

Cold Counsels and Hot Tempers: The Development of the Germanic Amazon in Old Norse Literature

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Abstract

Cold Counsels and Hot Tempers: The Development of the Germanic Amazon in Old Norse Literature will trace how the evolution of the powerful woman in literature shaped the development of female characters in the classical Icelandic family sagas and the Fornaldarsögur, or later sagas of ancient times. The thesis will focus on the conception and representation of the proverb “köld eru kvenna ráð” – cold are the counsels of women – specifically tracing the function of women in feud structures and folk motifs that involve assault and acts of revenge. In the early Germanic sources, women are direct participants in violence; they train themselves in warfare, take up weapons, begin feuds, avoid unwanted marriages and hold kingdoms through force of arms. In later Norse literature, women rely on verbal persuasion to force men into action; they use goading, seduction, and insult to engage men in violence. Cold Counsels and Hot Tempers will examine these changes in women’s roles and investigate the different methods women use to access power.

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This thesis is dedicated to the Germanic Amazons in my life:
my mother, Patricia,
my sisters Kerrienne, Kathryn and Kimberly,
my nieces Breanna and Jillian,
their mothers, Johanna and Laura,
and to the Amazons yet to come.

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most importantly my father, Norman,
my brothers Jonathan and Jeffrey,
Shane, Lukas, Tobin, and Jakob,
and my sweet husband, Peter.

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Note on Standardization

The spelling of proper names has been anglicized by omitting the Old Norse, Old German and Anglo-Saxon inflectional endings and replacing non-English letters with their closest English equivalent. Perhaps the most noticeable, the letters *eth* (Ƿ,þ) and *thorn* (Ð,ð) have been rendered as the modern English ‘th’ or ‘d’, thus the thesis will refer to Bergthora and Hallgerd rather than Bergþora and Hallgerðr.

Narrative titles, place names and quotations in original languages maintain standardized Icelandic, German or Anglo-Saxon spelling, as published in the source.

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1. Introduction

Cold Counsels and Hot Tempers: The Development of the Germanic Amazon in Old Norse Literature will trace how the transformation in Brynhild's ability to access power shaped the development of female characters in the classical Icelandic family sagas and the Fornaldarsögur, or later sagas of ancient times. The thesis will address the evolution of the portrayal of strong women's fighting techniques, which moved from physical to verbal, outlining the function of women in feud structures and folk motifs involving assault and acts of revenge. Working chronologically from the oldest story to the most recent, the thesis will first address the early Germanic sources, where women are direct participants in violence; they train themselves in warfare, take up weapons, begin feuds, avoid unwanted marriages and hold kingdoms through force of arms. This examination will next focus on the exceptional women of the Fornaldarsögur, Thornbjorg and Hervor, who provide an example of the shift in female power dynamics from violence to verbal persuasion. Finally, it will consider the heroines of later Norse literature, women who rely on the shame system inherent in verbal persuasion to force men into violent conflict, acting on the premise that it is preferable to have dead, honourable male kin than living husbands and sons who bring shame to the family. Cold Counsels and Hot Tempers will examine the several Germanic and Old Norse texts that depict these changes in the characterization of female power figures, investigating a temporal alteration in the representation of wise warrior women.

The phrase Germanic Amazon was created specifically to describe the strength and power of the fighting women addressed within the body of the thesis. It is intended to evoke images of the spirited and fiercely independent women warriors described in Greek myth, but varies from the myth by identifying female warriors depicted in Germanic and Norse literature who function well in the sphere of men, but who also lay down their weapons of war, marry, and employ verbal

persuasion to gain power over men. Unlike traditional Amazons, the Germanic Amazons are the quintessence of feminine beauty, skilled in the domestic arts, and in the early sources, trained in the arts of war. Brynhild, the Germanic Amazon archetype, thrives in physical conflict. Her propensity for war drives her to ride with warrior kings and support them in battle. Once she marries, she abandons her war activities and accepts the title of Queen, acting as companion and counselor to her husband. Thornbjorg and Hervor, the Maiden Kings, follow suit, turning from battle to domestic pursuits once they have found an acceptable partner. The notorious whetters of the later Norse sagas, wives and mothers whose primary focus is to maintain family honour, differ from the earlier Germanic Amazons in that they never enter physical conflict, yet the scope of their power is no less, as they manipulate husbands and sons through verbal persuasion.

The first chapter of the thesis will identify the literary tradition within which to situate the succeeding chapters on the family sagas and the *fornaldarsögur*. To establish the Teutonic origins of the Germanic Amazon archetype, Chapter One will draw upon poetry from the *Poetic Edda*¹ and from a number of early Germanic narratives including *Völsunga Saga*² and the *Nibelungenlied*,³ as well as the epic *Beowulf*.⁴ These sources, dating from ca. 750 to ca. 1270, are the foundational works focused on the valkyrie-like Brynhild, Odin's female warrior of great battle prowess. Brynhild is a woman of action: she wears armour, leads men in battle, and sleeps within a circle of flames. If she appears bloodthirsty, she is also forthright and honours every oath she makes. Brynhild does not engage in the verbal manipulation typical of later female saga characters

¹ In the introduction to her translation of the *Poetic Edda*, Carolyne Larrington explains that although it was recorded in the late thirteenth century, "it is thought that most of the mythological verse and a few of the heroic poems pre-date the conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity in the late tenth century" (*The Poetic Edda* xi).

