung legend created a story-world which transgressed borders and shows how folklore and literature evolve in the course of migration and intercultural contact. A narrative both transmitted in oral and written tradition and frequently restructured since the Germanic past and towards the High and Late Middle Ages, the story of the Nibelung is the paragon for the dynamic cultural exchange between Germans and Scandinavians. Related in both language and culture, these sources establish a wide-ranging Germanic-Nordic continuum⁵⁴.

It has been frequently suggested that older narrative layers of the legend survived in more isolated communities in Northern Europe and especially Iceland where more ‘archaic’ plotlines, names and smaller details were preserved which were otherwise omitted or restructured on the continent⁵⁵. Yet, it has been argued that when the Nibelung legend reached

⁵² Lars Boje Mortensen, Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen, and Alexandra Bergholm, eds., “Introduction: What Is Nordic Medieval Literature?,” in *The Performance of Christian and Pagan Storyworlds: Non-Canonical Chapters of the History of Nordic Medieval Literature* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 1-44, 8.

⁵³ Elina Sarakaeva et al., “Archaization Of The ‘Nibelungen Legend’ In The Folklore Of German-Scandinavian Frontier,” *4th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences & Arts SGEM 2017 2* (2017): pp. 661-668, 662.

⁵⁴ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Cornell University Press, 1998), 3.

⁵⁵ Albrecht Classen, “Matriarchalische Strukturen Und Apokalypse Des Matriarchats Im Nibelungenlied,” *Internationales Archiv Für Sozialgeschichte Der Deutschen Literatur (IASL)* 16, no. 1 (1991): pp. 1-31; Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images Of Women* (Philadelphia: Penn, 1996); Elina Sarakaeva et al., “Archaization Of The ‘Nibelungen Legend’ In The Folklore Of German-Scandinavian Frontier,” *4th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences & Arts SGEM 2017 2* (2017): pp. 661-668.

the more incapsulated societies of Northern Europe, the myth possibly went through an archaisation, that is to say, Norse poets and authors deliberately dismissed more modern plotlines and a more ‘archaic’ mentality was adapted instead⁵⁶.

Moreover, Scandinavian and especially Icelandic poets have a long tradition of preserving place and personal names as well as other genealogical details that sometimes have long faded into obscurity in societies far more integrated in the fast-moving mechanics of Central Europe⁵⁷, though one should be wary and consider the circumstances of creation of the written sources at our hands. Furthermore, it has been suggested that this might indicate that Scandinavian authors believed stories such as the Nibelung legend to be rather accounts of history than fiction and hence saw themselves as some sort of historians, not as artistic authors, though this is debatable⁵⁸.

13th-century Old Norse writers are often considered to deliver the latest and fullest accounts of the legend where they not only try to identify with their Germanic past but also reflect onto bygone pre-Christian times⁵⁹. Furthermore, the 13th century represented for many Scandinavians and Icelanders a kind of renaissance, a phenomenon which had also enthralled Central Europe a century earlier, the so-called „Renaissance of the twelfth century.“ Whereas Central and Western Europeans had reflected on their Roman past in light of the newly established Christianity at that time, Northerners reflected on their Germanic, and thus non-Christian, heritage⁶⁰. In this attempt to trace back their origins, notably Icelandic scholars were not satisfied with merely looking back at their Norwegian ancestors (*landnámsmenn*) that settled in Iceland from the 870s onward but went even further to their Germanic heritage. From that arose the *Landnámabók*, a compilation of information on over four hundred settlers that reached Iceland in between the 9th and 10th century AD. It provides modern readers not

⁵⁶ Sarakaeva et al., *Archaization Of The „Nibelungen Legend‘ In The Folklore Of German-Scandinavian Frontier*, 662.

⁵⁷ Margaret Clunies Ross, “The Conservation and Reinterpretation of Myth in Medieval Icelandic Writings,” in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 116-139, 116.

⁵⁸ Sarakaeva et al., *Archaization Of The „Nibelungen Legend‘ In The Folklore Of German-Scandinavian Frontier*, 661.

⁵⁹ Albrecht Classen, “Matriarchalische Strukturen Und Apokalypse Des Matriarchats Im Nibelungenlied,” *Internationales Archiv Für Sozialgeschichte Der Deutschen Literatur (IASL)* 16, no. 1 (1991): pp. 1-31; Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Cornell University Press, 1998); Elina Sarakaeva et al., “Archaization Of The „Nibelungen Legend‘ In The Folklore Of German-Scandinavian Frontier,” *4th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences & Arts SGEM 2017 2* (2017): pp. 661-668.

⁶⁰ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images Of Women* (Philadelphia: Penn, 1996), 13.

only with name and location of settlement but also with short genealogical anecdotes that more than once reach back into the Germanic past, creating family ties to legendary characters such as Sigurðr and Guðrún⁶¹.

In light of the creation and expansion of the aforementioned story-world of the Nibelungs one has to take into account the Christian influence and bias of the sources, as even the Old Norse material which we study today stem from Christian and/or clerical composers. Hence, trying to separate between non-Christian and Christian influences, as well as oral and literary ones, is futile and every conclusion hypothetical⁶². Though this complicates the search for pre-Christian or Germanic elements, it allows an insight into the social and cultural dynamics of the source's time and place of origin and the mindset of the composer and his target-audience, providing the story-world with local variants. Moreover, these variants do not only result from the scholarly composer, here „great tradition“, but also derive from „little traditions“ originating among the peasantry through orality; as Mortensen and Lehtonen argued:

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 that storyworld and new oral poetics that could feed back into the great tradition in its local representation⁶³.

Furthermore, there is the question of the purpose of a particular narrative, as a composer not only altered the legend to his taste but could also use the story-world to convey a certain message; repurposing the narrative elements to his heart's content. Hence, characters do not necessarily represent historical reality, Christian or pre-Christian, but could rather reflect social issues by forthrightly or sub-textually problematising and debating contemporary society.

⁶¹ Jochens, *Old Norse Images Of Women*, 21.

⁶² Gísli Sigurðsson, “Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders,” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), pp. 285-301, 291.

⁶³ Lars Boje Mortensen, Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen, and Alexandra Bergholm, eds., “Introduction: What Is Nordic Medieval Literature?,” in *The Performance of Christian and Pagan Storyworlds: Non-Canonical Chapters of the History of Nordic Medieval Literature* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 1-44, 5.

Chapter 3. The Role of Women in Medieval Literature

The role of women exhibited in medieval literature can generally be considered to resonate to some extent the role women truly occupied in medieval society. Thus, every epic, saga or tale is, biased or not, a reflection of the social reality from which these stories originated, even if what they show is predominantly an idealised societal model⁶⁴.

Upon examination, medieval texts generally promote ideal womanhood, passive characters expected to navigate foremost the private sphere and conducive to highlight their male counterparts⁶⁵. Women with opposing characterisation who assume an unusual or unfeminine role such as that of a warrior, thus disregarding the fine line between the male and the female sphere, were disdained. In contrast to this stands Old Norse literature, a branch of prose and poetry in which whetting women, shield-maidens and maiden-kings are equally looked upon with awe and horror⁶⁶. In spite of threatening the ideology of gender roles, these images of women navigate a limited grey area between affronting the world of men by assuming a male role and becoming passive, ornamental objects. It is often through the means of sexuality that these women switch from the first sphere to the latter. Medieval literature commend women's virginity and chastity, and it comes to no surprise that women who operate independently outside of their assigned gender role are pulled back into subservience through sexual and physical violence⁶⁷. Old Norse and Medieval German literature is consistent in that respect, that women have a specific and limited space in which they are permitted to operate, with boundaries not to be overstepped.

However, one should not forget that most literary female figures are likely biased through the male perception of the authors, especially when modern scholars have for a long time grasped at every possibility of evidence that might enlighten women's history⁶⁸. The question arises how these sources reflect the medieval reality and with that the development of women's social position and the slow extraction of their power and agency, because as

⁶⁴ Karin Rinn, *Liebhaberin, Königin, Zauberfrau: Studien Zur Subjektstellung Der Frau in Der Deutschen Literatur Um 1200* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1996), 312.

⁶⁵ Albrecht Classen, *Sexual Violence and Rape in the Middle Ages: A Critical Discourse in Premodern German and European Literature* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 33.

⁶⁶ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 103.

⁶⁷ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 11.

⁶⁸ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 3.

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013) points out: „Literary production is embedded in historical reality and discourse, encapsulating and communicating the ideologies of its sponsors⁶⁹“.

3.1. Categorisation of Female Characters

In quest of an authentic and reasonable concept of women's roles in medieval literature, it is necessary to analyse a variety of sources and the function of women therein, as implemented in the works by Clover (1993), Rinn (1996), Jochens (1996) and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013), inter alia. Generally, studies of women in literature incite the categorisation of female characters into specific roles. Hence, Jochens has provided four categories of female images in Old Norse literature, namely the avenger, the whetter, the prophetess and the warrior⁷⁰.

The female avenger is characterised through distinct, aggressive acts of personal revenge executed by physical effort. However, other family members, generally male, could be verbally encouraged to carry out the revenge without the female inciter having to physically intervene. Here, the role of the woman as avenger and as whetter overlaps. In comparison to the avenging woman, who is physically active in the act of revenge, the whetter incites others to carry out the act of violence on her behalf by means of speech. It is by the means of whetting that avenging women, through their limited sphere of action, provoke others to react to injustice or discrimination, and for whom „revenge was beyond [...] capability“⁷¹. Revenge as a result of love or heartbreak, as it is the case for women, can be seen as an emotionalisation of the narrative. However, the emotionalisation is only a weak counterweight to the defamation of the whetting woman and it ultimately leads to the conclusion that courtly love is fundamentally destructive⁷².

In Norse culture, magic is principally a female domain and Jenny Jochens assumes that female magical practitioners must have occupied a relevant role in Norse and Germanic

⁶⁹ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*, 8.

⁷⁰ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 88-203.

⁷¹ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 165.

⁷² Ursula Schulze, „Sie Ne Tet Niht Alse Ein Wîb. Intertextuelle Variationen Der Amazonenhaften Camilla,“ in *Deutsche Literatur Und Sprache Von 1050-1200: Festschrift Für Ursula Hennig Zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Annegret Fiebig, Hans-Jochen Schiewer, and Ursula Hennig (Berlin: Akad.-Verl., 1995), pp. 235-260, 238.

society alike⁷³. Various continental sources⁷⁴ suggest that Germanic women initially possessed a more notable position in society, as religious leaders, diviners or prophets, and here Jochens implies that this ‘archaic’ role of women eventually discontinued with the settlement of Germanic tribes and the introduction of Christianity⁷⁵.

Warrior women are most likely the most popular female characters from today’s perspective and have been made the standard image of pre-Christian womanhood by modern media and academia alike, in support of a feminist agenda. This should be regarded with caution as authorial fantasies might have distorted the perception of a presumed historical reality and modern researchers are eager to cling to every evidence to justify fighting women in history⁷⁶. Generally, one might assume that female warriors were as much a curiosity among Germanic-Nordic people as in other societies and that these figures were a trope used by male poets, incited by tales of valkyries and maiden-kings that from time immemorial have been the very fabric of Nordic storytelling⁷⁷. But reality must have looked differently, because the sagas of Icelanders evidently show that there were well-defined gender spheres in Norse society. Thus, men were beweaponed at all time, whereas women were not supposed to carry weapons⁷⁸. The gender distinctions are clear: men master the public sphere, while women manage the private one. Ultimately, even if the warrior woman was a popular trope illustrating male fantasies, the authors never subverted the common gender roles and the strong woman always finds her match in the invincible male⁷⁹.

The categorisation of female characters in German epics corresponds somewhat with the classification of female images in Old Norse texts attributed to Jenny Jochens. Karin Rinn has

⁷³ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 115.

⁷⁴ Jochens lists among the most informative contemporary Latin sources on women’s roles in Germanic and Nordic societies Tacitus’ *Germania*, Adam of Bremen’s *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* and Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*. These sources suggest that divination was a distinct female profession among Germanic and Nordic people, in their mythological as well as real world. Moreover, women were able to hold substantially important positions within the religious and cultic sphere. Nevertheless, these written sources need to be handled with caution as their authors were biased by their own cultural background and in some instances relied on even older sources whose authors were likewise influenced by their society in return. Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 35-37, 113-117.

⁷⁵ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 114.

⁷⁶ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*, 6-7.

⁷⁷ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 88.

⁷⁸ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 109.

⁷⁹ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 111.

offered an approach towards German epics and *Minnelyrik*⁸⁰. Rinn divided the female literary characters into two main groups, namely women as objects and women as subjects, with a further division into idealised and non-idealised images of women⁸¹. Thereupon, Rinn presents similar categories such as the prophetess or sorceress (*Zauberfrau*) and the whetter (*höfisch-listige Frau*). In consideration of the German epics the author adds the role of the queen (*Königin*) and the handmaid (*Magd*)⁸².

Although the categorisation of female characters is a crucial contribution to the study of the literary function of women, one should not fall victim to unnecessary stereotyping and generalisation of women's role in medieval reality through the mere analysis of a selection of characters. Therefore, this thesis argues towards two principal forms of womanhood as presented in the Nibelung legend instead: the ideal „Noblewoman“ and the challenging „She-Devil“. The first is the ideal Christian model of womanhood distinguished by characteristics such as chastity, obedience, docility and passivity whereas the latter advocates women who do not conform with Christian ideals, hence, bellicosity, supernatural abilities, stubbornness, pride, vengefulness and contentiousness. Encountering the challenging She-Devil in the three narratives examined in this thesis, it becomes apparent that women acting outside of their assigned gender role (ideal Noblewoman) and threatening gender dynamics are either pulled back into submission through physical and/or sexual violence, or are outright eradicated. However, it should be highlighted that female characters do not necessarily mirror historical reality, but might rather display womanhood as perceived through the male and patriarchal eye of the composer's time. Furthermore, it is not impossible that the aforementioned uncharacteristic She-Devil is an indicator for a pre-Christian image of women, shedding light on a presumed Germanic past as Jochens has argued.

On the other hand, are we not confronted with two forms of womanhood in Christian lore as well? Eve, the first woman, was banished and chastised for her transgression (the original sin) and affiliation with the devil, while the Virgin Mary, the personification of chastity and obedience, gave birth to the son of God, the redeemer of sin, and is venerated to this day. As the comparative study in this thesis will elaborate, the Christian composers of the various

⁸⁰ Karin Rinn, *Liebhaberin, Königin, Zauberfrau: Studien Zur Subjektstellung Der Frau in Der Deutschen Literatur Um 1200* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1996).

⁸¹ Rinn, *Liebhaberin, Königin, Zauberfrau*, 34.

⁸² Rinn, *Liebhaberin, Königin, Zauberfrau*, 80-268.

Nibelungen adaptations used varying strategies to create an imaginary story-world based in a legendary past while making it compatible with the dominant world view at the time of writing, because as Fulvio Ferrari argued: „[...] (the author) had to build up his fictional world in such a way that it did not put into question the centrality of the Christian faith⁸³“.

3.2. Women Trafficking and Female Diplomats

Marriage and kinship are an essential part of a social system and can be seen as both political and economic arrangements. For the most part, these marriage alliances promoted the suppression of women, who were essentially not included in the negotiations and whose own opinions did not matter⁸⁴. Women trafficked in marital exchange played an important part in forging unions between tribes and nations, ensuring peace as they bound kin together⁸⁵. Indeed, this is one of the most prominent roles of women in medieval literature⁸⁶. These marital arrangements can be considered gift transactions in which women were exchanged to prevent war by forming alliances. Thus, these trafficked women can almost be seen as diplomats, through advising their husbands and meddling in negotiations within the court or the mead hall.

Among the Germanic tribes and war-bands, exchanging women for the sake of peace could easily go awry and would end up highlighting the misery women experienced when becoming chess pieces in an all-male game⁸⁷. However, Germanic women could learn to navigate the male domain and break away from their role as mere objects of male desire, as Karen Newman points out that „woman as object is only one dimension of the force field that figures a sex/gender system⁸⁸“.

⁸³ Fulvio Ferrari, “Possible Worlds of Sagas: The Intermingling of Different Fictional Universes in the Development of the Fornaldarsögur as a Genre,” in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Arman Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), pp. 271-291, 274.

⁸⁴ Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.” *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Ed. Raya R. Reiter. New York: Monthly Review Press (1975): pp. 157-210, 201.

⁸⁵ Carol Parrish Jamison, “Traffic of Women in Germanic Literature: The Role of the Peace Pledge in Marital Exchanges.” *Women in German Yearbook* 20 (2004): 13–36, 13.

⁸⁶ Joel T. Rosenthal, “Marriage and the Blood Feud in ‘Heroic’ Europe.” *The British Journal of Sociology* 17, no. 2 (1966): 133–44, 133.

⁸⁷ Jamison, “Traffic of Women in Germanic Literature: The Role of the Peace Pledge in Marital Exchanges,” 14.

⁸⁸ Karen Newman. “Directing Traffic: Subjects, Objects, and the Politics Exchange.” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* (Summer 1990): 41-54, 49.

The Nibelung legend is here again a good example as it shows women exerting power through motherhood and diplomacy, thus „making“ and „breaking“ kings⁸⁹. In *Völsunga saga*, women like Signý and Guðrún are exemplary for powerful queens who act as intermediaries between their own kin and the kin of their husbands, participating in marriage negotiations and who, in the case of an unfulfilling marriage, take vengeance⁹⁰. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Kriemhild is trafficked by her brother Gunther and gifted to Siegfried in an exchange for his help in the bridal quest of Brünhild. An innocent courtly lady in the beginning, Kriemhild soon learns to play the game of men herself, ultimately seeking revenge for her husband's death and having her brother killed.

3.3. Objects of Male Desire

As elucidated above, women were often nothing more than mere objects of exchange between men, thus they were valuable assets of their male relatives and proof of the power of their guardian. Though this can be observed in medieval literature as well, women are not only depicted as a commodity to men but were also the target of male valour and ambitions in return. By reference of the female characters men's prowess is not only measured but also transmitted to the audience. Here, women go through a different process of objectification, namely they become objects of male desire and pursuit⁹¹.

A usual trope in medieval literature is the bridal quest, and specifically, resistance from the coveted woman in said bridal quest to reveal the valour and many talents of the male protagonist. The bridal quest is one of the few instances in which a woman can exert some kind of agency and is somewhat in control of the action. The coveted damsel presents her suitor with various obstacles and a trial of wits occurs in which the man always wins the upper hand. The woman, even an infamous maiden-king, is eventually outsmarted and forced into submission through marriage. In most cultures narratives concerned with bridal quests can be seen as moral tales, directed at the audience to advertise „natural“ gender roles and threaten any transgressors with punishment⁹².

⁸⁹ Jamison, "Traffic of Women in Germanic Literature: The Role of the Peace Pledge in Marital Exchanges," 31.

⁹⁰ Jamison, "Traffic of Women in Germanic Literature: The Role of the Peace Pledge in Marital Exchanges," 30.

⁹¹ Rinn, *Liebhaberin, Königin, Zauberfrau*, 51, 130.

⁹² Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 112.

In contrast to the beauty and chastity of women being highlighted by men, male characters' greatness and heroism are emphasised through female characters. This is certainly one of the key roles of women in medieval literature, that they become literary devices used to compliment male attributes. In *Þiðreks saga* this can be observed in the character of Hildisvið, Samson's wife, who verbally elaborates the heroic deeds of her betrothed. Also the mother of the hero Sigurðr, fair Sisibe, is foremost highlighted as a devoted and loyal wife complimenting her husband king Sigmundur⁹³. Additionally, the *Nibelungenlied* illustrates how the beauty, bravery and honour of Siegfried is described by female characters or through the author pointing out that many women loved him because of these traits. For example, in the second adventure it is written „waz eren an im wuohse und wie schoene was sin lip. des heten in ze minne diu vil waetlichen wip“ [C, 22] meaning that many women thought themselves in love with Siegfried because he was honourable and beautiful⁹⁴. This kind of writing is used to illustrate Siegfried's character and appearance by showing how women, whether fair Kriemhild, his own mother Sieglind or courtly ladies, react to him.

3.4. Violence Against Women

The social constructs of manhood, femininity and gender roles are historically fluctuating. Violence is an essential component of these constructs, thus propensity towards violence, monopoly on violence, roles of victims and abusers are mostly gender-specifically defined⁹⁵. Semantically speaking, violence has two main aspects, the act of violence itself and violence for the simple reason of power. Especially in the Nibelung legend, power is the premise for violence and incites not only conflict between men but also between genders⁹⁶.

In medieval literature women seem to have been the preferred victims of violence⁹⁷, however, the killing of women was rather rare⁹⁸. Here, the Nibelung legend is an exception as the character of Kriemhild (Guðrún/Grímhildr) finds her death, quite violently in the

⁹³ Robert Nedoma, “Zu Den Frauenfiguren Der »Þiðreks Saga Af Bern«,” in *Helden Und Heldensage: Otto Gschwantler Zum 60. Geburtstag*, vol. 11, ed. Hermann Reichert and Günther Zimmermann (Fassbaender, 1990), pp. 211-232, 215.