² *Völsunga saga* is generally thought to have been recorded sometime between 1200 and 1270, although "[m]any of the saga's historical episodes...may be traced to actual events that took place in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D." (*The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurðr the Dragon Slayer* 2).

³ A.T. Hatto argues that *The Nibelungenlied* was composed between 1201 and 1204 (*The Nibelungenlied* 365-369). Finch supports this conclusion (see R.G. Finch, trans. *The Saga of the Volsungs*. London, 1965 xi)

⁴ Although the actual date of the original *Beowulf* manuscript is unknown, most scholars agree that it was composed sometime between the seventh and tenth centuries.

until her physical strength is gone and she has been subjugated by her male counterparts. But even once she has been physically disempowered, she holds her vows sacred and uses every means available to her to maintain her personal honour. Brynhild is the archetype upon which Icelandic female strength is modeled, her deeds and especially her words frequently echoed by women of the sagas.

In Chapter Two I shall argue that the Germanic Amazon archetype directly contributes to the characterization of the exceptional *meykonungr*, the Maiden King, a woman who seizes land and power, casting aside needlework and domestic chores in favour of warfare. The Maiden King, usually a single child, prepares herself to rule her father's kingdom by training in the arts of war, expecting that if she cannot maintain the kingdom by force, it will be taken from her by a stronger male opponent. In the Fornaldarsögur⁵ (Icelandic prose narratives based on early heroic traditions but recorded after the classical saga period), women warriors such as Thornbjorg in *Hrólfs saga Gautreksson*⁶ and Hervor in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks Konungs*⁷ masculinize their names, dress like men, establish a comitatus (a band of warriors) and declare themselves "King". The *meykonungr* is considered a figure of fear – a strong-willed woman who acts against her father's counsel, unsexes herself, and takes pleasure in holding power. Unlike the archetype, who is forced into submission, the Maiden King, an evolved version of the Germanic Amazon appearing in story centuries after the original Brynhild cycles, lays down her arms and assumes the role of a wise

⁵ Finch notes that the Fornaldarsögur "deal with semi-historical or legendary events and personages of Scandinavian history before the colonization of Iceland (870-930), and of early East Germanic history," but were recorded after the Family Sagas (*The Saga of the Volsungs* viii). See also Phillip Pulsiano, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1993). 206

⁶ *Hrólfs saga Gautreksson* was recorded in the thirteenth century, after the family sagas.

⁷ In his introduction to *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, Tolkien identifies three versions of the saga. Although the oldest dates from the fourteenth century, he argues that the saga was composed earlier than that, and that the story was known well before it was composed. Parts of the saga, such as the "Waking of Agantyr," are conjectured to date from between the tenth and twelfth centuries, although no precise date exists. Other episodes, such as "The Battle of the Goths and Huns," are assumed to be older yet (*The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* xxiii – xxix).

woman in counseling her husband, particularly when he considers going to war. It is the shift from warrior to counselor that makes the *meykonungr* the literary bridge between Brynhild and the notorious female whetters of the family sagas who access power through verbal persuasion.

The third chapter will treat the female characters of the family sagas as specific representatives of Teutonic lore. I will examine the influences of Bergthora, Hallgerd, Gudrun and Hildigunn on the lives of their husbands, children and close male relatives, and will explore familial and societal consequences that result when women gain power and engage in feud. In *Njáls Saga* women, as the guardians of family honour, are responsible for goading and nagging often reluctant husbands and sons to feud. Once pride becomes involved in a female dispute, women are depicted as reverting to valkyrie or Amazon-like behavior similar to that of their literary predecessors, and acts of violence escalate, as evidenced by the proverb “köld eru kvenna ráð” – cold are the counsels of women. In a domino effect that encompasses all of her immediate male relatives, female feud among saga heroines such as Bergthora and Hallgerd does not end until the family of one of the women is dead and there is no one left to take or demand revenge.

Ultimately the aim of Cold Counsels and Hot Tempers is twofold: to explain what the saga composers are representing as they document oral tales – the literary depiction of strong women in a patriarchal, patrilineal society – and to explore how the Germanic Amazon evolved over several centuries.

2. Chapter One:
Brynhild, The Germanic Amazon Archetype

“Salr er á hóu Hindarfjalli,
allr er hann útan eldi sveipinn,
þann hafa horskir halir of görvan
ór ódökkum Ógnar ljóma.

“Veit ek á fjalli folkvitr sofa
ok leikr yfir lindar váði;
Yggr stakk þorni, aðra feldi
hör-gefn hali, en hafa vildi.

"Knáttu mögr séa mey und hjalmi,
þá er frá vígi Vingskorni reið;
má-at Sigdrífar svefni bregða,
skjöldunga niðr, fyr sköpum norna."

"There is a hall high on Hinderfell,
outside it is all surrounded with flame;
wise men have made it
out of radiant river-light.

"I know on the mountain the valkyrie sleeps,
and the terror of the linden plays about her;
Odin stabbed her with a thorn;
the goddess of flax had brought down
a different fighter from the one he wanted.

"Young man, you shall see the girl under the helmet,
who rode away from the battle on Vingskornir.
Sigdrifa's sleep may not be broken
by a princely youth, except by the norn's decree."