⁹⁴ Ursula Schulze, *Das Nibelungenlied. Nach Der Handschrift C Der Badischen Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe* (Winkler, 2005), 14.

⁹⁵ Elisabeth Lienert, “Geschlecht Und Gewalt Im 'Nibelungenlied',” *Zeitschrift Für Deutsches Altertum Und Deutsche Literatur* 132, no. 1 (2003): pp. 3-23, 3.

⁹⁶ Lienert, “Geschlecht Und Gewalt Im 'Nibelungenlied,'” 4.

⁹⁷ Albrecht Classen, *Violence In Courtly Medieval Literature: A Casebook* (London: Routledge, 2014), 12.

⁹⁸ Lienert, “Geschlecht Und Gewalt Im 'Nibelungenlied,'” 7.

Nibelungenlied and *Þiðreks saga*, by the hands of a man. Typical forms of violence towards women are domestic violence and rape, both aspects also represented in the literary corpus of the Nibelung legend. It is thus not surprising that medieval law books as well as medieval literature depict domestic violence as a common act in medieval society to which women were, for the most part, defenceless as patriarchy was the prevalent social system and men had the privilege to punish their wives if they committed any form of transgression⁹⁹.

So, what happens if that blind obedience is not ensured? Conventional femininity in medieval literature is defined through beauty, docility and representation which can only be highlighted through the power of male relatives. Deviating forms of that concept are then annihilated (Kriemhild/Guðrún/Grímhildr) or assimilated (Brünhild, Brynhildr)¹⁰⁰. This handling of female „insubordination“ is, as Classen points out, a phenomenon that is not just limited to medieval European literature: “Indeed, whenever we come across especially powerful women characters, such as Brünhild in the anonymous *Nibelungenlied*, [...] ultimately we seem to observe their radical subjugation, at times tantamount to rape, leaving them behind as mere shadows of their previous female identity and self.”¹⁰¹ Although courtly literature is seen as the epitome of amatory tales, the subjugation of the female gender is ever-present, however beloved the woman might be by a man.

Arguably the most accurate example of a woman threatening the world order of men is the character of Brünhild, a threat to “dominant patriarchal heroic ideals” which is eventually eliminated by men¹⁰². Thus, the theme of the Nibelung legend is not just the heroic violence of men towards men, but also the violence of men towards women and vice versa¹⁰³. Female violence is almost exclusively mediated violence¹⁰⁴, however men react to female violence

⁹⁹ Classen, *Violence In Courtly Medieval Literature*, 17.

¹⁰⁰ Lienert, “Geschlecht Und Gewalt Im ‘Nibelungenlied,’” 5.

¹⁰¹ Albrecht Classen, *The Power of a Woman's Voice in Medieval and Early Modern Literatures: New Approaches to German and European Women Writers and to Violence Against Women in Premodern Times* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 74.

¹⁰² Sheikh F. Shams, *Subversive Images Of Women In Medieval English Literature: A Selective Reading*. BRAC University Journal, vol. 5, no. 2, 2008, pp. 105-111, 105.

¹⁰³ Lienert, “Geschlecht Und Gewalt Im ‘Nibelungenlied,’” 6.

¹⁰⁴ Lienert, “Geschlecht Und Gewalt Im ‘Nibelungenlied,’” 18.

with physical abuse and rape. The removal of the woman's sexual autonomy is one way to ensure the female submission and restore the patriarchal world order¹⁰⁵.

Generally, women, even royalty, are seen and used by their male environment as „natural“ objects of male desire, as some price or reward for the hero. The audience takes actively part in the vulgar display of women and thus narrative violence becomes structural violence¹⁰⁶ and the rape of a woman is portrayed, and excused, as the deliberate act of a man counteracting a woman's transgressions¹⁰⁷.

3.5. Medieval Female Images and Older Narrative Material

The Nibelung legend offers enough versions from different sources, that change in time as well as place of origin, to attempt an investigation of the role of women within its literary corpus. Looking at the presumably oldest of the Eddic poems, also the earliest known transmission of the legend, show that women were indispensable and highly active in this narrative which in today's minds is predominantly concerned with the male domain of great battles and heroes. In later years, the hero Sigurðr (Siegfried) becomes the centre of the Nibelung epic, a character complimented by two women, Guðrún (Kriemhild, Grímhildr) and Brynhildr (Brünhild). However, in these earliest sources Sigurðr was seemingly not of interest to the authors, respectively, both Guðrún and Brynhildr are the protagonists of their own narratives. Thus, *Atlakviða* (Akvi), a source often dated to the 9th century and possibly the oldest surviving source in this literary corpus, tells the tale of Guðrún and her revenge, but Sigurðr is not mentioned once. The lays revolving around the character of Brynhildr does feature a man named Sigurðr, however he is only a secondary character and the poems are concerned with the heroine's quest to find the perfect husband. These sources are not only more numerous, but also older and far more detailed than any lays concerned with Sigurðr. Here, it is rather the archaeological material that conveys the importance of the Sigurðr-figure, considering related iconography and depictions such as on the Sigurðr-picture stones from Uppland, Södermanland and various other locations in Sweden, most notably the Ramsund carving, the Sigurðr-crosses from the Isle of Man or the wood-carvings on the

¹⁰⁵ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*, 125.

¹⁰⁶ Lienert, "Geschlecht Und Gewalt Im 'Nibelungenlied,'" 6-7.

¹⁰⁷ Corinne J. Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Boydell and Brewer Limited, 2001), 158-59.

church portal of the Hylestad Stave Church¹⁰⁸. This arises the question how these seemingly separate and well-known stories, revolving around Guðrún, Brynhildr and Sigurðr, came to be merged in 13th century literature: Were these always connected legends or were they combined later on, creating one coherent narrative out of individual storylines, crossing the lives of great male and female heroes of the legendary past. This hypothetical question is sadly unaccountable.

Much younger poems finally provide the hero with an origin story and weave the stories of the two women into his. Obviously, there is a great chance that any sources describing Sigurðr's *enfance* as well as early heroic deeds have not withstood the turmoils of time, however, the utter lack of such lays feeds into the assumption that Sigurðr's character was added to the stories of Guðrún and Brynhildr, in an attempt to provide depth to the tales¹⁰⁹.

It has often been suggested that religious and political practices survived for much longer in northern Europe and Iceland than in the fast-developing centre of the continent, on the grounds that „the nordic world, [...] had remained pagan five centuries longer than the Continent“¹¹⁰. Thus, it is assumed that the Old Norse tradition might have preserved not only Germanic culture but ultimately safeguarded valuable knowledge on powerful women, in both religious and political positions¹¹¹, as well as matriarchal structures¹¹², preceding the introduction of Christianity and with that the suppression of the female gender. Hence, it is argued that Old Norse literature could allow insight into the „historical reality“ of Germanic women and illustrate the steady decline and marginalisation of women in literature towards the High Middle Ages. This thesis will in the course of its comparative analysis interrogate this assumption and question its probability.

Various scholars (Classen 1991, Jochens 1996, Rinn 1996, i.a.) have suggested this possibility and worked towards unveiling women's pasts. Jochens remarked on the versatile

¹⁰⁸ Joachim Heinzel, “Siegfried in Navarra. Zu Motivik Und Ikonographie Der Drachentötung. Mit Exkursen Überdie Drachentöter-Strophe in Der 'Óláfs Saga Hins Helga' Und Die Darstellung Von Siegfrieds Tod Bei Peter Cornelius Und Julius Schnorr Von Carolsfeld,” *Zeitschrift Für Deutsches Altertum Und Deutsche Literatur* 135, no. 2 (2006): pp. 141-163.

¹⁰⁹ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 138.

¹¹⁰ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 206.

¹¹¹ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 115.

¹¹² Albrecht Classen, “Matriarchalische Strukturen Und Apokalypse Des Matriarchats Im *Nibelungenlied*,” *Internationales Archiv Für Sozialgeschichte Der Deutschen Literatur (IASL)* 16, no. 1 (1991): pp. 1-31.

but also contradictory aspects of Brynhildr and ascribed this phenomenon to the „growing awareness of the female psyche“ that influenced „Nordic and Germanic authors“. However, are not the earliest literary sources at our disposal from the 13th century, thus the authors Christian, if not even clerical? That the figure of Brynhildr from Eddic poetry and *Völsunga saga* exhibits a seemingly authorial fascination¹¹³ with the *valkyrja* leaves open the question if the „female psyche“ was really in debate here, or if it was rather male awe and fantasy that sparked an interest in the figure, or something else entirely. Undoubtedly, the concept of strong and fighting women was not unknown to a 13th century Christian mind. Jochen also highlights that in early lays the character of the goading Brynhildr is an image of feminine power whereas in later sources her persona is suppressed and certain facets of her role are either marginalised or entirely replaced¹¹⁴. Rinn also noticed the aforementioned gradual marginalisation of powerful female characters. She acknowledges the fact that powerful women, such as imposing queens or mighty sorceresses, appear in typological older narrative material as subjects with high agency. However, these same personas in younger narratives are disempowered. Thus, these ‘archaic’ sources were to show women with far more autonomy and influence than those of the courtly-idealising kind¹¹⁵.

As this thesis will argue later on, this begs the question of the purpose of the texts and hence the characters therein, ultimately interrogating if these texts can really be used in order to shed light on women of the Germanic past or if the authorial bias of the past and present rather provides us with a debate on forms of womanhood from the 13th century.

3.6. Conclusion

To conclude, the world of epics and heroic lays seems from today’s perspective like a male-dominated world full of fearless battles, courtly intrigues and valiant bridal quests, seemingly distant from the world of women. The ideology of manhood is at the centre of these medieval tales and it initially seems as if women are only present to compliment the male heroes or be the object of their desire¹¹⁶. However, the presented categorisation of

¹¹³ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild*, vol. 43 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 238-239.

¹¹⁴ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 162.

¹¹⁵ Rinn, *Liebhaberin, Königin, Zauberfrau*, 198, 244, 311

¹¹⁶ Sarah S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman, eds., “Introduction,” in *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 1-13, 1.

female characters provides a concept of women's roles in the literature of the Middle Ages and ultimately hints a brief look onto medieval reality. Beside the categorisations offered by other scholars, this study rather proposes the distinction between two forms of womanhood: the Christian ideal Noblewoman, and the challenging She-Devil representing non-Christian, or maybe even pre-patriarchal, womanhood.

Furthermore, women held different roles as wives, daughters and mothers. Daughters played an essential part in the social system, their marriages vital to ensure peace and form alliances between kin. This diplomatic role could enable a woman to have some limited form of agency, a tool to navigate the male domain. As wives they became the makers of heroes and kings, mothers creating ties between families, able to become trusted advisers to their husbands and eventually even capable of pulling the strings at court.

Nevertheless, the objectification of women is inevitable and prominent female characters will undoubtedly find themselves in the centre of male attention. When they become objects of male desire one can observe the gradual submission and domestication of women, their last acts of self-reliant agency influencing their role in the bridal quest. The literary trope of the bridal quest is the first step in the repression of the female character. Men always coming out as the winner in these quests was a rationalisation to the female audience and probably a comfort to the male¹¹⁷. When women oppose this „natural“ world order of male domination, they become prone to violence. In medieval literature, female insubordination was met with hostility and chastisement, exerted through domestic violence and rape.

As this chapter has illustrated, medieval literature introduces many intriguing female characters that provide us with knowledge on women in medieval culture. However, it must be noted that only a limited selection of female characters has been used by scholars so far and a generalisation of the life of medieval women is imminent, as this selection pre-eminently presents female characters that stand out and do not stand for all of medieval womanhood¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁷ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 111.

¹¹⁸ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*, 7.

Chapter 4. The Women Of The Nibelung Legend

4.1. The *Nibelungenlied*

4.1.1. The Women Of The *Nibelungenlied*

The importance of female characters in the *Nibelungenlied* does not have to be stressed any further, as their relevance in the legend is well-known and much debated in the Nibelungenscholarship. Right at the beginning of the *Nibelungenlied* it becomes clear that there is one person who holds a more important position over the seemingly main character Siegfried, and that is Kriemhild. The first adventure deals with the character of Kriemhild, describing her as a beautiful and honourable maiden who resolutely tells her mother Uote that she does not intend to marry and that she will gladly avoid the pain of heartbreak. But as the reader knows, this will not come to pass. Ultimately, there is a downright condemnation of love and married life in this first adventure: *Die rede lat beliben, vil liebiu frowe min. ez ist an manigen wiben vil dicke worden schin, wie liebe mit leide ze jungest Ionen chan. ich sol si miden beide, sone chan mir nimmer missegan* [C, 16; Waste no words, my Lady. A great many women have seen how love turned to sorrow. I will save myself from both and never know misery.]¹¹⁹. With this the audience, or reader, had to know that this is no ordinary heroic tale. This was the tale of a woman, whose beliefs and hopes for the future had to be proven wrong, that her plan to avoid love and sorrow had to fail. This stanza sets the entire mood and plot for the narrative, the story of a woman who will know great sorrow because she risked to love.

The Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* may contain less female characters than *Piðreks saga* or *Volsunga saga*, but it is a narrative that grants its women space to act and develop. It carries a high focus on intimate relationships, courtly love and the political instrumentalisation these elements evoke. One of the most fundamental motivations of action is the interplay between politics and eroticism, and with that the interaction between man and woman. Gestures and looks are here a vital medium to convey to the audience feelings and intentions of the characters. For instance, when the hero Siegfried submits himself fully to the rules of the *Minne* to woo fair Kriemhild, he is described to be blushing at their first encounter [C, 242/284/] and during the festivities in Worms the two lovebirds exchange secret looks and touch each others hands [C, 295].

¹¹⁹ Ursula Schulze, *Das Nibelungenlied. Nach Der Handschrift C Der Badischen Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe* (Winkler, 2005), 12. [cited: Handschrift, stanza] Trans., Burton Raffel, *Das Nibelungenlied: Song of The Nibelungs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 5.

Lust towards women is another vital part of the narrative. On the road to Worms, Gunther already wants to sleep with his bride Brünhild, though she refuses him and delays the wedding night to when they arrive at their destination; *Jane wolde si den herren niht minnen uf der vart. er wart ir kurzwile unz in sin hus gespart* [C, 536; But on the road she would not lay with him, he had to forgo this enjoyment until they came home]. In the *Nibelungenlied*, sexual love as well as possessive masculinity and the refusal thereof is a fundamental part of the *Minne*. Much like Gunther, the composer describes Etzel as madly in love and filled with lust. It is made clear that Etzel is a great womaniser and he is enamoured by the beauty of Kriemhild which eventually leads to his courtship. Male desire and longing are throughout the *Nibelungenlied* a central aspect. However, in the course of the narrative it becomes clear that male sexuality is a legitimate aspect of medieval life, female sexuality however not. The wedding nights are exclusively described from male perspective, the women either passive (Kriemhild) or antagonistic (Brünhild). Eventually, after that first submission both women contribute silently to the conjugal duty. Time and again the sexual lust of the male characters is highlighted and the emotions and sentiments accentuated. Compared to their actions, the inner dealings of women are relatively muted, though still more developed than in *Piðreks saga af bern*.

On various instances in the epic, one can observe political and erotic motives blending, intrigues and strategies resulting from intimate moments between man and woman, such as when Kriemhild influences Etzel in their marriage bed to invite her relatives to court in order to take her revenge [C, 1431] or Brünhild who in ‘personal talks’ persuades Gunther to send for Siegfried and Kriemhild to determine Siegfried’s social status once and for all [C, 733/736]. Also Gotelind learns of Rüdiger’s assignment to woo Kriemhild in Etzel’s favour, when they share their marriage bed [C, 1191]. It is in these intimate moments that women have power over the besotted men and are able to bend them to their will. This would make the marriage bed, the domestic and most private sphere, the domain where women can exert their power. So-called pillow-talk becomes political strategy.

In feudal-patriarchal Europe marriage was first and foremost a political alliance, connecting kin, ensuring heirs, and securing wealth (See Chapter 3.2.). Marriage was essentially a business deal and women a commodity, as can be observed in the *Nibelungenlied* when Gunther agrees that if Siegfried helps him to acquire Brünhild, Gunther in return promises his sister Kriemhild’s hand to Siegfried [C, 340]. Similarly, Etzel’s courtship is not directed to

Kriemhild herself but rather her brothers. Undoubtedly, affection and love can be present in these deals (Siegfried and Kriemhild) but are not prerequisite in the medieval world of marriage. The *Nibelungenlied* is outspoken in the assumed submission of women and obedience to their husbands, as Kriemhild herself connects marriage with subservience; *dem si wart sider undertan* [C, 46; to whom she will be subservient].

The female figures of the *Nibelungenlied* submit to their subjugation, some more reluctantly than others, and give in to the rules of the patriarchal society. For instance, Kriemhild accepts her beating through Siegfried after the queen's squabble and admits that she deserved it [C, 901]. Though Siegfried and Kriemhild are described to be very much in love, it is not a relationship of equality. More than once Siegfried subjugates his wife, stripping her of her autonomy. In addition to the aforementioned chastisement, Siegfried renounces in the name of his wife her inheritance without consulting her [C, 703/704] and disregards Kriemhild's prophecy of his impending death [C, 929].

Furthermore, in the *Nibelungenlied* the concept of marriage is dependent on the character and its role in the narrative, therefore varying views on matrimony are presented. This can be observed in the figures of Kriemhild and her mother Uote. Kriemhild is in the beginning of the story openly averted from the idea of marriage, pointing out that love can only lead to misfortune, so she would rather not marry and live happily [C, 14/16]. Uote answers to that, that a woman can only be happy when she is loved by a man and marriage is thus the only acceptable lifestyle for a woman [C, 15]. With this mother-daughter talk right at the beginning of the narrative, the *Nibelungenlied* offers us two types of female figures, the ideal Noblewomen (Uote, Sieglind, Gotelind and Helche) who submit to their role in a male-dominated world and women challenging patriarchy (Kriemhild and Brünhild), which for the purpose of this thesis, and in the composers' own words, will be called She-Devils¹²⁰.

The four ideal noblewomen are the epitome of medieval womanhood; obedient, docile and conscientious. Hence, essential parts of their role are: motherhood, and thus the upbringing of their children; the management of the household, including the welcoming of guests, presenting gifts and selecting court attire. Therethrough, these women play a central role in the structure of their husband's courts, respectively household. It can be argued that as long as the women attend to their duties and maintain harmony, their husband's courts are flourishing.

¹²⁰ Anat Koplowitz-Breier, "Politics and the Representation of Women in the Nibelungenlied," *Revista De Filologia Alemana* 15 (2007): pp. 9-25, 10.

As soon as this harmonious framework is threatened (Kriemhild, Brünhild) or discontinued (Helche), the court's balance is in jeopardy and the men must intervene. As will be elucidated in chapter 4.2. on *Volsunga* saga, this is a recurrent, narrative element.

The marriage of queen Sieglind and king Siegmund is depicted as the ideal marriage, a harmonious relationship that brought about the nurturing upbringing of the hero Siegfried. Sieglind is mentioned exclusively in the context of her being a caring mother and a good wife to the king. She is a prominent character in the first adventures of the *Nibelungenlied* and she's granted as much agency as her husband. When Siegfried takes on the task to win fair Kriemhild's heart and hand in marriage, both Siegmund and Sieglind disagree. In turns, the king and queen speak to their son, hoping to change his mind. Here, Sieglind's thoughts and opinion are as much conveyed to the reader as her husband's. Furthermore, Siegfried is throughout the poem described as Sieglind's child [C, 47, 136, 180, 210, 467, 471, 494], or son, and far more rarely brought into connection with his father Siegmund. It almost seems as if Sieglind holds here a more important position. As harmonious as Sieglind's marriage are also Gotelind's (with Rüdiger) and Helche's (with Etzel).

The aforementioned characteristics are, more or less, attributed to Uote, although the text does not mention the exact nature of the relationship between the Burgundian queen and the late Dancrat. Intriguingly, Uote is not responsible for the upbringing of her daughter Kriemhild as such, but rather Kriemhild's brothers take over this duty [C, 3]¹²¹. Nevertheless, Uote is portrayed as a very attached mother, who throughout the narrative cares immensely about the well-being of her children, especially Kriemhild. The narrator emphasises on various occasions that Uote is greatly concerned about her daughter's welfare [C, 744/759/778/1089/1524]. Though Uote and Sieglind represent ideal women, they nevertheless display two very different forms of parenting. Education, protection and affection outline Siegfried's upbringing in Xanten. In Worms, Kriemhild's raising is influenced by rather superficial matters, such as beauty, wealth and power.

Helche, the wife of Etzel, is described as the ideal woman and queen [C, 1221/1357/1359/1416]. Though she holds not much agency herself, the composer informs the audience time and again that Helche was a well-respected woman who was loved dearly by her husband until her death. She was efficient in handling courtly affairs and ruled skilfully

¹²¹ It would be bold to argue that Kriemhild's initial opposition to marriage and her free-spirit springs from Uote's negligence of raising her daughter (as it should be in medieval tradition) but nonetheless worth a thought.

over the territories under her jurisdiction [C, 1218]. Furthermore, she was responsible for the education of the daughters of the nobility and she was greatly missed by them after her death [C, 1219/1407], especially by Gotelind who wonders if Kriemhild can really live up to Helche [C, 1183-1184]. The composer repeatedly puts Kriemhild in comparison with the late Helche, and though Kriemhild grows more powerful than her predecessor, she does not reach Helche's status of ideal womanhood.

Gunther and Brünhild's marriage, as well as Kriemhild and Etzel's, are first and foremost political arrangements, nevertheless the description of their married life is far from unharmonious. After the turbulences of the wedding night, Brünhild and Gunther grow into a lifestyle of marital affinity, Brünhild having yielded to her role as obedient wife and thriving as queen of the Burgundians. Etzel and Kriemhild's relationship is amicable, Etzel being very respectful towards his wife and standing in strong contrast to his tyrannic role in the Eddic material. Nevertheless, neither one of these alliances is influenced by the *Minne*-tradition. In both cases the advice of a relative praising the female candidate's beauty is the decisive trigger for the start of the courtship. Ethereal beauty is one of the indicators for the concept of *Minne*. However, both women oppose *Minne*-tradition by actively dismissing marriage. This opposition only fuels the audiences' expectation for a hero to turn the tables. Hence, Kriemhild instantly forgets her resolution when she beholds Siegfried and Brünhild surrenders to Gunther after their wedding night.

Prophetic dreams are a relevant part of the *Nibelungenlied*, and intriguingly only women are afflicted by them, which is by some scholars considered to be a cliché of the Middle High German epic¹²². The prophetic dreams of the women in the *Nibelungenlied* give warning of the impending death of their beloved, most notably husbands. However, as soon as they utter their concerns towards the men and try to warn them, they are dismissed and the warnings ignored. The women are then affirmed in their worries when the prophecies turn out to be true, their efforts in vain. Hence, Kriemhild dreams about Siegfried's death three times and actively tries to prevent them from coming true, in which she fails [C, 12/929/932]. Kriemhild's mother Uote too has a prophetic dream [C, 1542] which warns her of the death of her sons, were they to travel to the Hunnish court. Both, Uote and Kriemhild's first dream use bird

¹²² Otfried Ehrismann, *Nibelungenlied. Epoche – Werk – Wirkung* (München, 1987), 52.

symbolism, a common imagery in medieval literature¹²³. Though prophetic dreams can be found in many biblical texts, and the *Nibelungenlied* must surely have been written by a cleric (or a Christian at the least), it is nevertheless compelling to highlight the ‘archaic’ role of the woman as a prophetess (See Chapter 3). Are these scenes from older narrative layers that spring from a Germanic and thus pre-Christian past? Or do the Burgundian women have prophetic abilities due to their character’s association with sorcery in the Eddic material, hence their prophetic abilities would be remnants of the past? To answer these hypothetical questions is virtually impossible. Moreover, the interpretation and analyses of the dreams of women in the *Nibelungenlied* is worthy of a study in its own right and can not be discussed here.

4.1.2. Brünhild

Brünhild is introduced into the narrative of the *Nibelungenlied* as the powerful warrior-queen of Iceland. She is rumoured to be extraordinarily beautiful [C, 401] and she is to possess great supernatural powers, thus only the man who manages to defeat her in combat will be an acceptable husband; along the lines: The most beautiful woman for the most powerful man. The composer of the *Nibelungenlied* does not refrain from pointing out Brünhild’s ‘monstrosity’ every chance he gets [C, 450], as she is more powerful than any man (except Siegfried with help of the *Tarnkappe*), she carries her weapons with ease even though four men are needed to carry them for her. Furthermore, she is self-assured and arrogant [C, 457/458], utterly removed from the female virtue of modesty. Brünhild is straightforwardly described outside of the acceptable gender norm and normal society at that. Especially the men’s reaction towards her highlights her ‘otherness,’ so much so that Hagen calls her twice the devil’s bride during the fight in Iceland [C, 447; *des valandes wip*. C, 461; *des ubeln tiufels brut*]. To a Christian audience she truly had to be a fearsome figure to behold.

Thus, Brünhild stands outside of courtly, patriarchal society through her origins in Iceland (for the medieval audience far away from the German setting) but she is also secluded because of her supernatural abilities that do not conform with the courtly ideals of womanhood. Her character is a challenge to the patriarchal societal structure and with that masculinity itself. With her description, the composer practically invokes the moment this woman is chastised and incorporated into the befitting courtly society.

¹²³ Otfried Ehrismann, *Nibelungenlied. Epoche – Werk – Wirkung* (München, 1987), 109.

This comes about through two delusions by the hand of Siegfried; with the use of the *Tarnkappe* he subdues her twice, once during battle and once during the wedding night. Hence, only with the use of a magical object, the supernatural abilities of Brünhild can be challenged. After that first defeat, she gives up her position as queen, ending a matriarchal rule, and agrees to marry Gunther whom she believed had defeated her. On the way to Worms Gunther's love and lust for Brünhild is imminent, so much so that he becomes obtrusive. But Brünhild refuses him, delaying the wedding night to when they arrive in the land of the Burgundians [C, 536]. Here, Gunther is even more impatient to be alone with his newlywed wife [C, 631] but the eagerly anticipated wedding night is not in accordance with the king's wishes. Brünhild's attitude of refusal eventually leads to Gunther realising; *der vil maere degen was vil dicke sanfter bi andern frowen gelegen* [C, 635; the legendary knight had lain happier by another woman's side]. Again Brünhild's arrogance is highlighted, taunting her husband when she ties him up and hangs him from a nail on the wall so she may have her peace. Siegfried has to help out his friend again, using the magical *Tarnkappe* to overcome Brünhild's supernatural powers once more. When Gunther finally, after Siegfried's intervention, manages to consummate the marriage by raping her, the composer's tone is almost teasing: *Er pflag ir minnekliche, als in daz beiden zam. do muoste si verchiesen ir zorn und ouch ir schäm. von siner heinliche si wart ein luzzil bleich. hey, waz ir von der minne ir vil grozen chrefte entweich!* [C, 690; He embraced her lovingly, as is right and proper / she had to relinquish her anger and shame / she paled at his love fulfilment / finally, through his love she lost her great powers!].

The husbandly right to bed one's wife is here mentioned, literally 'as is right and proper', and no second thought is heeded to the woman's feelings. The final line is triumphant, mocking even, that finally Brünhild is robbed of her powers. It is clear for whom the composer, and with that probably the audience, is rooting and that the desired outcome is ridding Brünhild of her powers. The victory of men (patriarchy) over the woman (matriarchy) acting outside of her gender sphere is imminent. During this episode, not once are Brünhild's feelings or thoughts mentioned, only her actions are described. Thus, she is further antagonised and her humanity removed. This is an active attempt of the composer to make Gunther the victim and Brünhild the aggressor, cleverly reversing their roles and hence defending Gunther's (and Siegfried's) actions. The audience had no other choice but to support the male heroes. Furthermore, Classen points out that her transgression and affront to

the norms of medieval society is due to her not recognising Gunther as her „master“ and she has yet to be introduced to the customs of her new home¹²⁴.

The symbolism of the struggle between Brünhild and the two men reflects onto medieval gender conflicts¹²⁵. To have Brünhild win this fight would mean that women were no longer inferior to men, and any woman could challenge a man. The composer's view is clear-cut: *solch wer deheiner frowen, waen ich, immer mer erge* [C, 647; she put up such a fight, I believe, like no other woman will ever dare again]. Through Siegfried the audience experiences the very fear that many men at that time might have had, that emancipation could lead to the demise of the patriarchy: *sol ich nu minen lip von einer magt verliesen? so mugen elliu wip her nach immer mere hohe tragen den muot, so versuohtet ez vil mänegiu, diu ez sus nimmer getuot* [C, 678; should I now loose my life at the hand of a maiden? If so, henceforth every woman might be brave enough to do so, even if they had never dared before].

Hence, Brünhild is violated twice, she experiences symbolic rape through Siegfried and marital rape through Gunther. Her resistance is broken when Siegfried takes her belt and ring, and through Gunther's marital rape she loses her supernatural powers and is officially subdued and incorporated into courtly society, losing her position as warrior-queen and accepting patriarchy. Robbed of her powers, Brünhild submits to her role as obedient wife and courtly life because: *ob siz versuochte mere, waz chunde daz vervan* [C, 691; even if she tried to resist, it would have been in vain].

Nevertheless, the ring and belt that Siegfried stole from her shall come back to haunt him. It is the very evidence that Kriemhild uses in her *senna* with Brünhild to prove to her that it was Siegfried who defeated her, not Gunther. Brünhild, ashamed by these news, does not hold the power anymore to fight for her honour herself and has to turn to the men around her. Tears are here the motivators and with clever words, she makes her shame Gunther's as well. In Hagen she eventually finds an unlikely ally and Siegfried's fate is sealed. The myth of the invincible warrior-queen is once and for all forfeit.

With this line of action the character of Brünhild is disused, her transition to courtly woman completed and thus she has lost her purpose at the forefront of the narrative. About the

¹²⁴ Albrecht Classen, *Sexual Violence and Rape in the Middle Ages. A Critical Discourse in Premodern German and European Literature* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 37.

¹²⁵ Classen, *Sexual Violence and Rape in the Middle Ages*, 39.

courtly Brünhild, the *Nibelungenlied* has nothing to tell and in the last part of the epic she joins the other courtly women in oblivion, her whereabouts unknown.

4.1.3. Kriemhild

The portrayal of Kriemhild in the *Nibelungenlied* is fairly unique in Middle High German epic literature. She is depicted as a protagonist and as such she is at the very centre of the narrative. The Burgundian princess appears as a headstrong and very active character, whose state of mind and actions are for the most part comprehensible and relatable to the modern reader. However, her characterisation exhibits various breaks which will be discussed below.

As aforementioned, the epic begins with the figure of Kriemhild, making her the starting point of the events to follow by making her openly dismiss marriage [C, 16], thus evoking the entrance of the male hero to alter her uncourtly provisos. Furthermore, throughout the epic Kriemhild is used as a literary device to warn the reader about which fate she will bestow on other characters of the tale. It is highlighted, already at the beginning, that she will be responsible for Siegfried's, as well as the Burgundian's, doom [C, 2, 18, 139], turning her into the antagonist right from the start.

But what is the catalyst? It is Kriemhild's falcon dream, her mother's interpretation thereof and the fear that springs from said dream. Two eagles kill a falcon, so, her future husband must die a violent death. Hence, *Chriemhilt in ir sinne ir selber nie verjach* [C, 46], she promises to herself that she will never marry – a fairly lonesome statement. It is hardly surprising that brave, invincible Siegfried is the only man that can take this fear from her; surely a hero like him would never be the falcon in her dream. At that point in the narrative Siegfried gives Kriemhild the security she desperately needs and her once so stubborn views on marriage are instantly forgotten at the sight of the hero. The feelings between the two are genuine and in *Minne*-like fashion their courtship is described with secret looks and gestures. Their wedding night is in complete opposition to that of Brünhild and Gunther: *Do der herre Sivrit bi Chriemhilde lach, und er so minnekliche der juneffowen pflach mit sinen edeln minnen, si wart im so der lip. daz chunde ouch si verdienen als ein tugende riche wip.* [C, 634; When Lord Siegfried lay with Kriemhild and turned to the maiden in love, they became one. Her virtues earned her this fortunateness.] The last sentence highlights the difference between the two women's wedding nights. Kriemhild, the courtly ideal woman until then, had deserved to be treated with love by her husband. Brünhild, however, in her resistance ('virtueless' to the medieval audience) did not deserve such love, therefore her violation is justified by the composer.

Nevertheless, Kriemhild would soon learn how Siegfried treats her when she does not adhere to the womanly virtues taught by patriarchy. After several years as the obedient wife at Siegfried's side, residing at the court of Xanten, Kriemhild and her husband are invited to Worms, which is part of Brünhild's plan to find out more about Siegfried's real position and rank. In a squabble (*senna*) over said rank, Kriemhild and Brünhild brings about the death of Siegfried and thus the fulfilment of the prophetic dream. Until the *senna*, Kriemhild is the epitome of courtly womanhood and she holds a conciliating position at first. Only when Brünhild is insistent in her accusations and indignities does Kriemhild break character and steps outside the role appointed to her. In her pride of rank she defends herself and makes sure to emerge as the winner of the squabble, whatever the cost. Thus, she breaks Siegfried's promise, with that his trust, by presenting Brünhild with the ring and belt that Siegfried had taken from the former warrior-queen in her wedding night. With a break of her virtuous behaviour, she inflicts her husband's wrath unto herself [C, 866], which she accepts as her rightful punishment for giving away a secret [C, 901].

She betrays another secret soon afterwards, when Hagen, in cahoots with Brünhild, inquires about Siegfried's only weak spot. Trusting her own kin to have her best interest in mind [C, 908], she confides in Hagen and ultimately brings about Siegfried's death, another punishment for her transgression. Plagued by prophetic dreams about Siegfried's impending death, Kriemhild tries to prevent Siegfried from participating in the hunt in which he will lose his life. But the hero ignores his wife's warning and betrays her thus in return. Her husband's death, at the hand of Hagen und Gunther, is a great calamity and Kriemhild's grief severe [C, 1020-1025]. With Siegfried's own dying words; *ez enwart nie frowen mere an friunde leider getan* [C, 1007; no other woman would befall greater sorrow thereafter (than Kriemhild)]. This extreme expression of misery leads over to the intense need for revenge, and indeed, makes her avenging spirit comprehensible. This is the second break in Kriemhild's character, taking over the role of the victim, heralding the act of revenge and thus the third break in her character.

The focus of the *Nibelungenlied* now shifts to Etzel's courtship. Deeply in mourning Kriemhild denies Etzel's request for marriage at first, which he, in courtly manner, transmitted through Margrave Rüdiger from his court. She can marry no other man, because she has lost the best of husbands already, these are Kriemhild's words [C, 1257]. Not until she is offered wealth, power and autonomy, does she agree to the proposal, having been presented with all

she needs to enact her revenge [C, 1281-1282]. The marriage becomes the medium for retribution. Hagen is the only one who realises which power Kriemhild would wield were she to become queen of the Huns. It is during the wedding ceremony that we get an unusual insight into Kriemhild's emotional world: *Wie si ze Rine saeze, si gedaht an daz, bi ir vil edelem manne; ir ougen wurden naz* [C, 1398; She thought back to her time on the Rhine at the side of her husband (Siegfried), and tears came to her eyes]. This is a unique instance in which the female state of mind is shown, and serves to underline Kriemhild's fealty to her late husband which justifies her vengeance later on.

For twelve years she builds her reputation and status at the Hunnish court, establishing her authority and forming allegiances, but never stops grieving for Siegfried. Kriemhild assumes incredible power and with that, indirectly, she creates and promotes a matriarchal position within the Hunnish court, similar to the former Brünhild. She becomes even more powerful than Helche; *daz nie diu frowe Helche so gewaldechlich gebot* [C, 1412; that even Helche had held no such power]. Strong-mindedly she pursues her goal in order to have enough power for her revenge: *ich bin nu wol so riche, swem iz ouch missehage, daz ich wol minen vinden mac gefüegen leit* [C, 1423; I am now so powerful that I can take revenge on my enemies, whether they like it or not].

Etzel and Kriemhild's marriage is a civil one and the Hunnish king is open with his display of affection for his new wife, which conveys the power Kriemhild holds over her husband. The term 'feminine wiles' comes to mind here, because it is in their shared marital bed, that Kriemhild, a mastermind of revenge, convinces Etzel to invite her family to the land of the Huns [C, 1427-1432]. Indeed, Kriemhild and Etzel's relationship appears more harmonic than her marriage to Siegfried who held patriarchal power over his wife, whereas Etzel grants her freedom. This could be another suggestion of the power women could hold in pre-Christian society. In her first Christian marriage, Kriemhild was an obedient wife, her husband commanding over her every right. But at the Hunnish, and thus non-Christian, court, Kriemhild is granted autonomy; matriarchal structures not as precluded as in her Christian homeland.

With the arrival of the Burgundians in the land of the Huns, their demise is imminent. Kriemhild riles her men up and an epic battle transpires, and she stops at nothing until she sees her kin dead. This is the third break in the figure of Kriemhild, and from that moment on her character fully transitions into the antagonist that the audience is promised at the

beginning of the narrative. Here, the composer removes himself from Kriemhild by reporting the events rather than describing them from the instigator's perspective. *Valendinne* she is called [C, 1789/ 2431], literally she-devil. „She is called a she-devil because of having assumed a male function and of having threatened masculinity in its core,“¹²⁶ says Classen and with that she also endangered the Christian patriarchal structure of the Middle Ages, as the devil is the opponent of Christian knighthood. Kriemhild's transgression could thus be evidence for the audience that pre-Christian leniency towards matriarchy and female empowerment is unacceptable and even the non-Christian king Etzel has to realise in the end that giving power to women is unwise. In her last act, Kriemhild decapitates Hagen [C, 2433], shocking her husband Etzel and ultimately crossing the last boundary between gender spheres, having assumed a warrior position like Brünhild before her. Her punishment for challenging gender norms comes on the spot; angered Hildebrand lifts his sword and brings an end to the She-Devil [C, 2436].

4.1.4. Conclusion

Generally, the figures of the *Nibelungenlied* are in accordance with feudal and courtly ideals of medieval Europe, especially the ideal Noblewomen. The traditional image of womanhood is that of a loving mother, this is the case for Sieglind, Uote, Gotelind and Helche (though son-less, she is a motherly figure at the Hunnish court). In strong contrast to this are Kriemhild and Brünhild, though both women become eventually mothers during the narrative, they are not defined by it and their motherhood is not elaborated. Thus, the audience is presented with gender-divergences that do not fit the apparent medieval world view but must have been very much on the mind of 13th-century people, considering the discourse enabled through the epic poem. *Minne* becomes an instrument of politics, and the marriages at the fore (Kriemhild and Brünhild) are alliances of convenience for the acquisition of power.

It is the opposition of the two rebellious women towards marriage that fuels the plot of the *Nibelungenlied* in the beginning. The composer practically conjures the moment these women are chastised and assimilated into courtly society. The question is, why is this resistance such a driving force in the narrative? Is it possible that the female opposition towards marriage reflects a crisis of medieval society, and the *Nibelungenlied* becomes a representation of

¹²⁶ Albrecht Classen, “Sexual Desire and Pornography: Literary Imagination in a Satirical Context. Gender Conflict, Sexual Identity, and Misogyny in ‘Das Nonnenturnier,’” in *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Times: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Theme*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 649-690, 671.

societal grievances to implement the courtly ideals of feudal patriarchy? In the words of the anonymous poet, Kriemhild wishes to be a knight herself [C, 1444]. She is longing for an expansion of her sphere of influence and the confinement of her gender ultimately forces her to act outside of her role. Or is it conceivable that the female opposition and rebellion is the result of male anxiety towards powerful women threatening patriarchy?

It is intriguing that the matriarchal society in Iceland, characterised through a warrior-queen with supernatural abilities, is literally brought into connection with the devil and ultimately ended by the courtly Christian hero. The conflict between matriarchy and patriarchy is obvious, and so is the conflict between Christianity and something that must have been understood as the pre-Christian past. Can the matriarchal subplot of the *Nibelungenlied* be understood as evidence that matriarchy was indeed part of the past and that in the course of the 13th century fear of a resurgence of that ideology arose, which had to be counteracted with a story where women act out and are ultimately put back in their place?

Alas, the Nibelung legend becomes a story of polar opposites, comparing society as it should have been, with society as it probably has been, exaggerated to evoke indignation. Kriemhild's rise to a matriarchal position, using her husband's love and devotion for her political scheming, is just another story with the same undertone as Brünhild's subjugation. These women refusing to play by the rules of patriarchy, complying to the dominant ideology, are treated with instant submission and punishment in the epic, ultimately a warning to its audience.

4.2. *Völsunga saga*

4.2.1. The Women Of *Völsunga saga*

The women of *Völsunga saga* are characters with relatively high agency who speak their mind freely and actively take part in the narrative. Though they are women who do not back away from a fight or revenge, they can also act as mediators. The saga features a variety of marriages that present different forms of womanhood. For instance, the saga tells us that Rerir took that woman as his wife *er honum þótti við sitt hæfi* [2; who he deemed worthy for himself]¹²⁷. It is a moral certainty that the unnamed queen holds the many virtues of medieval womanhood. She is however not able to bear an heir, and Rerir and his wife call upon Óðinn and Frigg to help them conceive. Óðinn sends one of his *óskmær* (chosen-maiden) with an apple, that upon consumption by Rerir, helps the king and the queen to conceive. These *óskmær* are said to be the daughters of the jötunn Hrímnir, who has the ability to shape-shift into a crow. As a helper of Óðinn this *óskmær* who we later learn is named Hljóð is sometimes interpreted to be a *valkyrja*¹²⁸. When Rerir and his wife finally have a son, Völsung, he will grow up to marry Hljóð. Though it is Hrímnir who sent his daughter for Völsung to marry, the saga tells us that Völsung and Hljóð *eru þau lengi ásamt, ok eru góðar samfarar þeira* [2, they were long together and their married life was good].