-- from "Fáfnismál" (The Lay of Fafnir)

The image of an armour-clad, sword-wielding beauty who defied one of the gods in battle and was brought to ruin for her action is one forever burned into the pages of literary history via the 13th century Icelandic epic *Völsunga saga*. Brynhild, a powerful maiden warrior who led men to war and slept within a circle of flames, angered the god Odin when she killed the man to whom he had promised victory. Struck by a vengeful sleeping thorn, she was cursed to marry and never

again win a battle. In an oath to herself and the treacherous god, Brynhild swore she would not accept a man who knew fear, but she was deceived into marrying a coward and a liar. Robbed of her physical strength through the consummation of her marriage and with no legal recourse for ending the union,⁸ Brynhild was trapped in an unwanted marriage to a man she could only despise. Physically defeated, she re-situated herself in a position of power by bending male strength to her will through verbal persuasion. Within her story, even in its many variations, lies the pattern of evolution under which the Germanic Amazon moves from physical to verbal power. What happens to Brynhild is formulaic in the representation of the northern female literary figures who follow her. She is the Germanic Amazon archetype upon which Icelandic female strength is modeled, her deeds, and especially her words echoed by the women of the sagas.

Brynhild appears only briefly in medieval sources, yet during her short storylife, she is the central figure around which swirls a whirlwind of activity -- love, betrayal, deceit, dishonor, revenge and murder. Even after she disappears from story, events she has set in motion impact the remainder of the tales linked to her ill-fated love for Sigurd. But it is her evolution, from a battle-ready valkyrie who decides the outcome of conflict to a married woman who manipulates men through verbal persuasion, that establishes the foundation for power dynamics in the development of the saga heroines. Although she is eventually forced from war activities, Brynhild is not without power. As will be seen throughout the narratives in which she appears, a sharp tongue can be as deadly as a double-edged sword.

Brynhild's story exists in several poems included in the *Poetic Edda* and *Snorra Edda*, as well as in *Völsunga saga*, *Þiðriks saga*, and the *Nibelungenlied*.⁹ Variations in the legends can be

⁸ For a discussion of women's legal rights in Medieval German Literature, see Sarah Wesiphal's "Bad Girls in the Middle Ages: Gender, Law, and German Literature" *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19 (2002), 103-119.

⁹ For a source description of the Brynhild legend, see Theodore Andersson's *The Legend of Brynhild* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

divided by geographical association. The Icelandic or northern versions contained in the *Poetic Edda*, *Snorra Edda*, and *Völsunga saga* relate similar events – the character of Brynhild and the valkyrie Sigrdrífa are conflated. Brynhild and Sigurd meet several times, he proposes marriage and she accepts. He is given a potion of forgetfulness and marries Gudrun, then helps his brother-in-law marry Brynhild through deceit. The Germanic or southern versions of the tale related in *Piðriks saga* and the *Nibelungenlied* depict Brynhild as the ruler of a distant country who is known for her legendary strength and beauty. Although Brynhild has an expectation to marry Siegfried (the Germanic equivalent of Sigurd), he brings about her wedding to King Gunther, his soon-to-be brother-in-law, and physically forces her to submit to the consummation of the marriage. Complications in both the northern and southern tales result in family strife and end with tragedy.

Paul Salmon offers an explanation for the geographical variations in the Brynhild legends: "the existence of reworkings of essentially the same story at widely separated times and places does suggest a vigorous tradition and may even, no matter how unfashionable such a view may be, give evidence of the gradual adaptation of portentous events by an author in the telling to conform to the viewpoint of his listeners" ("The German-ness of the Nibelungenlied" 2). Stith Thompson argues that variations occur in folklore because

story proceeds from an original center and the dissemination may and frequently does occur in a wave-like motion in all directions. But for any one of a number of reasons a major change in the story may occur and set up a new center of dissemination. The waves spreading from this new center meet and complicate the original waves and those proceeding from still other centers ("Problems in Folklore" 269).

The search for the origins of the Nibelung material and the discussions pertaining to the treatment of story in the northern and southern versions of the legends rage on. For the purposes of this thesis, the examination of *Völsunga saga* presented herein will not address the various sources of the Nibelung material in depth, but will follow the lead of Manuel Aguirre who rebukes *Völsunga*

scholars for treating the narrative as a “repository and combination of remains from earlier texts” and urges “a study of the saga ‘from within’ that will make as little use as possible of other texts for evidence” (“Narrative Composition in the *Saga of the Volsungs*” 5).¹⁰ Of greatest importance to this study is an examination of Brynhild’s words and actions, not the source of her story. Although the particulars surrounding her participation in each narrative differ drastically, the words and actions of the Germanic Amazon archetype remain relatively untouched by the transitions of her legend and are carried forward to characterize the saga women with power similar to that of their literary antecedent, thus making Brynhild the archetype upon which Icelandic female strength is modeled, her deeds and especially her words frequently echoed by women of the sagas.

In each version of her tale, Brynhild plays opposite the valiant Sigurd (or Siegfried), hero extraordinaire. Sigurd is the quintessential medieval heart-throb -- adventurous, brave, incredibly handsome, and stronger than any man. His youthful exploits are legendary, yet little is known of Brynhild’s youth. Other than the Icelandic recounting of the battle in which she incurred Odin’s displeasure, there are few tales of Brynhild's adventures or conquests: "Brynhild is the paramount figure of Germanic legend, but she has been subordinated more often than not to the male object of her passion. Her story is thus normally referred to as the legend of Sigurd or, in German circles, the legend of Siegfried" (The Legend of Brynhild 5). This might suggest that she is a secondary character, a foil for Sigurd, but referring to the Eddic poems that contain details of her legend,

¹⁰ Criticism of *Völsunga* saga centres on inconsistencies in flow and character development. Aguirre argues that “whatever its seams and sources, and whatever our literary desiderata, the text that has survived in the manuscript did make sense to its contemporary readers as it stood...Textual analysis on this premise reveals a considerable degree of internal coherence in the saga and goes a long way towards showing that a) the ‘lack of unity’ the text has been charged with is nowhere much in evidence; b) the fabled inconsistencies in Brynhild’s character are illusory; c) the study of narrative structure brings to light the double thematic structure of the saga” (“Narrative Composition in the *Saga of the Volsungs*” 5).