Here enters Signý, the only daughter of Völsung and Hljóð, who is the dominating female character in the first part of the saga. King Siggeirr enters the narrative, a powerful king who asks Völsung for Signý's hand in marriage as an exchange for peace. Though her family is delighted by the proposal, Signý *var þessa ófús, biðr þó fǫður sinn ráða sem ǫðru því, sem til hennar tæki* [3, was unwilling, yet she bade her father to decide, as he did in other things that concerned her]. She thus openly reveals her aversion to the marriage, but obeys her father's ruling nonetheless. Siggeirr beds Signý [4], however, she is still against the marriage afterwards: *Eigi vilda ek á brott fara með Siggeiri, ok eigi gerir hugr minn hlæja við honum, ok veit ek af framvísi minni ok af kynfylgju várri, at af þessu ráði stendr oss mikill ófagnaðr, ef eigi er skjótt brugðit þessum ráðahag.* [4, I do not want to go away with Siggeirr, my heart is not gladdened by him, and through my foresight that runs in the family I know that great misery will befall us if this marriage is

¹²⁷ For the Old Norse version of *Völsunga saga* Guðni Jónsson's normalised edition is used [cited: Chapter] Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds., "Völsunga Saga," in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, I (Reykjavík: Bókútgáfan forni, 1943). Translation by author.

¹²⁸ Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), 184.

not dissolved]. Here we are informed that Signý possesses the ability of clairvoyance, which leads her to inform a man about his impending doom, in this case her father Vǫlsung. He dismisses Signý's warning and is more afraid of Siggeirr's wrath should the marriage fail. The prophecy of a woman about the demise of the male characters, and the men's dismissal thereof, is a recurring pattern in the Nibelung legend. These foreshadowing prophecies set the development of the narrative and they always turn out to come true.

Through Signý's disapproval of the marriage she stays loyal to her own king, and when her family is invited to Siggeirr's lands, where he plots to kill them, she warns her father and brother's. Signý's prediction comes true, as her marriage brings great misery when Siggeirr kills her father. Here, the basis of Signý's character as avenger is set. Gone is the obeying daughter who cried bitterly over the death of her family [5]. As Carol Jamison points out: „(Signý) is instrumental in bringing about her husband's death.“¹²⁹ With high agency, Signý leads and influences the narrative, from sending her sons for her brother Sigmundr to train, having them killed by him due to their lack of bravery, to exchanging shapes with a sorceress in order to conceive a pure Vǫlsung heir (Sinfjǫtli) with Sigmundr, who will be able to bring about her revenge. Signý's role becomes aggressive in her quest to kill Siggeirr in order to redeem not only the honour of her family, but also her own. Failed in her role as a peace mediator, Signý does not return to her kin after Siggeirr finds his end, yet, by her own accord she steps into the burning hall, dying alongside her husband and their court: *Skal ek nú deyja með Siggeiri konungi lostig, er ek átta hann nauðig* [8; Now I shall die with King Siggeirr, though I married him unwillingly]. Plausibly Jamison suggests: „Signý's decision to join her husband in the pyre may be her final statement on the devastation wrought by a marriage she vehemently opposed¹³⁰.“ Ultimately, Signý breached taboo twice, as for one she had her own children killed and second, she engaged in an incestuous affair with her brother Sigmundr. The incest does not spring from love or lust, but rather Signý's plans of revenge to produce a worthy avenger for the Vǫlsung line, for which she eventually pays the price.

Additionally, there is the character of Sigrún, daughter of King Hǫgni, who contrary to her father's wishes, promises herself to king Helgi if he manages to slay her betrothed Hǫðbroddr [9]. Thus, Sigrún is active in her choice of a husband, and vigorously tries to prevent her

¹²⁹ Carol Parrish Jamison, “Traffic of Women in Germanic Literature: The Role of the Peace Pledge in Marital Exchanges.” *Women in German Yearbook* 20 (2004): 13–36, 26.

¹³⁰ Jamison, “Traffic of Women in Germanic Literature: The Role of the Peace Pledge in Marital Exchanges,” 27.

marriage to a man she does not favour. Furthermore, Sigrún is depicted as a *valkyrja*, or shield-maiden, taking part in the battle between Helgi and Höðbroddr. The description of her appearance alongside other female warriors on the battlefield seems to hold both awe and horror by the author: *Þá sá þeir skjaldmeyjaflokk mikinn, svá sem í loga sæi* [9, Then saw they a great many shield-maidens; it was like gazing into fire].

Furthermore, there is Hjördís, daughter of King Eylimi, who has the choice between two kings, Lyngvi and Sigmundur [11]. Eylimi praises his daughter's wisdom and it seems here to be the reason Hjördís can choose who she deems right herself: *Þú ert vitr kona, en ek hef þat mælt, at þú skalt þér mann kjósa* [11; You are a wise woman, and I have said that you shall select a husband]. Hence, Hjördís chooses Sigmundur, who she agrees is very old, but politically a better choice. Though this union was for both sides advantageous, it invokes the wrath of Lyngvi who proceeds to kill Sigmundur and his men. In a way, Hjördís choice brings about the death of her husband Sigmundur and her father Eylimi. Hjördís, neither her husband's nor her own kin surviving, pregnant with Sigmundur's child, is now on her own. On the arrival of king Álfr at the battlefield where Sigmundur lost his life, Hjördís exchanges clothes with her bondswoman [12]. No reason for this exchange is mentioned here, but it is plausible that Hjördís therethrough tried to hide her real identity and thus protect Sigmundur's unborn child and heir. This sequence allows an insight into what is considered virtuous by the characters, and thus possibly to the composer himself. King Álfr quickly realises that the women must have exchanged clothes, pointing out that Hjördís' behaviour and appearances makes her out to be the woman of higher rank, indirectly highlighting virtues such as beauty, countenance and conduct. After a sly test, Álfr's hunch is confirmed and he is adamant to marry Hjördís, thus *hún þar nú í miklum sóma ok þykkir in virðuligasta kona* [12; there she now lived in honour and was deemed the most worthy woman]. It almost seems as if Álfr is Hjördís' equal in wits, deeming himself worthy to marry her, and vice versa, as he was able to recognise her virtues and look through her disguise. On multiple occasions her virtues are highlighted, and it is assumable that Hjördís' (relatively) happy ending is due to her representing ideal womanhood. With the birth of the hero Sigurðr, Hjördís story ends and she disappears from the storyline.

Though the women of *Völsunga saga* are expressive in their betrothals and choice of husbands, there are instances where their characters are muted. Svanhildr does not voice her opinions about her marriage to Jörmunrekr, she willingly goes to his land to marry him after

her stepfather agreed to the match [42]. Svanhildr's story is a tragic one, falling in love with king Jǫrmunrekr's son Randvér, the king has both his son and his betrothed executed. On Svanhildr's part it is said that when she was to be trampled by horses, then the animals stopped in their tracks at the sight of her face (the reason is not elucidated, but probably due to her beauty), so that a bag had to be pulled over her head before she died. In comparison to every other female character, Svanhildr surprisingly does not speak once in the narrative. Her gruesome death leads to the last act of revenge by her mother Guðrún, and brings about the definite demise of the House of Gjúki [43].

Much like the *Nibelungenlied* and *Piðreks saga af bern*, *Vǫlsunga saga* holds various scenes concerned with prophetic dreams. Gunnarr's second wife Glaumvǫr, warns her husband of an impending betrayal that she had seen in her dreams, but every time Gunnarr dismisses her warnings [35]. Eventually her prophecy does come true and the man's choice to ignore the woman's clairvoyant abilities comes back to haunt him. Likewise, Hǫgni's wife Kostbera warns her husband about the same betrayal, being equally dismissed by him [34]. Furthermore, it is Kostbera who warns her husband that someone had meddled with the runes that Guðrún sent to her brother, but her warning is again ignored. Beside these warning sequences, both women do not appear elsewhere in the narrative.

These are part of an ongoing series of prophetic dreams that are interpreted falsely and nevertheless bring about the demise of the warned. Both Glaumvǫr and Kostbera's dreams are misinterpreted and disclaimed by their husbands. Interestingly, between Atli and Guðrún a similar discussion occurs, however it is Atli who dreams and Guðrún who interprets, but instead of dismissing her husband's dreams she tells him that they will come true, thus, he and his sons will die [33]. Ultimately, men tend to dismiss and misinterpret the women's dreams, whereas women believe that dreams tell the future, which proves true as the events always occur as they are portrayed in the dreams. This is a significant separation between genders and establishes two spheres, the male and the female one. Then there is Guðrún's dream interpreted by Brynhildr which will be discussed below.

Magic and supernatural abilities are an essential part of *Vǫlsunga saga*. Besides women with prophetic dreams the saga features sorceresses [6/11/25; *seiðkonur*, *spádísir*] and shapeshifters [1/5/6]. These magical women intervene greatly in the narrative, their actions incentive. First, Signý and an unnamed sorceress exchange shapes, so Signý can sleep with

Sigmundr and conceive Sinfjötli, who will grow up to avenge the Völsungs [6]. Secondly, the saga mentions that the she-wolf that killed Signý and Sigmundr's siblings was said to be Siggeirr's mother: *En þat er sögn sumra manna, at sú in sama ylgr væri móðir Siggeirs konungs ok hafí hún brugðit á sik þessu líki fyrir tröllskapar sakir ok fjölkynngi* [5; Some men say that the she-wolf was Siggeirr's mother, who assumed the shape through witchcraft and sorcery]. Thus, it would have been another magical woman that diminished the Völsung heirs. Sigmundr has *spádísir* fighting at his side in the battle against Lyngvi: *En svá hlífðu honum hans spádísir, at hann varð ekki sárr, ok engi kunni töl, hversu margr maðr fell fyrir honum* [11; And so his *spádísir* protected him, that he was not wounded, and no one knew how many men fell before him]. Only when Óðinn himself intervenes, Sigmundr's luck runs out and he is killed.

The sorceress Grímhildr, and stepmother of Guðrún, is another woman that greatly influences the narrative, as she magically brings about her stepdaughter's marriage to Sigurðr. She actively pursues the advantageous match, *væri at honum mikit traust* [26; He would be a great asset] in order to increase her husband's power and field of influence. The saga tells us that she is a great sorceress and a *grimmhuguð kona* [25; grim-minded woman] at that, generally she is painted as the meddling antagonist. Interestingly, the moment Grímhildr entices her husband Gjúki to consider a marriage between Guðrún and Sigurðr, she goes to King Gjúki and *lagði hendr um háls honum* [26; puts her arms around his neck]. Thus, the moment the woman sweet-talks the man is a private, even intimate, one, arguably the female sphere, where Grímhildr is able to influence Gjúki's decisions. It is Grímhildr's magical potion that eventually makes Sigurðr forget his oath to Brynhildr, so that he agrees to marry Guðrún.

The women of *Völsunga saga* mainly come to the attention of men through their beauty, and it is the men's desire that leads them to take action. Svanhildr [31; *vænst mun fædd allra kvenna*], Hjörðís [11; *allra kvenna vænst ok vitrust*], Sigrún [9; *margar ok virðuligar sýnum, ok bar þó ein af öllum*] are all coveted due to their beauty. Though the match between Signý and Siggeirr is mostly politically inclined, her being *fremst ok vænst* [2; *foremost and beautiful*] certainly seals the deal. An exception is Brynhildr, though she is beautiful, it is her intelligence that enamours Sigurðr first. When he wants to marry her, he says: *Engi finnst þér vitrari maðr, ok þess sver ek, at þik skal ek eiga, ok þu ert við mitt æði* [21; No one is wise as you, and I swear that I shall marry you, for you appeal to me]. Only later in the story does Sigurðr also accentuate her beauty [24]. For Gunnarr, however, the main objective for his bridal quest is Brynhildr's

beauty, *Víst er hún væn, ok eigi em ek þessa ófúss* [26; Certainly is she beautiful, and I am not averted (to marriage)].

Nevertheless, men's desire often comes back to haunt them, as is elucidated in the chapters on the *Nibelungenlied* and *Piðreks saga af bern*. In *Völsunga saga* this is illustrated in the story when Sinfjötli kills Borghildr's brother over a woman. While raiding, Sinfjötli comes across a woman he *girnist mjök at fá hennar* [10; desired strongly to have her], however his step-uncle also desired her. In a battle fighting over who could court the woman, Sinfjötli kills the other man. Upon his return home, Sinfjötli confesses the slaying. Borghildr asks for Sinfjötli to be banished from the kingdom but king Sigmundr tries to appease her with gold and riches. She then answers: *Þér skuluð ráða, herra, þat samir* [10; you shall decide, my lord, as is befitting]. This is a crucial statement as it clearly defines the gender roles between husband and wife. Though she is emotional over her brother's death and seeks revenge, she nevertheless leaves the decision to her husband „as it should be“. On the funeral feast Borghildr then takes revenge, poisoning Sinfjötli, whereupon Sigmundr drives his wife away. About the unnamed woman that Sinfjötli killed the other man over is nothing heard of thenceforth and it could be argued that Sinfjötli's fleeting desire brought about his own demise. On the other hand, the story could be interpreted that the merest tinge of desire for a woman is not worth killing for, and that losing a son over the revenge of a woman is neither. However, what the true intent behind the story is and how it was perceived by the initial audience remains speculation.

4.2.2. Brynhildr

Brynhildr enters the narrative when Sigurðr awakes her from a supernaturally induced slumber. She is clad like a warrior, in a coat of mail and helmet and in the first instance Sigurðr mistakes her for a man. The image of the *valkyrja* could not be more obvious. Brynhildr describes the events that lead to her coma-like state, having slain Óðinn's champion during a battle and therefore caught the wrath of the god and was stabbed with a sleeping-thorn. In the re-telling it is conveyed that Óðinn cursed Brynhildr twofold: that she will never claim victory again, and that she must marry [20], hence she would lose her status as a *valkyrja* and the power that comes with this position. An issue seemingly not concerning the other *valkyrjur* in the saga, Sigrún and Hljóð, who marry willingly. As this is supposed to be some kind of punishment for her transgression, it is plausible that Brynhildr was opposed to marriage but must comply to the god's curse now. But she also says that she made a counter-

vow so that she can only marry someone who never knew fear, ergo, a man with renown and a higher social standing, or lessening the chance of finding a worthy man altogether. Considering that Brynhildr is faced with an existential crisis where she could be stripped not only of her might but also her societal status and life's purpose, her counter-vow becomes comprehensible, and the rich and heroic Sigurðr her only chance to retain some of her former social position. When Sigurðr awakes Brynhildr by slicing through her armour, her first question is *eða mun hér kominn Sigurðr Sigmundarson, er hefir hjálm Fáfnis ok hans bana í hendi?* [20; or has Sigurðr Sigmundarson come, he who has the helmet of Fáfnir, who carries Fáfnir's bane in his hand?]. This clearly supports the idea that even before meeting Sigurðr, Brynhildr had already chosen him to be her worthy match through his reputation. When an unfamiliar man manages to lift Óðinn's sleeping curse from her, she immediately assumes that it could only be Sigurðr who had done the deed. She then continues to impart wisdom unto Sigurðr by giving him a goblet of beer that is laced with „strength“ and „glory“ which will give him knowledge about various magical runes, a clear parallel to *Hávamál* or *Sigrdrífumál*¹³¹. Brynhildr goes on to give him words of advice, partly even prophesying events to come and afterwards Sigurðr promises to marry her, *Engi finnst þér vitrari maðr, ok þess sver ek, at þik skal ek eiga* [21; Not can one find a wiser man than you, and I swear that I shall marry you]. Her wisdom seems here to be the initial reason for the proposal, and Brynhildr gladly accepts, Sigurðr being the embodiment of all that she seeks.

Then the reader is informed about Bekkhildr, Brynhildr's sister, who is married to a chieftain named Heimir [23]. Here the two sisters are compared: *því at hún hafði heima verit ok numit hannyrði, en Brynhildr fór með hjálm ok brynju ok gekk at vígum* [23; that she (Bekkhildr) stayed at home and took up fine handicraft, whereas Brynhildr took helmet and chestplate and went to battle]. The character of Bekkhildr has no other purpose but to be compared to Brynhildr, possibly showing two forms of womanhood, Bekkhildr (*bekkr* „bench“) being the image of domestic womanhood and Brynhildr (*brynja* „coat of mail“) is the image of the *valkyrja* or female warrior. It can be argued that these sisters are to be seen as two women of two worlds—Bekkhildr the epitome of Christian womanhood, and Brynhildr possibly belonging to a non- or pre-Christian past. However, in the following chapter it is said that Brynhildr *kunni meira*

¹³¹ About the similarities between the *valkyrjur* Sigrdrífa and Brynhildr, upon which can not be elaborated in this thesis, see, Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images Of Women* (Philadelphia: Penn, 1996), 89-95; Henning Larsen, “SIGRDRÍFA-BRYNHILD,” *Scandinavian Studies and Notes* 4, no. 1 (February 1917): pp. 65-73.

hagleik en aðrar konur [24; more accomplished in handicraft than other women], is embroidering the finest tapestries. This stands somehow in conflict with the earlier chapter, where two ideologies of womanhood are differentiated and Brynhildr is neatly put into the „warrior-box“, as it were. Thus, it seems that Brynhildr’s warrior side does not exclude features of ideal womanhood, the two forms more ambiguous.

Interestingly, one of the most misogynistic comments of *Völsunga saga* comes from Brynhildr when she says: *Vitrilgra ráð er þat at leggja eigi trúnað sinn á konu vald, því at þær rjúfa jafnan sín heit* [24; It’s wise counsel to lay no trust into women’s power, because they always break their promises]. At this point Brynhildr tries to release Sigurðr from their oath of betrothal, stating their differences and that she is bound to live the life of a warrior and she prophecies that Sigurðr will go on to marry Guðrún. Only when he swears that he will never marry another woman, they renew their oaths. But as aforementioned, Grímhildr has something else in mind for Sigurðr.

In comparison to the *Nibelungenlied* or *Þiðreks saga af bern*, here Brynhildr and Guðrún know each other before Sigurðr enters their lives, and they seem to be friends. In a sequence where Guðrún seeks wise Brynhildr’s interpretation of her dreams, Brynhildr tells the other woman the entirety of her future, her marriage with Sigurðr and Atli, and the desperation she will experience because of them. Brynhildr is straightforward with the analysis of Guðrún’s dreams, even though it would mean that she and Sigurðr were after all fated to live apart.

After Sigurðr is given the potion of forgetfulness and marries Guðrún, Grímhildr urges Gunnarr to ask Brynhildr’s hand in marriage. Curiously, the *valkyrja*’s family leaves the choice of husband to Brynhildr. It is Gunnarr’s father Buðli who says *hana svá stóra, at þann einn mann mun hún eiga, er hún vill* [27; she is so proud, that she will only marry a man she wants], and in this case it can be considered a snide remark which criticises Brynhildr’s pride and free will as something unideal. After Sigurðr and Gunnarr exchange shapes and Sigurðr wins Brynhildr’s hand in marriage by riding through the wall of fire, Sigurðr spends three nights with Brynhildr, sharing one bed but laying the sword Gramr unsheathed between them. Though there is no wedding night described between either Sigurðr and Guðrún, Brynhildr and Gunnarr or Sigurðr and Brynhildr prior to the potion-incident, sex is clearly thematised in this episode. Sigurðr placed the sword between them because Brynhildr was now bound to his

blood-brother Gunnarr. As Margret Clunies Ross points out, „sexuality is in any case thematic and the liminal is accentuated by the 'abnormal' in the situation¹³².“

After Sigurðr and Gunnarr's deceit, Brynhildr agrees to marry Gunnarr whom she thinks was the one who travelled through the wall of flames and thus won the right to marry her. When Guðrún reveals to her that it was indeed Sigurðr who had done the deed, Brynhildr's heartbreak is overt, and the reader is allowed an insight into the woman's emotions [28]. Her reaction is threatening to Gunnarr's court as she refuses to play the part of the docile woman: *Hirð eigi þat, því at aldri sér þú mik glaða síðan í þinni holl eða drekka né tefla né hugat mæla né gulli leggja góð klæði né yðr ráð gefa* [29; Do not mind, from now on you will not see me cheerful in your hall, nor will I drink, play chess, speak sincerely, embroider clothes with gold or give advice]. With that statement she refuses every part of the role that comes with being an obedient and helpful wife. As Jamison¹³³ proposes: „She is aware that her husband depends on her diplomacy in the mead hall and will be politically damaged without her participation.“ With the statement *at þér véltuð mik, ok þess skal hefna* [28; that you betrayed me, and this shall be avenged] Brynhildr turns to the avenger figure, bringing about the death of Sigurðr and thus the sorrow of Guðrún.