Theodore Andersson argues that Brynhild is the central character around which variations of the story have been built:

Since she is the core of the three most impressive poems of the cycle, she must be considered also the substance of the legend. She must have dominated from the outset, and Sigurd must always have been in her shadow. Rather than trying to imagine Brynhild as a late accretion to the Sigurd legend, we may more easily imagine that Sigurd's adventures were expanded because of a flattering association with such a powerful heroine. (The Legend of Brynhild 80)

Jenny Jochens also argues that the “difficulties in locating a historical source for Sigurðr – despite tremendous efforts – make it appear as if the Brynhildr story was the original and the Sigurðr legend was added later to give depth to Brynhildr’s ambition” (Old Norse Images of Women 138-139). This shift in focus from the male to the female illustrates the uniqueness of the Brynhild-Sigurd cycle – that the hero is a woman, and that although she is variously represented as a warrior maiden and a courtly lady, her character development remains consistent across a broad spectrum of sources. Although most versions of the narratives in which she appears begin with Sigurd’s many adventures, this is merely a narrative technique used to establish the necessary characteristics of a suitable mate for the Germanic Amazon.

The *Poetic Edda*, which is contained in the *Codex Regius*¹¹ manuscript, pieces the ill-fated love story of Brynhild and Sigurd together through several poems – “Gripir’s Prophecy”, the “Lay of Fafnir”, the “Lay of Sigrdrifa”, “Fragment of a Poem about Sigurd”, the “First Lay of Gudrun”, “A Short Poem about Sigurd”, and “Brynhild’s Ride to Hell”. The first three poems, which occur before an eight-page lacuna in the *Codex Regius*, explain that Sigurd kills the dragon Fafnir, eats his heart and drinks his blood. The magical power of the blood gives him *fuglarödd* – the ability to

¹¹ The *Codex Regius* is an Icelandic manuscript which contains the *Poetic Edda*. It is considered one of the most valuable sources of Old Norse mythological and heroic poems. Although it is thought to have been composed in the late 13th century, scholars argue that most of the poems pre-date the 10th century conversion to Christianity. The *Codex Regius* is housed at the Árni Magnússon Institute (a research institute that preserves thousands of Icelandic texts returned to Reyjavík from Denmark between 1971 and 1997) at the University of Iceland.

understand the speech of birds. Nuthatches instruct him to gather Fafnir's treasure, to seek a marriage settlement with Gjuki for his daughter, and to release the valkyrie Sigrdrifa from her unbroken sleep at the top of a mountain. Following these instructions, Sigurd takes as much of Fafnir's treasure as he can manage, rides to the mountain top, releases the valkyrie from her sleeping curse and stays with her for several days learning wisdom – languages, the healing arts and rune discernment. The poem ends here, followed by the lacuna, and the story resumes with the “Fragment of a Poem about Sigurd”, where Brynhild demands his death.

The missing material from the *Codex Regius* can be reconstructed from *Völsunga saga*.¹² Following the Eddic story, Sigurd kills Fafnir, and while roasting his heart, licks a drop of blood from his finger, which gives him *fuglarödd*. Nuthatches chirping in a nearby bush warn Sigurd that he is about to be betrayed by his companion, direct him to the dragon's treasure, and instruct him to wake Brynhild from where she sleeps at Hindarfell, because she will gift him with great wisdom.

Sigurd's arrival at Brynhild's castle is structured on conventions of heroic romanticism. The dashing hero makes a timely appearance and wakens the slumbering maiden from her sleep. Once Brynhild is awake, she explains to him the circumstances that have left her sleeping in a circle of flames. This version also follows the Eddic tale:

Brynhild said that two kings had fought. One, called Hjalgunnar, was old and was a great warrior, and Odin had promised him the victory. The other was Agnar or Audabrodur. "I struck down Hjalmgunnar in battle, and Odin stabbed me with a sleeping thorn in revenge. He said I should never afterward have the victory. He also said that I must marry. And I made a countervow that I would marry no one who knew fear." (67)¹³

Brynhildr segir at tveir konungar borðusk. Hét annarr Hjalmgunnarr. Hann var gamall ok inn mesti hermaðr, ok hafði Óðinn honum sigri heitit, en annarr Agnarr eða Auðabróðir. “Ek fellda Hjalmgunnar í orrostu, en Óðinn stakk mik svefnþorni í

¹²

¹³ Jesse L. Byock, trans. *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). All English quotations from *Völsunga saga* are from this edition. Hereafter, page numbers will appear in brackets within the text.

hefnd þess ok kvað mik aldri síðan skyldu sigr hafa ok kvað mik giptask skulu. En ek strengða þess heit þar í mót at giptask engum þeim er hræðask kynni.” (35) ¹⁴

Having heard her tale, Sigurd requests that she impart her wisdom to him.