Interestingly, in the dispute between the two women, Brynhildr openly differentiates between herself, a warrior, and Guðrún, and with that also shows that she deems herself superior to the other woman. When Brynhildr says *Spyr þess eina, at betr sé, attu vitir. Þat samir ríðum konum* [29; Ask only what is good for you to know. That which is suitable for noble women] she, almost mockingly, suggests that Guðrún is „only“ a traditional noblewoman and that it is herself, a warrior, who can be bothered with more complex matters. Womanhood is again separated into two forms, the courtly noblewoman and the strong, female warrior.

In the end, Brynhildr is responsible for bringing about Sigurðr's death, laughing when she hears Guðrún's cry of grief and is called a *mikit forað* [30; great monster] by Gunnarr, having instigated not only the death of their most important ally but also bringing about a political crisis with Atli. Additionally, she has Sigurðr and Guðrún's son killed. In her last act, she kills herself, giving a final prophecy about the doom of the House of Buðli and foretelling

¹³² Margaret Clunies Ross, *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003), 274.

¹³³ Carol Parrish Jamison, „Traffic of Women in Germanic Literature: The Role of the Peace Pledge in Marital Exchanges.“ *Women in German Yearbook* 20 (2004): 13–36, 28.

Guðrún's further sorrow, before she requests to be burned alongside Sigurðr on his funeral pyre. Though depicted as an antagonist in the end, her actions derive from betrayal and deceit by the people around her. In *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr is cheated thrice; first by her love Sigurðr when he marries Guðrún; secondly by her friend Guðrún who knew from the interpretation of her dreams that Brynhildr and Sigurðr were betrothed but enchanted, and married Sigurðr anyway; and thirdly when Sigurðr and Gunnarr exchanged shapes to win Brynhildr's hand in marriage for Gunnarr.

4.2.3. Guðrún

The character of Guðrún is only introduced to the narrative in the second part of the saga, where she rises to the role of the protagonist. Described as *frægst mærl* [25; the most famous maiden] and furthermore praised by her handmaiden to possess *vænleik, vizku ok kurteisi* [25; beauty, wisdom and courtesy] Guðrún is portrayed as the ideal Noblewoman.

As aforementioned, Guðrún seeks Brynhildr's advice in the interpretation of her dreams. Here, Guðrún is very much aware of Brynhildr's betrothal to Sigurðr and acts shocked when the other woman prophesies that she will break the oath between the lovers by bewitching Sigurðr and marrying him herself. Guðrún's actions can almost be seen as ruthless when she, fully aware of the prophecy, goes along to marry Sigurðr after Grímhildr's plan to give the hero a potion of forgetfulness succeeds. How far Guðrún is involved in this scheme is not elaborated in the text, but it is conspicuous that she marries Sigurðr with the full knowledge that he is betrothed to Brynhildr, not questioning the situation whatsoever. With that, she not only betrays her friend, but is, if she is aware of Grímhildr's potion, consciously taking part in the violation of Sigurðr.

A change in the figure of Guðrún, that has not been called to attention enough, is briefly implied in the description of Sigurðr and Guðrún's married life. *Sigurðr gaf Guðrúnu at eta af Fáfnis hjarta, ok síðan var hún miklu grimmar en áðr ok vitrari* [26; Sigurðr gave Guðrún some of Fáfnr's heart to eat, and afterwards she became much grimmer (or crueler) and wiser] the saga tells us. Seemingly insignificant at first, it might be suggested that this is the moment her character really changes. During the queen's quarrel Guðrún admits that she knew of Sigurðr and Gunnarr exchanging shapes and that Sigurðr took Brynhildr's ring from her. The saga does not mention if Sigurðr told Guðrún what happened, but it can also be assumed that she gained this knowledge after consuming Fáfnr's heart. Furthermore, during the dispute Brynhildr tells

Guðrún *hefir þú grimmt hjarta* [28; you have a grim (or cruel) heart], which could also be understood as a result of eating Fáfnir's heart. Though it could be coincidental, the parallel between the sequences and the mention of Guðrún being grim/cruel is intriguing. On account of this, if this assumption were to be true, it would mean that the reason for the quarrel getting out of control and the malice taking root, is not only because of Brynhildr's betrayal through Guðrún but also of Sigurðr's choice to give Guðrún a part of the serpent's heart. Therethrough, Guðrún's behaviour during the *senna* could be somewhat excused, however, this would not absolve her involvement in the enchantment of Sigurðr and ultimately her betrayal of Brynhildr.

With the death of Sigurðr, by the hand of Guttormr, Guðrún's sorrow only begins. It is her punishment for betraying Brynhildr and deceiving Sigurðr, ultimately heralding the demise of the House of Gjúki. She berates her brothers for killing her husband, disclosing the problems they now would have to face with the loss of Sigurðr's alliance. Curiously, Guðrún's first lamentation is concerned with the political crisis and not the loss of her beloved spouse. Only later does she verbally lament Sigurðr's death and in her sorrow she flees the kingdom. It is Grímhildr who intervenes again, forcing upon her stepdaughter a magical potion that lets Guðrún forget her grievances [32], instrumentalising her once more for the political benefit of her family when she marries Atli. Much like Signý at the beginning of the saga, Guðrún is not content with the marital arrangement, staying loyal to her own family instead. When she learns of Atli's intent to kill her brothers, Guðrún chooses her kin's side by warning them and takes up the role as mediator when both sides clash. In the ensuing battle she sides with her brothers and, surprisingly, takes up a mail coat and sword, and fights beside her family. Here, Guðrún takes up the image of the fighting woman and when Atli murders her brothers she takes revenge for her family into her own hands. This is where things turn dire and Guðrún evolves into a, almost exaggerated, cruel antagonist, by killing her own sons, feeding their hearts to Atli and giving him their blood to drink. The turnaround from the initial character of a noble woman could not be greater. *Grimm ertu, er þú myrðir sonu þína ok gaft mér þeira hold at eta* [38; Cruel are you, that you killed your own sons and gave me their flesh to eat] Atli tells Guðrún. But is her cruelty, or *grimm* behaviour, of her own volition or is it the result of her consumption of Fáfnir's heart? This will be discussed again later.

In a narrative parallel to Signý's sequence at the beginning of the saga, Guðrún ignites Atli's hall, and kills him as well as all their retainers in the fire [38]. Thereafter, Guðrún chooses to commit suicide by drowning herself but as Brynhildr prophesied her sorrow was not yet to end. Carried by waves to another kingdom across the sea, Guðrún is married to yet another king, Jónakr, and becomes the mother of three sons [39]. As aforementioned, her daughter by Sigurðr, Svanhildr, dies a violent death through her betrothed Jǫrmunrekr and Guðrún's sorrow is amplified [40]. Her need for revenge is kindled again, taunting and goading her three remaining children until they have no choice but to take revenge for Svanhildr, although they know that this will result in their certain death [41]. Guðrún dies upon the realisation that she caused the death of her children, thus bringing about the total extinction of the line of Gjúki. In her last moments she reflects on her life, what has been done to her, and what she did to others, constantly expressing her love to Sigurðr and the sorrow she has known since his death. *Minnstu nú, Sigurðr, þess, er vit mæltum, þá er vit stígum á einn beð, at þú mundir mín vitja ok ór helju bíða.* "Ok lýkr þar hennar harmtölur [40; Remember now, Sigurðr, what we spoke of, when we shared one bed, that you would visit me and wait for me in Hel. Then ended her lamentations.]. The last line can be understood that Guðrún finally died of her grief and sorrow.

4.2.4. Conclusion

The different natures of marriage and womanhood varies greatly in *Vǫlsunga saga*. Signý symbolises the woman unwilling to marry, but obedient to her father's wishes. Such a marriage has a dreadful outcome, Signý's loyalty to her father exceeding that to her husband. Virtuous Hjǫrdís, survives the battle between Sigmundr and Lyngvi, and is granted a happy ending with king Álfr. Brave Sigrún prevents her own wedding by inciting another man to fight for her hand in marriage. Svanhildr is executed after being accused of adultery. Guðrún is her family's instrument to form fortunate alliances, and like Signý this kind of match ends badly.

What can be said is, that in *Vǫlsunga saga* kin and blood ties are more important than the clan married into, a fact often attributed to Icelandic, and pre-Christian, society, at that.¹³⁴ This would explain the deviation of the revenge-motif between *Vǫlsunga saga* and the other versions treated in this thesis. Thus, the solidarity to one's clan is what leads Signý, and later

¹³⁴ Ruth Mazo Karras, "Marriage and the Creation of Kin in the Sagas," *Scandinavian Studies* 75, no. 4 (2003): pp. 473-490, 480.

on Guðrún, to choose their family over their husband's and hence take the severe choice of sacrificing their children in order to achieve revenge¹³⁵. Furthermore, the women understand and most reluctantly accept that they are a commodity for their family to decide over.

Völsunga saga holds female characters with a variety of agency. There are Signý, Brynhildr and Guðrún who are very active, characters like Hjördis, Borghildr or Grímhildr who influence the narrative but are not protagonists and then there are relatively underdeveloped characters such as Sigrún and Svanhildr. *Völsunga saga* presents two forms of womanhood, the noble woman and the female warrior, however both forms are flexible, and women are capable to vacillate from one to the other or hold characteristics of both. This we can see in the character of Brynhildr, equally an accomplished fighter and embroiderer, or Guðrún, initially a noble woman but taking up armour in the battle against Atli's men. Male worth is measured differently and is dependent on the characteristics of the women. For instance, Brynhildr measures Sigurðr by his heroic deeds, he is brave therefore he is worthy of her. Guðrún on the other hand mostly measures Sigurðr by his wealth and the alliance he provides for her family.

As has been made clear, prophetic dreams are an essential part of the saga. They are used to foreshadow the events to come and establish a sense of fate that can not be altered. Women are for the most part the ones blessed, or cursed, with the ability of prophetic dreams. Though they have the gift of seeing into the future, they are ultimately disregarded for it by the men around them. The male characters perpetually underestimate the wisdom and abilities of the women and dismiss their warnings. Women on the other hand, always take these prophecies seriously. Nevertheless, the men always remain non-believers, ultimately bringing about their own demise. If this notion was intended by the author or not is arguable, but it gives the women a clear superiority and men the disadvantage.

The driving force of *Völsunga saga* is magic, but it is also magic that brings about the most grievous events of the narrative. Signý's exchange with the sorceress leads to an incestuous relationship that brings about a child (Sinfjötli), whose only purpose is revenge. Grímhildr gives Sigurðr the potion of forgetfulness, breaking apart Brynhildr and Sigurðr, to form an alliance with her own clan. Guttormr also becomes an instrument of Grímhildr, becoming cruel and violent under the influence of her witchcraft, which leads to him killing Sigurðr and

¹³⁵ Carol Parrish Jamison, "Traffic of Women in Germanic Literature: The Role of the Peace Pledge in Marital Exchanges." *Women in German Yearbook* 20 (2004): 13–36, 30.

hence, Guðrún falling into despair [30]. To remedy this, Grímhildr gives another magical potion to Guðrún, taking away her grief so that she may marry Atli to strengthen their kingdom once more which only leads to Guðrún taking her brothers' side, killing Atli and her own children. Through her magic, Grímhildr violated Sigurðr, Guðrún and Guttormr respectively. Thus, the saga seems to greatly condemn magic and is through that in accordance with Christian ideals.

Moreover, as mentioned before, there is the matter of Fáfnir's heart. I suggest that it is the consumption of Fáfnir's heart which ultimately leads to Guðrún's tendency towards cruelty and revenge, leading to her hostility during the *senna*, the revenge for her brothers, the murder of her own children, the killing of Atli and his people as well as avenging Svanhildr's death by sacrificing her three last remaining children. The consumption of the serpent's heart, ultimately a supernatural object, is thus another instance of magic bringing about misery. Furthermore, it could suggest that cruelty and grimness are male attributes, which, when a woman acquires them, is corrupting. By eating Fáfnir's heart, Guðrún stepped out of her gender sphere, acquiring male attributes that she used for severe transgressions against the societal norms of that time. This would suggest that her actions do not spring from herself, but rather from an exterior source that is known for its cruelty and maliciousness. If this sequence of husband and wife sharing a serpent's heart somehow echoes the Christian creation myth where Adam and Eve, instigated by a serpent, share the forbidden fruit might be too far-fetched, it is still worth a consideration. This suggestion aside, a role reversal between Guðrún and Brynhildr is apparent. The latter lost her might and her position as *valkyrja* when betrothing Sigurðr. Guðrún in return acquires her might through the consumption of Fáfnir's heart offered by Sigurðr. That would put Sigurðr in the centre of this power transmission and make him the main agent.

Though *Völsunga saga* holds strong female characters that delight the modern reader, there are still limitations to how they can behave. They are not free to act as they please, they still very much attune themselves to the men around them and are punished for their misbehaviour. Interestingly, being a fighting woman does not necessarily give into these transgressions, as it is rather magic and breaking obvious societal taboo's that brings about the chastisement of the female characters.

4.3. Þiðreks Saga Af Bern

4.3.1. The Women Of Þiðreks Saga

In the Norwegian *Þiðreks saga af bern* it becomes clear that the author had a fondness for character descriptions, however with no intention of a psychological evaluation. The focus lies here on the character and physiognomy of the male figures, elaborated by a list of physical and intellectual attributes, however, the appearance and personality of women is barely specified¹³⁶. This is a reasonable approach, considering that men were mostly at the centre of medieval literature and the focus on their heroic deeds. As early as the first part of the saga, concerned with the youth of the male protagonists and Þiðrek's ancestry, female characters lack scope. The characterisation of women remains schematic, being literary devices to highlight male attributes, such as Hildisvið, the wife of Samson, whose only verbal action is given in order to point out the heroic deeds of her husband [I, 15-17]¹³⁷. Eventually, also Sisibe, mother of the hero Sigurðr, is only accentuated through her apparent deep devotion and loyalty towards her husband Sigmundur [I, 290-291].

This can also be observed in the episode *Velents þátrr smiðs* which procures no active female character. Velent's mother as well as the antagonist, Niðungr's wife, remain unnamed. In contrast, Niðuðr's wife acts as the antagonist opposite Velent in the Eddic *Völundarkviða* where she takes the typical position of the *Hetzerin*, a role often encountered in Eddic material (See Chapter 3.1.), where women are allowed a more active part in the storyline. Moreover, even Velent's wife does not carry a name in *Þiðreks saga*, being merely a vessel for the birth of Velent's sons. Whereas the saga does not provide its reader with a name or more information on the persona of Velent's bride, the smith's bridal quest is more extensively displayed in the Eddic *Völundarkviða*. Here, Velent kills Niðuðr's sons and rapes the king's daughter Bøðvildr, whom he leaves behind pregnant and in despair. In *Þiðreks saga* the smith does rape the, here, nameless princess as well, however after Niðungr's death, Velent returns to marry the woman he violated and who bore his son Viðga. Hence, *Velents þátrr smiðs* pleases its audience with king Niðungr's death, Velent's reconciliation with his nemesis'

¹³⁶ Hans Friese, *Þiðreks saga Und Dietrichepos: Untersuchungen Zur Inneren Und Äusseren Form* (New York: Johnson, 1967), 35.

¹³⁷ Used here is Bertelsen, Henrik, ed. *Þiðriks Saga Af Bern*. II vols. Samfund Til Udgivelse Af Gammel Nordisk Litteratur. København: S.L. Møllers bogtrykkeri, 1905-1911. [cited: volume, page], which is for the most part based on the membrane, except for the missing chapters 1-20 which are substituted by the 17th century Icelandic manuscripts. (See Chapter 1.4.)

family through marriage to the violated, nameless princess, with no trace of judgement over his former actions, so that his son Viðga is provided with a flawless familial background. It could also be argued that here Velent took responsibility for his actions and married the woman he defiled. At this point, one can observe the saga's tendency to dissolve conflicts into complacency, which might have rather agreed with its 13th century audience¹³⁸. Velent's bridal quest raises a question of morality that may or may not have been problematised by its initial audience. As the scholarly works of Alcuin Blamires, Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees point out¹³⁹, medieval literature could very well raise questions of morality to its audience and encourage a critical discourse of ethics in which men did not always come off well.

The first part of the saga features various female characters, more or less vague in their descriptions and agency, who, nevertheless, remain mere objects of ornamental function. The daughter of Sigurðr the Greek stands out among them, as she embodies three opposing traits. First, she is known to possess immense strength '*hon dottir Sigurðar er sva styrc at fair karlmenn ero aflygrí en hon er*' [I, 227; Sigurðr's daughter was so strong that few men were as mighty as her], secondly she is known to be particularly beautiful '*frið var hon*' [I, 229; beautiful was she] and lastly she is proficient in courtly manners '*Oc nv drecca þeir gott vin en dottir sigvrðar þionar. oc skenkir vel oc kvrteislega.*' [I, 229; And now drank they good wine that Sigurðr's daughter served, and poured well and politely]. Þetleifr's bridal quest to woo Sigurðr the Greek's daughter however remains an insignificant side story. Nevertheless, Sigurðr's daughter does not fit into the conventional model of medieval femininity, with her display of mannish strength. Thus, *Þiðreks saga* aligns the unnatural strength of women consistently with supernatural powers that can be used against the male heroes, similarly as can be encountered in the *Nibelungenlied*. These 'warrior-women' are hence not part of the usual societal hierarchy, as they stand beside society through the display of supernatural abilities¹⁴⁰.

A similar female character is that of Hildir, whose strength equals that of her husband Grímr who is said to possess the strength of twelve men [I, 35]. In the Middle High German

¹³⁸ Robert Nedoma, "Zu Den Frauenfiguren Der »Þiðreks Saga Af Bern«,," 215

¹³⁹ Alcuin Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005); Alcuin Blamires, Karen Pratt, and C. William Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010); Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees, *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

¹⁴⁰ Robert Nedoma, "Zu Den Frauenfiguren Der »Þiðreks Saga Af Bern«,," 216

Dietrichsepik, Hildir and her husband are even introduced as giants, which would provide an explanation for the inhuman strength of Hildir. When Hildibrandr threatens to loose a fight against the supernatural woman Hildir, Þiðrekr raises the last of his strength to save his friend from the humiliation of loosing against a woman [I, 37]. A brief but substantial insight into the men's world of honour and dignity.

Furthermore, the reader encounters the mother of the giant Vaðe, a *sækona*, who is a monster of the sea but who holds the body of a beautiful woman when stepping onto land [II, 64]. It is Vilkinus who encounters the supernatural woman when roaming the forests, and is beguiled by her. After sleeping with her, Vilkinus returns to his ship and heads home, however the *sækona* ambushes him at sea, stilling his ship in her grasp. Negotiating her welcome in his homeland, she eventually lets the ship resume its voyage. Half a year later she gives birth to Vaðe, the father of Velent, leaves him with his father and disappears again.

Another supernatural woman of *Þiðreks saga* is Ostacia, the wife of Hertnið, who is described as being much like the *vǫlur* of pre-Christian times [II, 271]. The character of Ostacia can be considered the epitome of a witch or sorceress. She is displayed as intelligent, beautiful but also malicious, *illgjörn* [II, 269]. In a battle between her husband Hertnið and the Isung, Ostacia takes the form of a dragon, succumbing however to her lethal wounds afterwards. Robert Nedoma argues that the figure of Ostacia might derive from an older mythological figure and suggests that here the image of the protecting, winged *valkyrja* was changed into a „heathen-demonic“ dragon, a statement probably a bit far-fetched¹⁴¹.

Beside this magical occurrence there are instances where women display prophetic abilities. Queen Erka, first wife of Attila, advises on her death bed that her husband shall never take a woman from the Niflungaland and Aldrian's family as his wife, for he and the Huns shall suffer greatly [II, 257]. With Grímhildr's revenge and the birth of Hǫgni's son Aldrian who kills Attila, Erka's prophecy is fulfilled. Another prophecy is that of Oda, mother of Gunnarr and Grímhildr who predicts the death of her sons and the Niflung men, and urges them not to go to the banquet in Susa. But Hagen mocks the „old woman's dream“ and they depart to Húnaland anyway [II, 283]. Twice the men dismissed the warnings and predictions of a woman and suffered greatly for it. The woman as a prophetess is an archaic literary figure (See Chapter 3.1) and goes back to a time in which women possibly held a specific position in

¹⁴¹ Robert Nedoma, „Zu Den Frauenfiguren Der »Þiðreks Saga Af Bern«,“ 217.

Germanic society, though we know that the interpretation of prophetic dreams is not unknown to Christian society as well¹⁴². This could be one of the reasons that even with the discontinuation of Germanic settlements and the introduction of Christianity this aspect of female characters remained, though dwindling, so that women were not necessarily villainised for such an ability but rather seen as voices of reason that men deliberately ignored to be proven wrong later on.