One of the characteristics that marks Brynhild as a Germanic Amazon is her combination of wisdom and strength, which occurs as a result of her conflation with Sigdrífa, the valkyrie from the poem Sigdrífumál, whose "two outstanding features are her prowess in war...and the exceptional wisdom that she imparts to Sigurd" (Old Norse Images of Women 92).¹⁵ As she offers him advice and wisdom, Brynhild warns Sigurd about his future dealings with both herself and his treacherous in-laws-to-be. She tells him to "sver eigi rangan eið, því at grimm hefnd fylgir griðofi...En lítt megu vér sjá fyrir um yðart líf, en eigi skyldi mága hatr á þik koma" (40). (She tells him to not "swear a false oath, because hard vengeance follows the breaking of truce," and also that "it would be better if the hate of your in-laws did not descend upon you" [71].) Sigurd replies by proposing to Brynhild: "Sigurðr mælti, 'Engi finnsk þér vitrari maðr, ok þess sver ek at þik skal ek eiga, ok þú ert við mitt æði'" (40). ("No one is wiser than you. And I swear that I shall marry you, for you are to my liking" [71].) Brynhild's response to the hero is acceptance: "Hon svarar, 'Þik vile k helzt eiga, þótt ek kjósa um alla menn.' Ok þetta bundu þau eiðum með sér" (40). ("I would most prefer to marry you, even should I choose from among all men.' And this

¹⁴ Finch, R.G., trans. The Saga of the Volsungs. (London, 1965) 35. All Icelandic quotations from *The Saga of the Volsungs* are from this dual language edition. Hereafter, page numbers will appear in brackets within the text.

¹⁵ Jochens explains how the valkyrie and the mortal woman may have been combined from originally separate narratives: "It is not surprising that a heroic but human Sigurðr would have had encounters with several women among the pagan Germanic people, but supernatural valkyries were not known in the Continental legend. It therefore seems likely that a Nordic compiler, fascinated by the foreign material, took Sigdrífa's stanzas – the lay's oldest part – from a poem dealing with the mythological valkyrie and placed them in the Sigurðr context. Convinced that only a supernatural woman would be a suitable counterpart for the male hero, he created an encounter between Sigurðr and a valkyrie, thereby acculturating the foreign legend. Nameless, she may have been characterized by the fitting term *sigdrífa* (the one who brings victory), which a later compiler understood as a proper name. Subsequent authors saw enough of a similarity between this figure and the powerful mortal woman known as Brynhildr to conflate the two, in the process giving Brynhildr a role not of a valkyrie but of a shieldmaiden" (Old Norse Images of Women 92).

they pledged with vows between them" [71-72].) Assured that he has secured his future bride, Sigurd rides off to the next adventure.

Traditional courtly ideals are evoked again when the couple meets for the second time. The structure and description of this meeting are evidence that the saga composer drew his material from different sources. The encounter occurs in the home of Brynhild's sister Bekkhild and her husband Heimer, who is also Brynhild's foster-father. Biding by Odin's curse, Brynhild seemingly abandons her battle accoutrements and takes up a traditional female activity -- embroidery:

Now Brynhild, Heimir's foster daughter, had come home. She stayed in a bower with her maidens. More skilled in handicraft than other women, she embroidered her tapestry with gold and on it stitched the stories of the noble deeds that Sigurd had wrought: the slaying of the serpent, the seizing of the gold, and the death of Regin. (74)

Þá var komin til Heimis Brynhildr, fóstura hans. Hon sat í einni skemmu við meyjar sínar. Hon kunni meira hagleik en aðrar konur. Hon lagði sinn borða með gulli ok saumaði á þau stórmerki er Sigurðr hafði gert, drápormsins ok upptoku fjárins ok dauða Regins. (42)

By incorporating this scene into the saga, the composer has Brynhild turn from battle to needlework, thereby disassociating herself from the sphere of men and moving into the sphere of women, most likely in anticipation of marriage. Stephanie Pafenberg notes that when Brynhild retires to her bower to sew, she is participating in a socially condoned female role:

Spinning, sewing, and weaving are the only productive activities for women sanctioned in the most conservative medieval texts. These activities are, in part, for the benefit they provide the male warriors and courtiers in need of raiment. But more importantly, spinning and weaving are sanctioned because they are associated with humility, devotion, and loyalty; they occupy a woman's attention against the distraction of romance or political activity. ("The Spindle and the Sword: Gender, Sex, and Heroism in the Nibelungenlied and Kudrun" 107)

Pafenberg continues by arguing that "symbols associated with weaving are employed and imposed with a clear ideological purpose: to confine and control women in a heroic culture" (107). Thus the sewing disempowers Brynhild by removing her from the company of men and placing her firmly in

the midst of women. Furthering the argument, Jerold Frakes identifies how public and private space is gendered and determines the parameters of individual activity:

Conventionally men are posited as inhabitants of the public space, that is, most or all of their life activities except the strictly personal and familial take place in a public setting: their work, recreation, friendships, and participation in political life. On the other hand, women's (identical types of) life activities are concentrated in the private space, usually in the (variously defined) family. The concrete consequences are immediately apparent: with very few exceptions, the potential for economic, social, communal, and political activity is severely restricted for women, as compared to men. (Brides and Doom: Gender, Property, and Power in Medieval German Women's Epic 50-51)

When Brynhild assumes the acceptable role of courtly lady in this activity, she removes herself from the public space where she has commanded an army, tangled with a god and counseled a hero. In the sewing bower she has no power, is not active in warfare or politics, nor can she affect the decisions of the gods while praising Sigurd through the medium of needle and thread.