Erotic episodes in the saga come to pass exclusively in a courtly setting. Although the saga displays various courtly motives, the portrayal of sexual encounters however lacks courtly content according to *Minne*-fashion. One such encounter occurs between the aforementioned daughter of Sigurðr the Greek and Þetleifr when she joins him in his bed. As the saga explains, it is not loose morals that has brought the daughter to the man's bed but it is her way of apologising and thus allegedly an act of courtly manners [I, 230-231]. On the other hand, this act of reconciliation might also be seen as a way to force women back into their gender sphere, considering that earlier on, Sigurðr's daughter had fought Þetleifr and brought embarrassment over him when he lost against a woman. Though it is mentioned that their feelings for each other are sincere, it is dubious that the daughter joins Þetleifr in his bed as an act of apology. Especially, as later in the saga Þetleifr breaks the engagement with Sigurðr's daughter when he marries one of Drusian's daughters instead and it might be argued that the night spent together was just another subjugation of a woman that dared to act outside of her gender role. This resonates to Brynhildr's chastisement when she is raped by Gunnarr on their wedding night, except that Sigurðr's daughter *chose* to submit to the will of the man and unyielding Brynhildr had to be forced. Might here have been a moral tale at work? Two women that fought and won over male counterparts were faced with the consequences for acting out of their designated gender role and were offered the decision to yield and apologise, or fight back even more and be chastised for it, making Sigurðr's unnamed daughter and Brynhildr two sides of the same coin. If a parallel between Sigurðr's daughter and Brynhildr was intentional is uncertain but it is plausible that these roles or images of womanhood were purposefully put under debate. This is a rare instance where morality and ethics are forthrightly addressed by the composer, the sequence between the daughter of Sigurðr the Greek and Þetleifr seems to serve exactly this purpose and possibly even to

¹⁴² See: Jean-Marie Husser and Jill Munro, *Dreams And Dream Narratives in the Biblical World* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 106.

prompt discourse among the audience in order to problematise the subject. Though rare in *Þiðreks saga*, this would not be an uncommon concept in medieval literature as pointed out by scholars such as Alcuin Balmires or Thelma Fenster¹⁴³.

Another sexual encounter can be found in the *Þáttr af Herburt ok Hildi* where the *kurtteiss oc hoverskr* [II, 50; polite and well-mannered] Herburt is in the middle of fleeing with King Artus' daughter Hildr (name meaning „battle“), who is supposed to be married to Herburt's uncle Þiðrekr when the lad descends his horse and deflowers Hildr, *en hann legðz hia konungs dottur. oc fær hennar mæydom* [II, 58; he lay with the king's daughter and took her maidenhood]. When their followers eventually catch up with them Herburt is able to fight off all of Artus' men and Hildr tends to his wounds. Is the sole purpose of this liaison the love between Herburt and Hildr as well as Herburt's method of claiming the woman for himself and severing her ties to her kin? Or is this possibly another transfer of power: Does Herburt's victory against all these knights reflect on his talent as a fighter or was it that taking Hildr's maidenhood awarded him with the needed power to overcome Artus' knights? This might suggest that taking a woman's virginity could on one hand strip women of their power, such as Brynhildr and possibly Sigurðr the Greek's daughter, but could also bestow this power onto men.

Another erotic, but less sexual, encounter is recounted in *Írons þáttr jarls* [II, 120-157]. Here, Isolde, wife of Jarl Íron, grows desperate as her husband spends more and more time chasing deer instead of tending to his wife. In an elaborate plan Isolde lays herself naked into the fresh snow where then can be seen *likneskiu sina. oc allz merci sua sem kona hæfdi þar legit*. [II, 122; her body shape, so that all recognised that a woman had lain there]. After coming across the imprint of his wife's body in the snow, Jarl Íron quickly tends to his wife, before another man can cut him to the chase, and he withholds from hunting henceforth bringing an end to the domestic squabble. Isolde presents here a rather self-confident woman who does not, by definition, act outside of her gender sphere, but does very well know how to influence the male domain to get her husband, Jarl Íron, to attend to his husbandly duties in what can almost be seen as an advice to men for marital life.

Nonetheless, these sexual encounters are mere literary supplements which do not advance the plot of the saga as such. This stands in strong contrast to the various rape scenes of the

¹⁴³ Alcuin Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005); Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees, *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

saga which are always strongly intertwined with the course of events. A typical courtly element of these rape scenes is the *grasgarðr*. Though usually a safe haven for women, here the garden is used as a setting for the sexual assault¹⁴⁴, explicitly the rape (and chastisement) of Oda, mother of Hǫgni, and of Niðung's daughter. This would mean that these women are violated in a place that is commonly connected to the private, domestic and predominantly female sphere and the violation of their privacy twofold. The children that spring from these encounters grow up to be heroes with supernatural powers, particularly from the father's side. Hǫgni's father is an *álfr* and rapes Oda, the wife of Aldrian, while she sleeps in her *grasgarðr*. When she bears Hǫgni, the boy has inherited the eerie physical attributes of his father, (i.a. pale skin) and other children teased him for looking like a troll [I, 319-320].

Niðung's daughter, who is often identified as Bǫðvildr from the Eddic *Vǫlundarkviða*, is sitting in her *grasgarðr* when she breaks her ring, upon which she seeks out Velent, so that he may repair it. This will eventually lead to the rape of the king's daughter by the hand of Velent the smith and the consequential birth of Viðga [I, 120-122]. Viðga himself can not be considered a great womaniser, exhibiting no talent for the courtly behaviour towards women much in contrast to the main hero Þiðrekr. When Viðga's father Velent informs his son that he may marry the daughter of the Swedish king if he manages to kill a certain giant, Viðga refuses and answers that no woman would be worth endangering one's life [I, 133-135].

Þiðreks Saga features various misogynistic comments which are in crucial opposition to the common courtly appreciation of women. Although courtly women are generally held in great esteem, that does not mean they are free of subtle misogynistic comments. For example, when Hildibrandr mocks his son Alibrandr's punch with the words *þetta slag mun þið kient hafa þin kona enn æigi þinn fader*. [II, 350; your woman might have taught you that punch, but not your father] or when Hǫgni says to Grímhildr *þu ert ein drottning. huat skalltu taka vopn manna. oc þat kendi mer minn faðer þa er ek var ungr at all dri skillda ek legia min vopn a konu tru. [...]* [II, 305; you are a woman, why shall you take a man's weapon, and that taught me my father when I was young to never leave my weapon into a woman's care]. Furthermore, through Sigurðr, the composer literally raises the subject of misogyny, when the character advises Erka (not yet queen) to have a talk in her *grasgarðr* where they would be chaperoned by other courtiers because *ængi matðr vil ek at illa mæle til yðar firir minar saker. af þui at marger ero illz fusir. til kvænna at mæla*

¹⁴⁴ Robert Nedoma, "Zu Den Frauenfiguren Der »Þiðreks Saga Af Bern«,," 220.

slættilæga ok værðr vannlæga at gæta sin firir illum tungum. [I, 66; I want no man to speak ill of you for my sake, because there are many who are ill-minded towards women, speaking disdainfully, and one must be wary of evil tongues]. With that statement, the composer clearly acknowledges misogyny and condemns it as well.

As mentioned before, rape scenes, in contrast to consensual sexual encounters, are literary devices that in the course of the story further the plot, instigating revenge and bloodshed. It is the rape of Odilia by Erminrekr that leads not only her husband Sifka but also the woman herself, on a path of revenge. Odilia becomes, much in the image of Grímhildr, an avenging woman. Through various intrigues Sifka, advisor of Erminrekr, brings about the death of Erminrekr's sons Friðrekr, Reginbaldr and Samson II. The death of Erminrekr's nephews Áki and Egarð (sons of Áki Qmlungatrausti) come by the dealings of Odilia by goading Erminrekr's wife¹⁴⁵ and making her believe that Áki and Egarð are planning on raping the woman. To this, Erminrekr himself reacts by attacking his nephews stronghold and hanging both men. The transgression of Erminrekr thus results in the downfall of the Qmlungs (or Amelungs) by the hand of Odilia and Sifka¹⁴⁶ [II, 158-169]. This condemnation of non-consensual unions by ultimately bringing about the death or misery of the guilty party could correspond to the arise of the lawfully defined consent in marriage during the legal development of the mid-13th century in which women had to verbally and publicly consent to the advances of men¹⁴⁷.

The second part of the saga is foremost concerned with the concept of bridal quests. As earlier discussed in chapter 3, bridal quests are an integral part of medieval epics where the hero has to go through a variety of ordeals in order to win the damsels heart by outwitting her. *Piðreks saga* presents various bridal quests, wherein, surprisingly enough, the title hero Piðrekr is not a dominant character. Although he is married three times throughout the narrative, there is no special emphasis placed on his marriages to Drusian's eldest daughter (unnamed), Herað and Isolde. Even though Middle High German epics usually put forward psychologically stimulating female characters that are not only passive players in the bridal

¹⁴⁵ Erminrekr's wife, that we know in other sources (*Poetic Edda*, *Prose Edda*, *Völsunga saga*) to be Svanhildr, the daughter of Sigurðr and Guðrún/Grímhildr, remains in *Piðreks saga* without a name. Character further discussed in Chapter 4.2. *Völsunga saga*.

¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, Sifka incites strife between Erminrekr and his nephew Piðrekr (by Pétmar/Thetmar).

¹⁴⁷ Jenny Jochens, "Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life and Literature," *Scandinavian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1986): pp. 142-176, 144.

quest but characters in their own right outside of the trope¹⁴⁸, in *Þiðreks saga* the coveted women remain untouchable, often unnamed and never heard of afterwards. The women of *Þiðreks saga* rarely interact with their male counterparts and can be seen as passive and willing objects of male desire. Even Brynhildr and Grímhildr, possibly the two most dynamic female figures in medieval epics, are in comparison to their counterparts in other versions of the Nibelung legend relatively inactive¹⁴⁹. Surprisingly, it is another woman, the aforementioned Hildr, who can be seen as one of the most active women in a bridal quest. She does not only take initiative by managing to put Herburd into her service but even goes as far as to suggest that Herburd might woo her himself instead of him courting her in the name of Þiðrekr.

Another bridal quest is that of Oda, though this one holds unconventional elements. Hence, Oda is not courted as such (and outwitted by her suitor) but is brutally abducted. There is no secret love or intimacy described between her and Osantrix and there is no love confession. This is just one of the examples of the, in light of medieval literature, unconventional bridal quests. *Þiðreks saga* is characterised through simplified bridal quests that do not come close to the tropes in other medieval epics, which may be through the report-like structure of the saga itself. The so-called *Minne*, courtly love, is fairly absent in the Norwegian narrative and any portrayal of Christian virtues is marginalised; fascinating if one considers that the saga was written in a Christian society for a Christian audience by a Christian, if not even clerical, composer¹⁵⁰. One exception, which very much holds classical *Minne* elements, is the story of how Jarl Íron falls madly in love with Áki Qmlungatrausti's wife Bolfriana, so much so that he *fellr mikill hugr til konunnar sua at af þessu verðr hann seucr* [II, 148; falls ill with heartsickness]. A *Minne*-worthy love triangle containing love letters and magical rings ends eventually in a very un-*Minne*-like fashion when Áki kills Íron for coveting his wife which plays much into the emotionally dramatic setting of the third part of the saga.

Nonetheless, the typical active women in bridal quests are replaced by cunning men, who become masters of disguise (masquerading as men and women) and entertaining talents such

¹⁴⁸ Hans-Joachim Böckenholt, "Untersuchungen Zum Bild Der Frau In Den Mittelhochdeutschen 'Spielmannsdichtungen'. Ein Beitrag Zur Bestimmung Des Literarhistorischen Standortes Der Epen 'Koenig Rother', 'Salman Und Morolf', 'St. Oswald' Und 'Orendel'" (Dissertation, Münster, 1971), 82.

¹⁴⁹ Robert Nedoma, "Zu Den Frauenfiguren Der »Þiðreks Saga Af Bern«,," 222.

¹⁵⁰ Hans Friese, *Þiðrekssaga Und Dietrichepos: Untersuchungen Zur Inneren Und Äussere Form* (New York: Johnson, 1967), 30.

as Apollonius (disguising himself as a maid named Heppa), Herburt (entertaining Hildir with man-trained mice) or Sigurðr (disguising himself as a man named Roðólfr).

It is this latter story that features two women, Erka and Berta, who are more active in their bridal quests than others. Sigurðr who as a trusted friend of Osantrix evaluates Norðung's intentions towards Osantrix's daughter Erka, disguises himself as a man named Roðólfr in order to infiltrate Osantrix's court. He asks Erka to follow courtly protocol and meet him within her garden (here again the *grasgarðr*, though no rape implied) under the surveillance of other court members to speak about the proposal [I, 50]. Beside Hildir, Erka and her sister Berta are notable women active in their courtship. In comparison to other kings' daughters mentioned, the two sisters decide for themselves who they intend to marry. Erka is beside Grímhildir and Brynhildir, the only woman who holds an active role in the public domain of the court after she becomes queen. As Attila's wife and queen, Erka becomes an important influence on various characters, most notably Þiðrekr himself, as he frequently turns to her for advice (not the surrounding men) and is through her help alone pardoned by Attila for the death of Erp and Ortvin [II, 253-254].

The, with bridal quests concerned, second part of the saga comes to a dark ending with the ill-fated love affair between Jarl Íron and Bolfriana, as well as the rape of Odilia through Erminrekr, and Brynhildir through Sigurðr (and Gunnarr). These events are the starting point for the demise of the blithe events at the beginning of the saga and herald the end characterised through murder, intrigues and bloodshed. Three women from the bridal quest narratives play a vital part in the third section of the saga, intriguingly enough, these are the three most active female characters of the saga overall; Erka, Brynhildir and Grímhildir. These women (together with the events connected to Bolfriana and Odilia) are strong agents in the events that lead to the downfall of the Niflungen, the death of Sigurðr and the murder of kin through Erminrekr.

4.3.2. Brynhildir

Brynhildir, as in other versions of the legend, holds a special position in the narrative. She is a ruler in her own right, and reigns here over the castle of Sægarðr (Segarð) and a stud farm that breeds the best horses to and fro. Her description praises her beauty, wisdom and pride, and mentions many heroic deeds done by her [I, 18].

Though she is mentioned before, she only enters the limelight of the saga when Sigurðr proposes her as a suitable wife for Gunnarr. Thus, Gunnarr goes to Sægarðr to ask for Brynhildr's hand in marriage with the help of Sigurðr and Þiðrekr. She had met Sigurðr before, as he came to her farm to claim the horse Grani for his foster father Mímir [I, 168]. When they meet now, Brynhildr is adamant to marry Sigurðr, not Gunnarr, as she says they had promised themselves to each other when he visited her to obtain the horse Grani. No such vows are mentioned in the preceding chapter but Sigurðr does not deny the existence of such a promise so we must believe that it is true. Interestingly, this would correspond to *Völsunga saga* where Sigurðr and Brynhildr were involved prior to Sigurðr and Guðrún's union. Even in the *Nibelungenlied* it is noted that Siegfried has met Brünhild before, so this is coherent. Finally, she gives in after learning that Sigurðr is married to Grímhildr and she agrees to the marriage without much resistance, even though in her wedding night she does not consent; somewhat a plot hole of *Þiðreks saga*.

Hence follows the infamous wedding night sequence of the legend. Much like in the *Nibelungenlied* the supernaturally strong Brynhildr rejects Gunnarr's advances and eventually ties him up and hangs him from a nail on the wall. This goes on for two more nights until Gunnarr approaches Sigurðr and reveals his problem. Sigurðr then explains that by deflowering Brynhildr she would lose all her supernatural powers (that until this chapter have not been mentioned) and Gunnarr requests that Sigurðr may subjugate her and take her virginity, *at þú ert svá sterkr maðr, at þú mátt fá hennar meydóm* [I, 228; for you are such a strong man that you may be able to take her maidenhood], which he then does in disguise [I, 229]. Afterwards Gunnarr can do with her, now a broken woman, as he pleases, resulting in marital rape. It should be taken into account that for the 13th century Christian audience there was probably no such thing as marital rape, as under Christian beliefs the husband had the (sexual) right to his wife's body and it was the wife's duty to abide¹⁵¹. However, that this episode is a catalyst for the events to follow, and therefore a crucial momentum in the saga, might be an indicator that the issue of consent in marriage and marital rape was familiar to, and under debate among, the 13th century audience.

Narratively conflicting is the fact that Brynhildr, first willing to marry Gunnarr is then so reluctant to consummate the marriage. Both Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga* and the

¹⁵¹ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 114.

Nibelungenlied's Brünhild only agree to the marriage as to staying true to their word; Brynhildr for accepting the man that can ride through the flames and Brünhild for being defeated in battle. Was this initial agreement of *Piðreks saga's* Brynhildr the composer's way of justifying Gunnarr's right to consummate the marriage later on, even though his actions are tantamount to rape? Different is the subjugation of Brynhildr through Sigurðr before the consummation of marriage with Gunnarr. Though the medieval audience should have assumed Sigurðr to be a rapist, it is possible that Sigurðr (and Gunnarr) was here not seen as the aggressor (as from modern perspective) but as the victim. Brynhildr, acting outside of her designated gender sphere, fighting like a man, could be seen as the villain and both men as the victims. This victim-aggressor reversal was perhaps deliberately created by the composer to trick his audience into believing that Brynhildr is the aggressor, which would justify the men's subjugation and rape of the woman, and would be an example of villainising women for the sake of maintaining a hero's image. On the other hand, one should consider Gunnarr's position in consideration of the societal setting. In Medieval canon law, if the consummation of the marriage was incomplete, the marriage was thus not fully binding and could be dissolved on grounds of, for instance, impotence¹⁵². Gunnarr's inability to consummate the marriage would mean that Brynhildr could call their union invalid and could hence lead to his humiliation as he was not able to fulfil his marital duty. His decision to call his friend Sigurðr to help in order to avoid shame might thus be justified but his actions not excused.

Much in contrast to the Icelandic tradition, the emotions and feelings of Brynhildr are cut short in favour for the deeds of the male heroes. The initial engagement between Brynhildr and Sigurðr is only retrospectively mentioned, his betrayal seemingly not having much impact on the cast-aside woman [II, 38-39]. Furthermore, Brynhildr's revenge is not a result of unrequited love towards Sigurðr or jealousy towards Grímhildr, but rather a defence of social standing. It is the dispute, or *senna*, between Grímhildr and Brynhildr, that forces the latter to take further action. Grímhildr does not acknowledge Brynhildr's standing by rising from a seat at the entrance of the other woman. Both women begin to provoke each other culminating in Brynhildr's insult of Sigurðr's (apparent) lower rank and thus Grímhildr's, not aware that Sigurðr is a king in his own right. It is then that Grímhildr in her anger reveals that it was her own husband who took Brynhildr's maidenhood and shows for it a ring that Sigurðr had taken

¹⁵² James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 136/236.

from her that night. Hence, the secret that Gunnarr had asked Sigurðr to protect was revealed and Brynhildr's shame public. This open disgrace is the catalyst for her revenge.

She goads on her husband Gunnarr, pointing out that it is now not her shame alone but his as well, as it is now public knowledge that he had not been able to consummate the marriage himself [II, 262]. This supports the idea that Gunnarr was indeed pressured to consummate the marriage, either because of male pride or because Brynhildr would have been able to contest the validity of the marriage. Thus, Gunnarr and Högni are forced to eliminate the hero. On Brynhildr's order Sigurðr's body is tossed into Grímhildr's bed with the words *faðmi hon hann nu dauðan. þui at nu hæfir hann þat sem hann hæfir til gert oc sua Grimildr* [II, 267; embrace she now the dead, because he now got what he deserved, and so does Grímhildr]. Was Brynhildr seemingly indifferent when she learned that Sigurðr had married Grímhildr and she herself thus married Gunnarr, now she seems to take revenge for his broken promise and the events of her wedding night alike. Brynhildr's sneer stands here in strong contrast to Grímhildr's tears of grief. The difference between laughing and crying after an act of revenge is a classic literary device of medieval heroic epics. Brynhildr is here the epitome of the *Hetzerin* (see Chapter 3.1.), much like in the Old Norse *Völsunga Saga* or the Eddic *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*. Nevertheless, the *senna* between the two women in *Þiðreks saga* is relatively plain and lacks the dramatic and elaborate description of the other versions. Finally, Brynhildr is the only figure from Þiðrekr's generation whose death is not mentioned in the saga, a clear difference to the Icelandic tradition. Much like in the *Nibelungenlied*, Brynhildr disappears from the storyline after Sigurðr's death, being rendered functionless by having served her purpose as the instigator of the grand hero's death and the turmoil that is to follow.

4.3.3. Grímhildr

While the Middle High German Kriemhild is the protagonist of the *Nibelungenlied* from the second stanza on, the Norwegian Grímhildr only rises to significance after the death of her husband Sigurðr. But even during the events at the court of Attila, Grímhildr's second husband, she remains a secondary character, albeit she is the main instigator for the annihilation of the Niflungs, the literary climax of *Þiðreks saga*. Both Grímhildr's marriages are mentioned briefly; her and Sigurðr have no real backstory whatsoever and it is only at one point decided that they marry [II, 37]. No mention of love is here required and the reader is only convinced of Grímhildr's deep love for her husband Sigurðr after his death, expressed

through her frequent crying and mourning even years after being married to Attila; her continual grief a clear omen for evil to come. Aforementioned, Grímhildr receives more agency towards the end of the saga and the nearing banquet at Susa that will be the backdrop for the downfall of the Niflungs. Even before the events, the audience is warned against Grímhildr, her character being intentionally villainised; On her deathbed Queen Erka advised her husband Attila not to marry a woman from Niflungaland [II, 257], and Hogni warns his brothers in arms of the invitation to the banquet with the rude words *fyr því at grímhilldr er utru kona oc vitr. oc ma vera at hyn se isvikvm um os.* [II, 282; because Grímhildr is a faithless woman and clever, and she might be plotting against us].

Surprisingly, once the banquet begins Grímhildr is very active having gathered men all over Húnaland [II, 296] and goading on Attila, Bloðlin and Þiðrekr to join her plans of revenge. It is Irung, Grímhildr's designated knight, who eventually obeys his lady and starts the battle [II, 307-308]. Though Grímhildr acts here as a *Hetzerin*, her goading is less intense than in other versions and the *Hetzerin*-portrayal more indistinct than traditional as there is not one specific sequence that results in the aspired outcome but it is rather a narration of Grímhildr's actions that eventually result in Irung taking initiative.

During battle she adamantly encourages her men to fight, even providing more weapons and armour while promising great rewards [II, 310]. Grímhildr proves herself to be very resourceful and inventive, going as far as proposing efficient military tactics such as preparing ox-hides (on which the enemies would slip and fall down) and to burn down the hall, in which her enemies along with Hogni were seeking refuge. The men of Grímhildr's entourage go along with her plans without much thought, it is only when the woman begins to inspect the bodies of the fallen Niflungs (among them her brothers Gíslher and Gernoz) with a burning log, that Attila and Þiðrekr see her madness; *vist er hon diavoll* [II, 326; Certainly is she the devil]. It is Attila's decision to have her executed saying *þat vere gott verc ef þu hefðer þat gort vii. nottom fyr.* [II, 326; it would have been better you'd have killed her seven nights ago] when Þiðrekr cuts her in half. With that, the story is not only rid of the villain but has also provided Grímhildr with a punishment for acting outside of her gender sphere. That her sorrow and the ensuing vindictiveness is only the result of a world in which men fight over power and wealth, women

only reacting to what is done to them¹⁵³, probably reflected a controversial subject as perceived by the initial audience.

Finally, the figure of Grímhildr is throughout characterised solely through her crying over Sigurðr's death [II, 279/292/297/307], essentially a stereotypical trope, and she is denied to witness the objective of her revenge, when Høgni (Sigurðr's murderer) survives Grímhildr about a day and fathers a son, Aldrian, who will eventually grow up to kill Attila and take revenge for the killing of the Niflungs [II, 373-374].

4.3.4. Conclusion

To conclude, *Þiðreks saga* features a variety of female characters, and with that female agency, which ranges from barely existent unnamed women, over rather passive women to women with comparatively high agency, such as Brynhildr and Grímhildr.

Notably, the narratively more active women appear in the third, cataclysmic part of the saga. It is the violation of mainly two women which evokes the downfall of the male heroes and their kin. First, Odilia's rape through Erminrekr that brings about the downfall of the Qmlungs. Secondly, Brynhildr's castigation and rape eventually leads to Sigurðr's death and thus, Grímhildr's revenge and the doom of the Niflungs¹⁵⁴. The bridal quest narratives of Brynhildr (with Gunnarr) and Grímhildr (with Sigurðr and Attila) are, in comparison with other sources, held briefly. It is debatable if that is because this part of the narrative was not of much significance for the composer's purpose, or because the audience was familiar enough with the Nibelung legend that a repetition would have been too time-consuming in an already lengthy saga. The courtships of Grímhildr and Brynhildr are written down with low expenditure, but it is the courtship, or bridal quest, of other characters that are placed special emphasis on: Hildr and Erka. It is salient that Brynhildr, from disobedient to courtly woman, survives whereas Grímhildr, from courtly woman to cruel avenger dies a horrid death. Both women's characters change for the worse over time and thus join the personas of Attila, Erminrekr and Høgni, all prone to a deterioration of personality over the course of the narrative. On various occasions the women of the *riddarasaga* further the plot and can be seen as catalysts inciting the events of the story: magical women intervening with the heroes'

¹⁵³ Brynhildr might have been responsible for the death of Sigurðr but was she not in her desperation forced to act, after men (Gunnarr and Sigurðr) did her wrong?

¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, there is the rape of Odilia, Sifka's wife, through king Erminrekr, which results in the king murdering his own kin and the declaration of war against Þiðrekr.

quests, men raping women with dire consequences, men pursuing women and going on bridal quests, women foreshadowing events through their prophetic dreams etc.

Nedoma (1990), who has conducted one of the more extensive studies on the role of women in *Diðreks saga*, points out that it proves difficult to create a consistent image of women through the *Buntscheckigkeit*, the chequered structure, of the text. Therethrough, the portrayal of characters in the saga, women as well as men, are generally schematic. As this thesis has shown, this is true. However, Nedoma analyses the agency of women mostly in comparison to other versions (Middle High German *Dietrichsepik*), where indeed women possess higher agency, but neglects to observe the saga in its own right. He concludes that the saga does not reflect extra-literary reality and that women were supposedly not on the mind of the audience; a reasoning this thesis has refuted.

It is the interaction between genders and the conflicts developing therethrough that show that the composer openly addresses societal issues in the saga. The subject of morality and ethics is broached, but also concerns about misogyny, marital law and societal pressure are brought forth, in all probability sparking debate among the audience. This can be seen in the pointed out episodes where the composer leaves an almost explanatory comment for the actions of the characters.

Indeed, in comparison to the Middle High German *Heldenepik* the female characters of *Diðreks saga* are marginalised to a greater extent and they remain literarily more unused. Furthermore, a continuous *Minne*-ideology is not ensured and courtly elements, though they appear briefly in episodes of sexual encounters, stay on the margin. But now one has to raise the question if the saga was even intended to be a classic courtly romance or if it was rather a means to addressing societal problems through the means of fiction (though inspired by the historical past); the well-known characters and plots repurposed. The characters could hence be used to transmit the ideals, flaws and convictions of medieval society and through that function as some kind of sub-textual discourse about morality, problematising aspects of social life (marriage, sexual consent, love, etc.) according to the composer's background.

Chapter 5. Comparative Analysis

The preceding chapters have given an in-depth analysis of the three narratives' various female characters, emphasising their role, characterisation and treatment. Some comparative examinations of the female characters of the Nibelung legend have already been attempted though the following chapter shall go further into detail.

As has been elucidated before, the three narratives feature mainly two forms of womanhood, ideal womanhood and uncharacteristic womanhood. Instead of pointing out specific characterisation, and thus generalising female characters, as discussed in Chapter 3, this study has suggested an alternative – two forms of womanhood. Noblewomen, idealised as in the mindset of the 13th century Christian composer, and the challenging „She-Devils“, that may or may not be representing aspects of non-Christian women. The first is distinguished by Christian virtues such as obedience, docility, conscientiousness and modesty. The latter, however, conveys pride, arrogance, pugnacity and defiance. These two types of female figures, ideal Noblewomen (NL: Uote, Sieglind, Gotelind, Helche; VS: Hjórdís; ÞS: Erka, Berta, Hildir, Sisibe, Herað) and challenging „She-Devils“ opposing the male-dominated world (NL: Brünhild, Kriemhild; VS: Guðrún, Signý, ÞS: Brynhildir, Grímhildir), stand in utter conflict, a matter highlighted frequently in the texts. Notwithstanding, these forms are not distinct. As the narratives show, women can change from one type to the other and vice versa. Furthermore, in comparison to the *Nibelungenlied* (NL) and *Piðreks saga* (ÞS), *Völsunga saga*'s (VS) view on the ideal woman is not as clearly defined. Here, fighting women (Sigrún, Brynhildir, Hljóð) are not considered to be virtue-less, their bellicosity not necessarily considered to be unwomanly and excluding female courtly behaviour. This might be lead back to the Icelandic literary tradition where fighting women, or *valkyrjur*, were not an unusual feature¹⁵⁵. If that tendency can be considered a reflection unto the pre-Christian past, assuming that fighting women were existent in pre-Christian society, is debatable.

The preponderance of patriarchy is paramount. More than once men, as well as women, impart that women's submission to men is „right and proper“ or „as it should be“ and thus a clear message to the medieval audience. Women who threaten the patriarchal, Christian ideals are through various means, rape or battery, forced back into their defined gender sphere (NL: Brünhild; ÞS: Brynhildir) or downright obliterated (NL: Kriemhild, ÞS: Grímhildir, VS: Signý).

¹⁵⁵ For further information on the subject see: Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir. *Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

Here, a comparison of the two forms of womanhood is apparent— virtuous women who comply with their male-dominated surroundings deserve to be treated courteous and are entitled to a „happy ending,“ licentious women however not.

Additionally, it is in all three narratives the violation of women that furthers the plot, whether it is the impact of Grímhildr's potions or Signý and Guðrún's involuntary marriages in VS, or the various rape scenes in NL and ÞS, that always herald the high point of the story which in all three versions is the downfall of the Burgundians/Gjúkings/Niflungs at the court of Etzel/Atli/Attila. Violation is here an ambiguous term, that reaches from rape and battery, to the abuse and infringement of privacy and free will.

From VS to ÞS we see not only a crucial rise of gruesome punishment for the transgressions of the women (rape), but also a marginalisation of women and their feelings. Furthermore, ÞS and the NL have a tendency of villainising women and conversely victimising men, as we see in the victim-aggressor reversal during Brünhild and Gunther's wedding night. Therethrough, women are slowly antagonised and their humanity removed as can be seen likewise in the NL's wedding night sequences, where the poem openly states that Kriemhild deserved to be treated in a courtly manner because she was a virtuous, ideal, woman. Brünhild, on the other hand, being an obstinate, atypic image of womanhood is punished for her defiance. Their endings in NL and ÞS also support this notion: Brünhild/Brynhildr changes from She-Devil to Noblewoman and survives, however, Kriemhild/Grímhildr changes inversely and dies a cruel death.

Hence, women are also expected to play a certain part in society, which becomes clear on various occasions throughout the three narratives, where women's purpose is relatively consistent. Their responsibility is mainly to uphold harmony at their husband's courts, reflecting the state of their kingdom. As soon as women threaten this order, they are either punished or eliminated, as in VS where Brynhildr downright threatens Gunnarr with neglecting her duties of giving advice, engaging in communal drinking or playing chess. It can be argued that as long as the women attend to their duties and maintain harmony, their husband's courts are flourishing (E.g. NL Helche and Etzel).

All three narratives are consistent in the fact, NL and ÞS more than VS, that the private sphere is a female one. Hence, on various instances erotic and political motives merge. Especially the marital bed is here a recurring feature. It is the place where in the NL

Kriemhild persuades Etzel to invite her relatives to his court, just as Brünhild had convinced Gunther in „personal talks“ to invite Siegfried and Kriemhild earlier in the narrative. NL’s Gotelind likewise elicits Rüdiger’s intentions while in their marriage bed. In VS we are told of Grímhildr laying her arms around her husband Gjúki in order to get him to consider a marriage between their daughter Guðrún and Sigurðr. In ÞS this can be seen in the episode when Sigurðr the Greek’s daughter enters Petleifr’s bed to apologise for her earlier actions when she had wrestled the man to the ground. The saga explicitly stated that she shared his bed only to ease his temper, in other words, using the intimate moment to charm him into forgetting her earlier transgression. This would make the bed, not exclusively the marriage bed, the domestic and intimate sphere, the place where women are able to influence men who, when feeling appreciated, can be appeased or goaded to do (almost) anything the women want.

Nevertheless, the three narratives presume the submissive behaviour of women towards men, and men having discretionary power over women, calling it on several occasions „as is right and proper.“ In the NL and ÞS most female figures submit to this blind obedience, some more reluctant than others and comply with patriarchy. As clear as the requirements for ideal womanhood are, the narratives show, and tell, what is been held in store for transgressing against these ideals and patriarchal societal structures.

Another common feature of all three narratives is the role of women as a commodity to form political alliances. Signý in VS is married off to Siggeirr by her father in exchange for peace and Guðrún is later married to Atli for the same reason. The NL’s Kriemhild is promised to Siegfried in exchange for him helping Gunther in his bridal quest for Brünhild. In ÞS, Sigurðr marries Grímhildr instead of Brynhildr because she was a more profitable match. Furthermore, women are very much aware that they are used as an asset by their family, their split loyalties resulting in conflict between their own kin and their husband’s. This kind of conflict is much more prominent in VS than in the NL or ÞS and was ascribed distinctly to the Germanic past by several scholars,¹⁵⁶ a time where blood ties used to „mean more than

¹⁵⁶ Carol Parrish Jamison, “Traffic of Women in Germanic Literature: The Role of the Peace Pledge in Marital Exchanges,” *Women in German Yearbook* 20 (2004): pp. 13-36; Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157-210; Karen Newman, “Directing Traffic: Subjects, Objects, and the Politics Exchange,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 1990, pp. 41-54.

marriage¹⁵⁷. This could play into the assumption that VS is often considered to derive from older narrative layers of the legend (See Chapter 1.3.).

As mentioned on several occasions before, prophetic dreams are in all three versions of the Nibelung legend of utmost importance. Notably Kriemhild/Guðrún/Grímhildr and her mother Uote/Grímhildr¹⁵⁸/Oda have prophetic dreams, the former famously foreseeing the death of Sigurðr. Over the course of this research, other characters with clairvoyant abilities were pointed out, all of them being female except one which is Atli in VS. In all instances do the women predict the death of a person close to them, subsequently warn said person to avoid the prophecy but always fail. The prophetic ability of women was not seen as something evil or a reason for them to be villainised but interestingly they are depicted as voices of reason that men always dismiss and have to pay the prize for.

Beside prophetesses, magic and the supernatural are a recurrent feature in the Nibelung legend, strongest in VS and weakest in the NL. VS and ÞS frequently feature women with magical abilities, the NL none whatsoever. Nevertheless, magic is an apparent female sphere, which would correspond to what we know about magical women in Old Norse literature, *seiðr* and that men practicing a magical craft were called out for *ergi* („unmanliness“ or „homosexuality“) ¹⁵⁹ which could explain magic being a sole female ability in the versions of the Nibelung legend treated here. Only VS is here more ambiguous, but the few men with magical abilities are always of a supernatural kind (Óttar, Fáfnir, Andvari) or related to gods (Óðinn). It could be argued that the role of women as prophetesses and/or sorceresses go back to older narrative material closer to the native Germanic folklore and survived in the various versions of the legend from Christian authors of the 13th century. Possibly, this characterisation might have been excused in the Christian Middle Ages through prophetic dreams that are also a vital part of Christian lore¹⁶⁰ and were therefore not necessarily seen as exceedingly foreign or „pagan“.

¹⁵⁷ R. G. Finch, ed. and trans., *The Saga of the Volsungs* (London: Nelson, 1965), xvi.

¹⁵⁸ VS's Grímhildr does not openly state that she has prophetic dreams but she is known to be a great sorceress and shows clairvoyant features.

¹⁵⁹ Jenny Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic: Ecstasy and Neo-Shamanism in North European Paganism* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 139-142; Stephen A. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 80, 175-201.

¹⁶⁰ Jean-Marie Husser and Jill Munro, *Dreams And Dream Narratives in the Biblical World* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 106.

5.1. Brünhild – Brynhildr

Concerning the character of Brünhild/Brynhildr, the fundamental difference between the German NL and the Nordic VS and ÞS, is that the Norse Sigurðr and Brynhildr have been betrothed before Sigurðr's marriage to Guðrún. VS provides the reader here with a detailed story about the first meeting of the lovers and their betrothal, their love story essentially at the centre of the saga. ÞS does mention a first encounter when Sigurðr visits Brynhildr's farm to acquire the horse Grani, but no love story is mentioned until Gunnarr courts the woman and she mentions a betrothal to Sigurðr. How this has come to pass is never explained. In the NL there is no engagement between Siegfried and Brünhild, however he seems to know a lot about the queen of Iceland, suggesting they might have met before. In VS the lovers are parted through a magical potion which makes Sigurðr forget his betrothal to Brynhildr. In ÞS however, he actively chooses Grímhildr as the more suitable bride. The NL's and ÞS's Siegfried/Sigurðr on the other hand offers help to acquire Brünhild/Brynhildr for Gunther/Gunnarr in exchange for Kriemhild/Grímhildr's hand in marriage. Furthermore, Gunther/Gunnarr of the NL and ÞS is advised by Siegfried/Sigurðr to seek Brünhild/Brynhildr as a bride, whereas in VS it is Gunnarr's mother Grímhildr who suggests the courtship. In VS and the NL it is Siegfried/Sigurðr who wins Brünhild/Brynhildr's hand in the bridal quest by disguising himself as Gunther/Gunnarr. In ÞS, however, no bridal quest is needed and Brynhildr agrees freely to marry Gunnarr, as her betrothed Sigurðr is already married to Grímhildr. Moreover, only in the NL is Brünhild located in Iceland, which might be an indication that the German composer was aware of older Norse material, written down in Scandinavia or Iceland, and therefor placed the foreign warrior-queen in this remote setting.

Nevertheless, Brünhild or Brynhildr is betrayed and deceived in both, German and Norse tradition on various occasions. In the NL and ÞS Brünhild/Brynhildr is misled and violated during the wedding night, when Siegfried/Sigurðr disguises himself as Gunther/Gunnarr and literally beats her into submission, so that her husband can proceed with marital rape, consequently stripping her of her supernatural powers and subduing her to his will. Moreover, in ÞS she is not only beaten by Sigurðr but he indeed rapes Brynhildr as well. In VS no such wedding night scene exists. Considering that in ÞS she initially agreed to marry Gunnarr, it seems that in the Nordic sources she was only misled once, but in the NL she was deceived during the bridal quest as well as her wedding night. Though in various settings, all three

versions have Kriemhild/Guðrún/Grímhildr enlightening Brünhild/Brynhildr that she was deceived by the two men in the striking *senna* between the two queens about their position at court. Here the ring that Siegfried/Sigurðr steals from her finger and gave to Kriemhild/Guðrún/Grímhildr is the evidence that convinces Brünhild/Brynhildr and sparks her revenge. Said revenge comes about in all three narratives through the medium of goading. The character Brünhild/Brynhildr pressures Gunther/Gunnarr and Hagen/Högni to kill Siegfried/Sigurðr, as he not only endangers her honour but her husband's as well.

Finally, the hero's death evokes different feelings in the three characters of Brünhild/Brynhildr. The NL and ÞS's character rejoices over the death of Siegfried/Sigurðr, her honour restored, but VS's Brynhildr laments the death of her former lover and commits suicide so that she may be burned alongside Sigurðr on the funeral pyre. It might be presumed that VS, the only version where they were actively lovers, conveys the message that the two figures, fated to be apart in life, can be together in life after death, turning Brynhildr's suicide into a symbolic death¹⁶¹. This gives VS a more romantic and withal melancholy end to the character of Brynhildr¹⁶².

Whereas NL and ÞS's Brünhild/Brynhildr is a character that has to be tamed, being a supernaturally strong woman, in order to comply to patriarchal order of the time, VS features a Brynhildr who, beside her image as a warrior (*valkyrja*), can hold the many virtues attributed to the ideal Noblewoman. Only when she is betrayed does she act out. As has been pointed out by Jochen¹⁶³ (1996) and Andersson¹⁶⁴ (1980) respectively, the composer of VS must have been fascinated by the figure of Brynhildr, making her a far more remarkable character than in the other versions discussed in this thesis. Essentially, the female warrior-character is not fighting men for the sake of opposing patriarchy and marriage alone, but especially in the NL and VS does Brünhild/Brynhildr oppose men because she only deems the strongest worthy to marry.

¹⁶¹ Hans Kuhn, "Brünhilds Und Kriemhilds Tod," *Zeitschrift Für Deutsches Altertum Und Deutsche Literatur* 82, no. 3 (1950): pp. 191-199, 191.

¹⁶² Theodore M. Andersson, "The Native Romance of Gunnlaugr and Helga the Fair," in *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland: Essays in Honor of Marianne Kalinke*, ed. Johanna Denzin and Kirsten Wolf, vol. 54 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 2008), pp. 33-63, 57.