It is while she is tucked away in the private women's sphere that Brynhild and Sigurd meet the second time. Unaware that they are both enjoying the hospitality of the same host, Sigurd rides out to hunt one day and has a problem with his hawk that brings him to Brynhild's bower:

It is said that one day Sigurd rode into the woods with his hounds and hawks and many followers. When he returned home, his hawk flew into a high tower and settled by a window. Sigurd went after the hawk. Then he saw a fair woman and realized that it was Brynhild. Both her beauty and her work affected him deeply. He went into the hall but did not want to join in the sport of the men. (74)

Ok einn dag er frá því sagt at Sigurðr reið á skóg við hundum sínum ok haukum ok milku fjölmenni. Ok er hann kom heim, fló hans haukr á hávan turn ok settisk við einn glugg. Sigurðr fór eptir haukinum. Þá sér hann eina fagra konu ok kennir at þat er hon gerir. Kemr í hollina ok vil enga skemtan við menn eiga. (42)

In the conventional role of a love-struck suitor, Sigurd mopes around the hall until Alsvið, Brynhild's nephew, notices that he is quiet and inquires as to the cause of his unhappiness. Sigurd tells Alsvið that he has seen a beautiful maiden who is embroidering his heroic deeds. Alsvið warns Sigurd of her independence: “Engi fannsk sá enn um aldr er hon léði rums hjá sér eða gæfi

ol at drekka” (43). ("There has yet to be a man that she allows to sit by her or to whom she gives ale to drink" [74].) He also tells Sigurd that Brynhild will never be content to settle quietly into domesticity: “Hon vill sik í herskap hafa ok alla konar frægð at fremja” (43). ("She wants to go warring and win all kinds of fame" [74].)

Rather than listen to the counsel of his host’s son, Sigurd decides to court Brynhild, the woman with whom he has already exchanged vows of promise. He enters her chamber, greets her, and without invitation, sits down beside her. Brynhild lightly chastises him for his arrogance saying, “Þetta sæti mun fáam veitt vera, nema faðir minn komi” (43). ("That seat is granted to few, except when my father comes" [74].) Sigurd assumes a proprietary air and announces his possession of Brynhild's private quarters by replying that the seat will be granted to whomever he pleases. In her role as the subservient female, Brynhild accepts this as a declaration of his intentions and welcomes him: “Síðan reis hon upp ok fjórar meyjjar með henni, ok gekk fyrir hann með gullker ok bað hann drekka” (43). ("She brought him a gold cup, and invited him to drink" [75].) Sigurd takes advantage of her action to press his suit: “Hann réttir í mót hondina kerinu ok tók hond hennar með ok setti hana hjá sér. Hann tók um hals henni ok kyssti hana ok mælti, ‘Engi kona hefir þér fegri fœzk’” (43). ("He reached toward the cup, but took her hand, drawing her down beside him. He put his arms around her neck and kissed her, saying: 'No fairer woman than you has ever been born'" [75].)

While up to this point in their second meeting, Brynhild has behaved as the docile maiden, she immediately rejects his compliment, telling him to be wary of women and that the two of them shall never marry:

Brynhild said: "It is wiser counsel not to put your trust in a woman, because women always break their promises."

Sigurd said: "The best day for us would be when we can enjoy each other."

Brynhild said: "It is not fated that we should live together. I am a shield-maiden. I

wear a helmet and ride with the warrior kings. I must support them, and I am not averse to fighting" (75).

Brynhildr mælti, 'Vitrligra ráð er þat at leggja eigi trúnað sinn á konu vald, því at þær rjúfa jafnan sín heit.'

Hann mælti, 'Sá kæmi beztr dagr yfir oss at vér mættim njótask.'

Brynhildr svarar, 'Eigi er þat skipat at vit búim saman. Ek em skjaldmær, ok á ek með herkonungum hjálm, ok þeim mun ek at liði verða, ok ekki er mér leitt at berjask.' (43)

Ignoring her protests and refusing the wise counsel he so eagerly accepted earlier in the story, Sigurd insists they belong together: "Sigurðr svarar, 'Þá frjóumsk vér mest ef vér búum saman, ok meira er at þola þann harm er hér liggir á en hvoss vápn'" (43). ("Sigurd answered: 'Our lives will be most fruitful if spent together. If we do not live together, the grief will be harder to endure than a sharp weapon'" [75].) Brynhild renews her protest, prophesying of the marriage and political alliance that will lead to their deaths, but Sigurd refuses to acknowledge her concerns, and once again they pledge themselves to each other:

Sigurd answered: "No king's daughter shall entice me. I am not of two minds in this, and I swear by the gods that I will marry you or no other woman." She spoke likewise. Sigurd thanked her for her words and gave her a gold ring. They swore their oaths anew. (75)

Sigurðr svarar, 'Ekki tælir miki konungs dóttir, ok ekki lér mér tveggja huga um þetta, ok þess sver ek við guðin at ek skal þik eiga eða enga konu ella.'

Hon mælti slíkt. Sigurðr þakkar henni þessi ummæli ok gaf henni gullhring, ok svorðu nú eiða af nýju. (43-44)

The lovers part company once again, to return to their gendered spheres, Brynhild to her domestic chores and Sigurd to the lands south of the Rhine, seeking adventure with his men.