¹⁶³ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images Of Women* (Philadelphia: Penn, 1996), 26.

¹⁶⁴ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild*, vol. 43 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 238-239.

5.2. Kriemhild – Guðrún – Grímhildr

The NL's Kriemhild is an extraordinary character in the Medieval epic tradition, her role as the protagonist, with whom the poem starts and finishes, unique. The NL openly states that the downfall of the Nibelungs comes about through the revenge of Kriemhild, that she was obsessed with avenging Siegfried, making her out to be the antagonist from the start. All involved parties eventually see Kriemhild as the villain and her need for retribution *the* reason for the demise of the Burgundians and the Huns. She has high agency, her actions and emotions transmitted to the audience. Kriemhild is mainly characterised in two ways: In the first part of the NL, though she opposes marriage at first, she is the obedient, ideal woman. That is not to say that she is utterly submissive. Kriemhild, though the Noblewoman at first, does know how to navigate her gender sphere in order to get what she wants. Only later does she grow into the proud and defiant woman that becomes the antagonist of the epic, the She-Devil. The centralisation of the character of Kriemhild in the NL is thus unique and not coherent with the other versions. The 'collection' that is ÞS, centred on the life of Þiðrekr af bern, obviously does not feature Grímhildr as a protagonist and although she rises in relevance at the end of the saga, she is not as cleverly thought out as in the NL or VS. ÞS's Grímhildr is just a character of many, paling beside her male counterparts. However, in comparison to the other female characters she is relatively active. In VS, Guðrún only enters the narrative in the second part of the saga, but occupying a protagonistic role from the queen's *senna* on.

Kriemhild/Grímhildr's revenge is essentially justifiable; she uses her marriage to Etzel/Attila in order to avenge her beloved husband by having her brothers killed, only when she oversteps her gender's boundaries by killing Hagen, respectively killing her already dying brother Gíslher with a burning log. Kriemhild and Grímhildr are thus eliminated as a result of stepping outside of their gender sphere by assuming a male role and challenging patriarchal societal structures. Up until then it had been the women's goading that enabled them to use the men around them as instruments for their revenge, a passive approach which had been socially acceptable.

VS's Guðrún makes here a different impression. Her revenge is not achieved through goading, but it is a cataclysmic event that sees an, almost exaggerated, cruelty on Guðrún's side. Killing her own children and serving Atli their cooked flesh, as well as their blood

served in their skulls, the monstrosity of Guðrún is manifold. Here, she is not punished for her gruesome actions on the spot. After the death of her daughter, she riles up her three remaining sons to take revenge on her behalf and only upon the realisation that she brought about the death of all her children does she die of her own grief and sorrow. Guðrún's death comes about through the misery resulting not only from her own decisions, but also her mother Grímhildr's magical potions and possible also as a result of Guðrún consuming the heart of Fáfnir. These supernatural interventions transmit the idea that Guðrún's actions were not solely her own, but that she was forced to react in a certain way through exterior forces. Most notable is the difference between Guðrún avenging the death of her brother's by killing Atli and Kriemhild/Grímhildr avenging Siegfried/Sigurðr's death by killing her brothers. Thus, it seems that relation to kin was considered more important in VS, and Icelandic saga tradition in general¹⁶⁵, than in the NL and ÞS from a feudal-European background.

The transition of the figure from avenger of brothers to avenger of a spouse did not necessarily mean that the Kriemhild-figure was solely responsible for the downfall of the male heroes. In ÞS Grímhildr holds the role of the villain, however, the motive of revenge is not as straightforward as in the NL. Grímhildr is in comparison to the other representation fairly passive, only regaining agency during the final battle. Characteristically obvious features are barely visible. Grímhildr's wish for revenge is not openly stated as in the NL, only in the end her intentions are made clear. Nevertheless, considering the popularity and distribution of the legend the audience most likely knew of Grímhildr's intentions during the course of the saga, which gives her character a literary opacity¹⁶⁶. Grímhildr becomes thus the mastermind behind the scene, a passive figure who knows how to influence the men in her life to reach her goal, eventually stirring Attila's avarice which leads to the demise of the Niflungs. Her emotions and motivations however remain for the audience to interpret. The NL on the other hand relieves Etzel of his blame and directs it solely towards Kriemhild. Though this villainises the woman even further, it also creates a character more active and versatile than in other versions.

¹⁶⁵ Ruth Mazo Karras, "Marriage and the Creation of Kin in the Sagas," *Scandinavian Studies* 75, no. 4 (2003): pp. 473-490, 480.

¹⁶⁶ Roswitha Wisniewski, *Die Darstellung Des Niflungenunterganges in Der Thidrekssaga* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1961), 189.

Conclusion

This study was committed to the comparative investigation of female characters, their role, treatment and characterisation in three selected narratives of the Nibelung story-world. Furthermore, it was an attempt to attest to the existence of remaining images of pre-Christian Germanic women, evidence of pre-Christian matriarchal structures and the marginalisation of women in the 13th-century sources, as suggested by scholars such as Jenny Jochens (1996, 1998), Albrecht Classen (1991), Karin Rinn (1996), respectively. In the course of this thesis, it has come to my attention that scholarship on the subject is either too determined to criticise patriarchy and misogyny or in desperate search of a feminist agenda.

The problem already arises with the source origins and the dynamic relation between orality and literacy. Suggested evidence on Germanic women and connected societal structures (such as matriarchy) would undoubtedly stem from oral tradition. The Nibelung legend, with suggested historical roots in the 5th-6th century, would have undergone approximately seven to eight centuries of evolution in orality until it was eventually brought to parchment in the 13th century where Christianity had been already around for centuries. Furthermore, this evolution is not only dependent on time, but on geographical distribution as well. As the Nibelung story-world would have undergone constant remodelling due to a continuous feedback loop, pointing out certain elements distinctly pre-Christian, or even Germanic, is impossible.

What can be examined, and what this thesis ultimately attempted, is how women were perceived and which societal conflicts were on the mind of the 13th century composers and their target audience. The literary versions of the Nibelung legend thus become the medium to debate: First, the conflict between ideal and challenging womanhood. Second, the conflict between Christian and non- or pre-Christian values. And lastly, the conflict between patriarchy and matriarchy. These openly-addressed conflicts suggest that these subjects were on the mind of the 13th century audience and in dispute. The Nibelung legend thus becomes a vehicle to reflect gender differences and genders under pressure through societal expectations.

If the Nibelung legend, with Kriemhild/Guðrún/Grímhildr and Brünhild/Brynhildr at its centre can really be considered feminist, is highly debatable. Yes, the legend features strong female characters that oppose patriarchy and the women become active agents in its challenging. But is it not rather the story of the desperation of women in a male-dominated

world, that only react to the action of men, and their lives relevant because they revolve around their husbands, fathers and brothers (even male gods in VS)? Though these women are strong, and in modern minds fit into the view of contemporary emancipation and feminism, they are in every instance punished for their transgression and the, most likely, male composers convey through these stories patriarchal and Christian values. Hence, the narratives are not about the female empowerment, it is about their submission and a reflection on a possible emergence of women's empowerment or matriarchal ideologies. The wishful thinking of recent scholars for female empowerment in medieval literature becomes thus more a pursuit of modern agendas than an even-minded approach to the history of women.

It may be advisable that we not see the many literary versions of the Nibelung legends as a gradual evolution of gender that exactly represents the way women were perceived, but rather as different versions of a story-world, repurposed by a composer in light of his society and culture, reflecting subjects of his own mind and/or his audiences'. Undoubtedly, in comparison with the *Nibelungenlied* or *Völsunga saga*, the women of *Þiðreks saga* seem to be more passive or marginalised, however, one has to call into question the purpose of each narrative, which is purely hypothetical at this point.

That the Nibelung legend is evidence for the existence of matriarchal structures in the non-Christian past, as suggested by Classen (1991), remains undecided, but it seems that matriarchy was certainly a familiar concept in the minds of 13th-century composers and ultimately looked upon with both awe and horror, thus posing the question where this concept derived from. Here, a pre-Christian Germanic background can not be ruled out. It is a flattering thought that strong female characters which occupy a subjective role can be traced back to typological older layers of the narrative – but it remains a hypothesis. However, these female characters do not necessarily advocate historical reality, but might rather display womanhood and womanhood as perceived through the male and patriarchal eye of the composer's time.

The Nibelung legend shows that putting female characters into neat little „boxes“ of characterisation, generalising their roles, is futile as they are ambiguous figures who do not only correspond to one characterisation but are ever-changing, complex characters that can evolve from a warrior to a whetting and from there to an avenging woman, and the line between virtuous and virtue-less women is gossamer.

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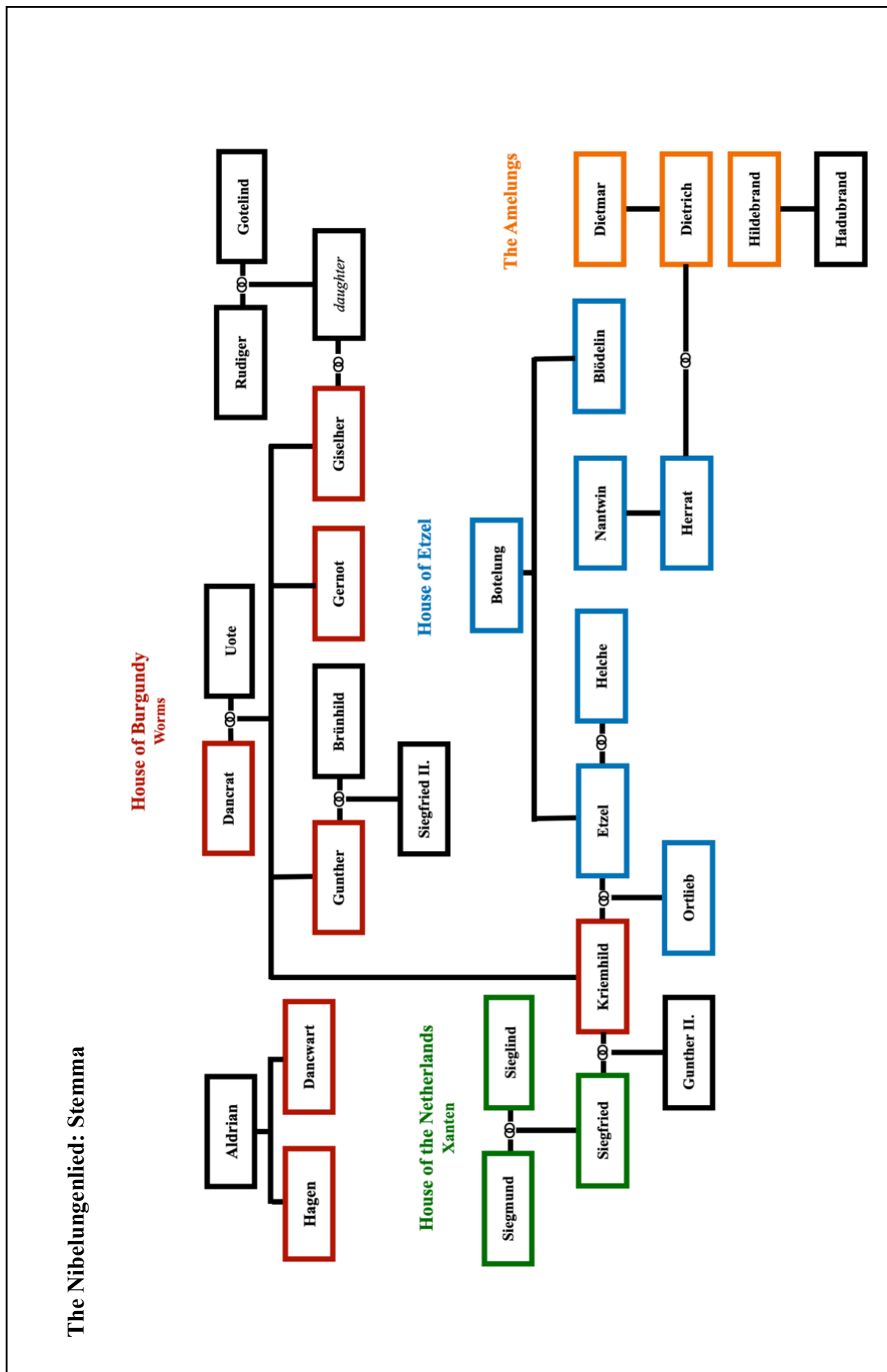
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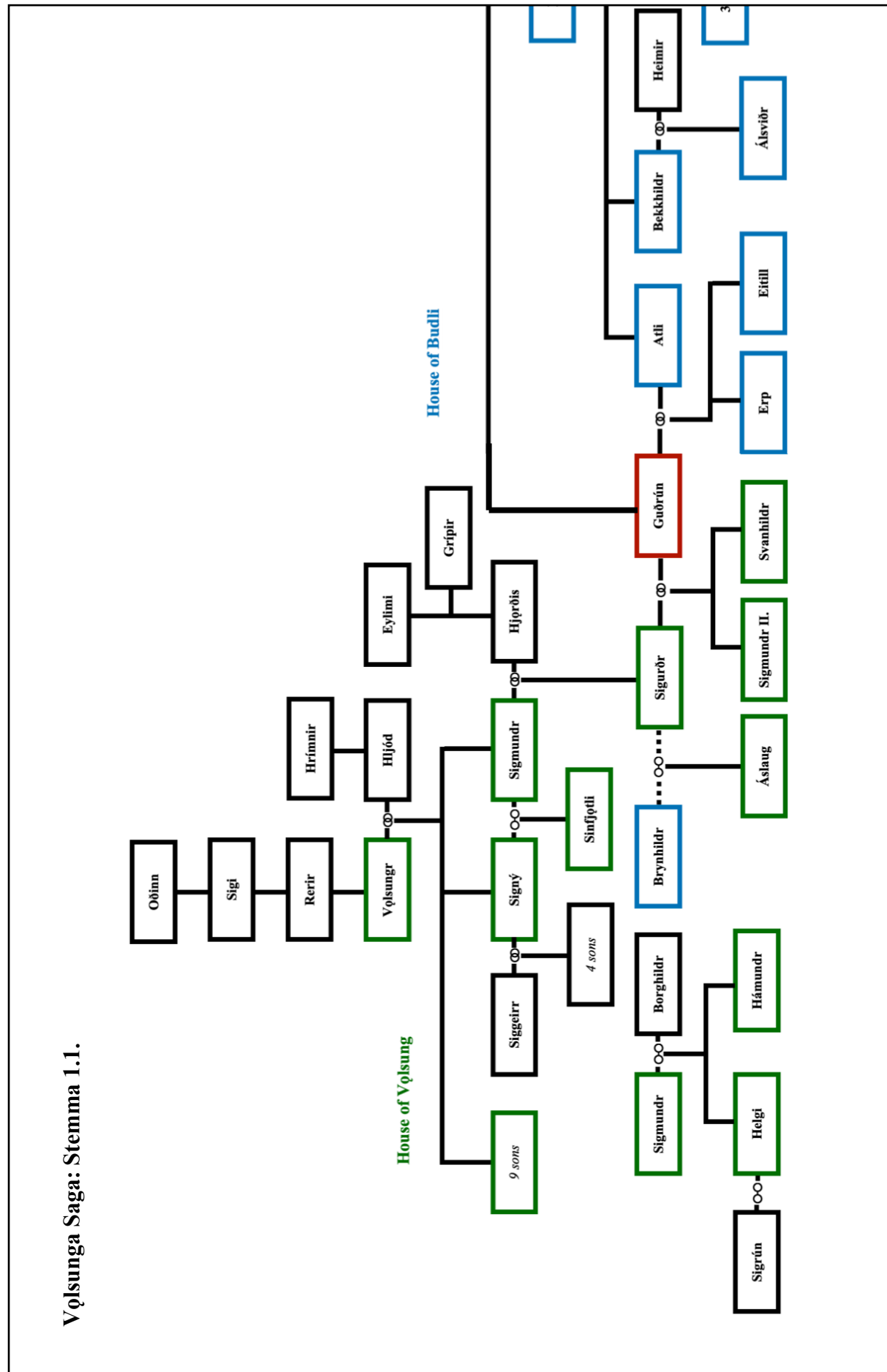
Appendix: Genealogy

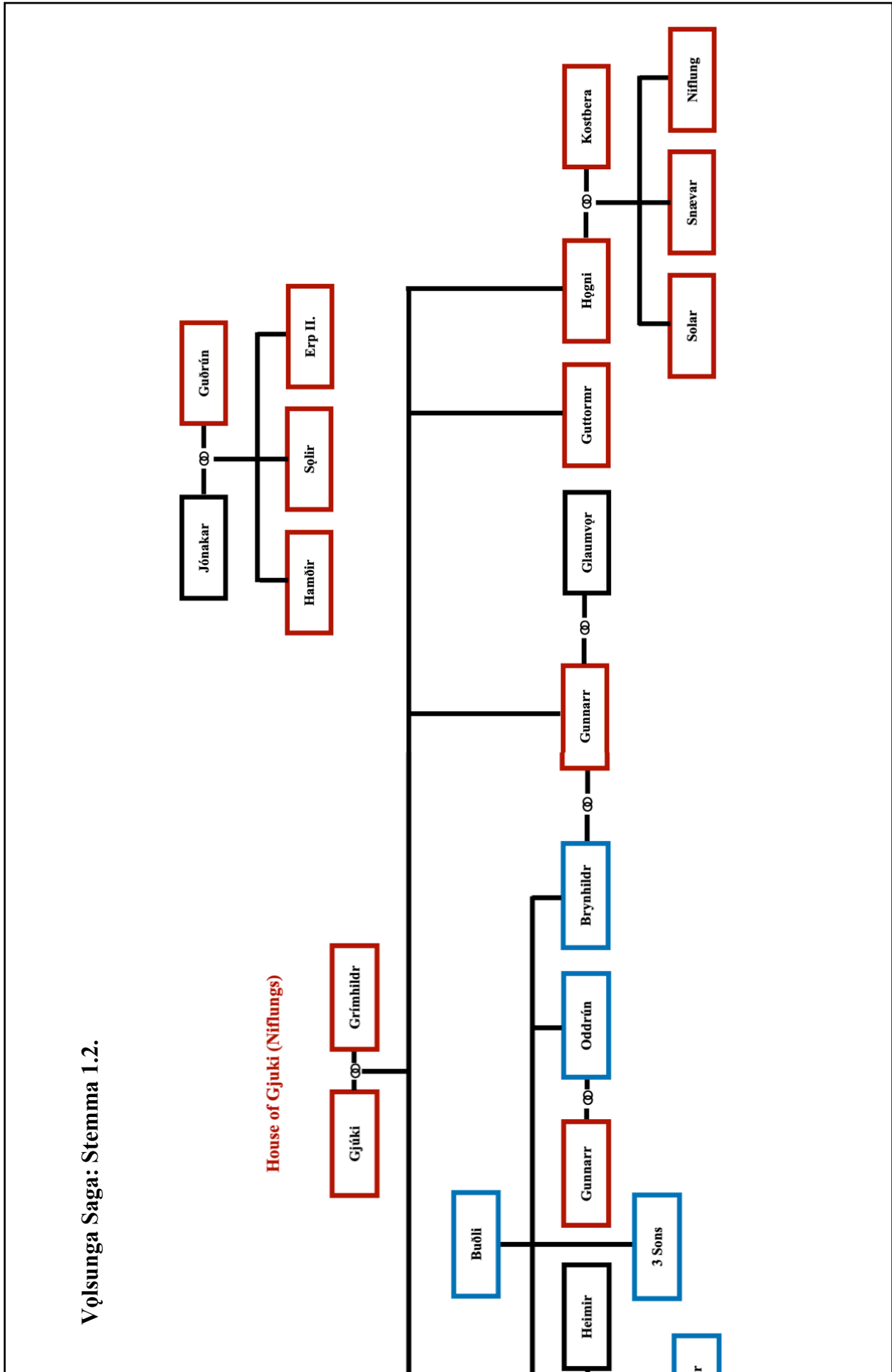
The following appendix on the genealogy of the *Nibelungenlied*, *Völsunga saga* and *Þiðreks saga af bern* is intended to be a sole visual aid in navigating this thesis as the many character names can deviate from one version to another and might be confusing to some readers.

Main Characters:

<i>The Nibelungenlied</i>	<i>Völsunga saga</i>	<i>Þiðreks saga af bern</i>
Siegfried	Sigurðr	Sigurðr
Kriemhild	Guðrún	Grímhildr
Brünhild	Brynhildr	Brynhildr
Gunther	Gunnarr	Gunnarr
Hagen von Tronje	Högni	Högni
Giselher		Gislher
Gernot	Guttormr	Gernoz
Siegmund	Sigmundr	Sigmundr
Siegling	Hjördis	Sisibe
Uote	Grímhildr	Oda
Dietrich von Bern		Þiðrekr af bern
Etzel	Atli	Attila
Helche		Erka







Þjóreks Saga Af Bern: Stemma 1