The wrench in the workings of this great love affair appears in the form of the lovely Gudrun, the only daughter of King Gjuki, whose kingdom lies along the route Sigurd is traveling. When Sigurd arrives in Gjuki's kingdom and is welcomed as an honored guest, his prophesied

fate¹⁶ is brought about at the hands of a woman. At this point in the saga, the composer re-emphasizes that Sigurd is the superlative hero; he is more than any other man -- bigger, stronger, richer, more handsome and also taller than every man in the hall. He is clearly the ultimate champion and a desirable ally with great wealth, qualities which pique the interest of Gjuki's wife, Grimhild, who prepares a drink of forgetfulness, the *óminnisol*, for Sigurd,¹⁷ wiping Brynhild from his memory. Although she is the one who prepares the potion, Grimhild is not the only one who wants to form a power alliance with Sigurd; Gudrun's brothers offer him a position of authority within their kingdom along with Gudrun's hand in marriage. Sigurd accepts the offer and the men cement their alliance by swearing an oath of blood-brotherhood.

Once Sigurd is married to Gudrun, Grimhild encourages her son Gunnar to seek Brynhild's hand. He and Sigurd present the *bónorð* -- a request of marriage -- and Heimer encourages the suit, informing the men of Brynhild's terms: "Heimer fagnar þeim vel...Heimer kvað hennar kjor vera, hvern hon skal eiga" (48). "He was well disposed to the match, provided Brynhild did not refuse. He said she was so proud that she would marry only the man she wanted" [80].) On their journey to her fortress, the men are further cautioned: "...ok kvazk þat hyggja at þann einn mundi hon eiga vilja er riði eld brennanda er sleginn er um sal hennar" (48). ("[T]he choice of a husband was Brynhild's" (80) and that "she would only want to marry that man who rode through the blazing fire surrounding [her hall]" [80].)

When the men arrive at Brynhild's hall, she and Sigurd experience their third encounter and the true characters of the hero and anti-hero are revealed. When Gunnar fails to cross the flames

¹⁶ Brynhild prophesies Sigurd's fate – to marry Gudrun and not herself – to both Sigurd and Gudrun, at separate times.

¹⁷ According to *The Saga of the Volsungs*, Grimhild is a witch and uses supernatural power to make Sigurd forget Brynhild: "Gjuki was married to Grimhild, a woman well versed in magic" (75).

and claim the woman within, he exchanges shapes with Sigurd and sends him to complete the bridal-quest.¹⁸

And when Sigurd got past the flames, he found a beautiful dwelling and in it sat Brynhild. She asked who this man was. He called himself Gunnar, the son of Gjuki, "and with the consent of your father and the agreement of your foster father, you are my intended wife, provided I ride your wavering flame and if you should so decide." (81)

Ok er Sigurðr kom inn um logann, fann hann þar eitt fagrt herbergi, ok þar sat í Brynhildr. Hon spyrr hverr sá maðr er. En hann nefndisk Gunnarr Gjúkason – ‘Ertu ok ætluð mín kona með jáyrði feðr þíns, ef ek riða þinn vafrlaga, ok fóstra þíns með yðru atkvæði.’ (49)

Knowing that he has to bargain directly with the woman herself to gain her hand, Sigurd offers an economic lure: “Sigurðr stóð rétt á gólfinu ok studdisk á sverðshjoltin ok mælti til Brynhildar, ‘Þér í mót skal ek gjalda mikinn mund í gulli ok góðum gripum’” (49). (“Sigurd stood straight upon the floor, resting on the hilt of his sword, and said to Brynhild: 'I shall pay a generous marriage settlement of gold and precious treasures in return for your hand'" [81].) Brynhild's response is revealing. In a few short lines, the composer manages to expose her character, emphasize the sanctity of oaths to Brynhild, and foreshadow the lovers' tragic end:

She answered gravely from her seat, like a swan on a wave, in her mail coat, with her sword in her hand and her helmet on her head. "Gunnar," she said, "do not speak of such things to me, unless you surpass every other man and you will kill those who have asked for me in marriage, if you have the courage to do so. I was in battle with the king of Gardariki and our weapons were stained with the blood of men, and this I still desire." (81)

Hon svarar af áhyggju af sínu sæti sem álpt af báru ok hefir sverð í hendi ok hjálm á hofði ok var í brynju: ‘Gunnarr,’ segir hon, ‘ræð ekki slíkt við mik, nema þú sér hverjum manni fremri, ok þá skaltu drepa er mín hafa beðit, ef þú hefir traust til. Ek var í orrostu með Gardakonungi, ok váru vápn vár lituð í mannablóði, ok þess girnumk vér enn.’ (49)

¹⁸For a discussion of the bridal-quest, see Marianne Kalinke, Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.)

Sigurd reminds Brynhild of her vow, that “þér mundið með þeim manni ganga er þetta gerði” (49). ([T]hat "if this fire were crossed, you would go with the man who did it" [81].) Abiding by her oath as she has previously obeyed the terms of the curse laid upon her by Odin, Brynhild acknowledges that she owes the man standing before her marriage and treats him accordingly.

This third encounter provides further evidence that the composer incorporated multiple sources to draw out the interplay between Brynhild and Sigurd. Much of the criticism directed at the saga is focused upon the inconsistencies of these meetings. During their first encounter, Sigurd awakens a female warrior sleeping behind a wall of shields that shine with a bright light. She gifts him with wisdom, as would a valkyrie. He proposes marriage and she accepts. In their second encounter he seeks out a courtly lady who is removed from the public sphere and spends her days practicing feminine pursuits – weaving and sewing. He proposes and she accepts. For the third encounter, Brynhild has returned to her keep and waits behind a wall of flames for an appropriate suitor to cross the fire and find her within. Sigurd, disguised as Gunnarr, proposes and she accepts. While many scholars find the incorporation of these three seemingly separate and distinct events disjointed and awkward, Aguirre has suggested that the composer purposefully included the three meeting scenes in the saga to lengthen and draw out the tension between Brynhild and Sigurd. Aguirre has coined the narrative technique “phasing” and describes it as the recurrence of an event that is not simply the repetition of language, but rather serves specific functions in narrative: “lengthening and delaying, creating tension, enhancing and devaluing” (“Narrative Composition in the *Saga of the Volsungs*” 7).¹⁹ Aguirre observes that phasing

calls for action to be drawn out in such a way that the decisive episode, carrying the ‘Weight of the Stern’, will show the truth, fulfill the expectations created, reveal the

¹⁹ Aguirre observes that “phasing relies on a folk-narrative convention, called by Olrik (1909) the ‘Law of the Stern’, which requires that the decisive element in a series be placed last” (“Narrative Composition in the *Saga of the Volsungs*” 7). Axel Olrik identified the ‘Law of the Stern’ in his 1909 article “Epic Laws of Folk Narrative”.

true hero, unfold his destiny (whether apotheosis or catastrophe), while the false hero will be exposed, unmasked, shown up...As the crossing of the flames is phased into three attempts, the event is lengthened, tension added, behaviour ritualized...without the need for saying it, phasing establishes a comparison between the two heroes...and shows their respective worth: it is not the horse but the quality of its rider that determines success or failure. (10)

Sigurd stays with Brynhild in his Gunnar disguise for three days, and “[h]ann tók þá af henni hringinn Andvaranaut er hann gaf henni, en fekk henni nú annan hring af Fáfnis arfi” (50). (He takes "from her the ring Andvaranaut, which he had given her, and gave her now another ring from Fafnir's inheritance" [81]. He then returns to his companions, crossing the wall of flames once more, and resuming his own shape. Though the synthesis of the three encounters is not smooth, incorporating them into the saga serves a purpose:

If the author found the three meeting-scenes in different sources, he yet managed to set them up in such a way that the third stands in bleak contrast to the first two, effectively reversing the usual phasal structure. In other words, the author has not only built them in but also exploited the narrative potential of such a configuration; as they stand, and notwithstanding the obvious ‘seams’...they are an integral part of an unfolding text. (“Narrative Composition in the *Saga of the Volsungs*” 16)

After his departure, Brynhild travels to the home of her foster father and tells him of her visitor: ““Ok reið minn vafrlöga ok kvazk kominn til ráða við mik ok nefndisk Gunnarr. En ek sagða at þat mundi Sigurð einn gera, ere k vann eiða á fjallinu, ok er hann minn frumverr” (50). ([A] king had come to her 'and rode through my wavering flames, declaring he had come to win me. He called himself Gunnar. Yet when I swore the oath on the mountain, I had said that Sigurd alone could do that, and he is my first husband'" [82].) In spite of her suspicions concerning the identity of her husband-to-be, Brynhild keeps her promise and marries Gunnar, yet “[Sigurd’s] achievement leaves us uneasy; we feel something is wrong if he deserves a maiden but woos her for an undeserving man. We are alerted that this is the beginning of potential tragedy, the signal being

given by a disjunction in the phasing process” (“Narrative Composition in the *Saga of the Volsungs*” 11).

Although Brynhild is considered by some scholars to be the central character of the Sigurd or Siegfried cycles, she has a cameo appearance in *The Nibelungenlied*. The story begins with a focus on the fair Kriemhild, a princess of Burgundy, whose beauty is so great that news of it travels to Siegfried, crown prince of the Netherlands, who decides he will have her as his wife. Taking an escort of a dozen men, Siegfried marches on Burgundy and declares his intention to take the country from King Gunther through a contest of arms. The Burgundians are distressed by the challenge because they are aware of Siegfried’s reputation. Hagen of Troneck, one of Gunther’s liegemen, recounts Siegfried’s deeds, reminding the company that Siegfried has single-handedly killed the Nibelungs and their friends, and conquered seven hundred men from Nibelungland, following which they gave him their lands and castles. Besides being brave, Siegfried is difficult to defeat in battle because he has killed a dragon and bathed in its blood, which has made his skin impenetrable.

Rather than risk losing his kingdom, Gunther strikes a compromise: he welcomes Siegfried and his men into Burgundy and offers to share everything he has. From this start springs a cautious friendship. Siegfried competes with the King and his retinue in athletics, rides with them in combat and leads a small, successful contingent against the massive, combined forces of Kings Liudegast and Liudeger, who have also threatened Gunther’s kingdom. Yet, in spite of his service to Gunther, Siegfried rarely has the chance to see the object of his affection – Kriemhild remains beyond his reach.

Siegfried secures the promise of Kriemhild’s hand in marriage when Gunther decides to pursue a bride for himself. Similar to the way Siegfried learned of Kriemhild’s great beauty, stories

of Brynhild reach Gunther, who decides to win the fair lady. Introduced as a figure of legend, Brynhild is queen of the distant country of Iceland, and has contrived a contest to discourage unworthy suitors from gaining her hand in marriage and by default, gaining control of her notably wealthy kingdom, an inheritance from her father:

Over the sea there lived a queen whose like was never known, for she was of vast strength and surpassing beauty. With her love as the prize, she vied with brave warriors at throwing the javelin, and the noble lady also hurled the weight to a great distance and followed with a long leap; and whoever aspired to her love had, without fail, to win these three tests against her, or else, if he lost but one, he forfeited his head. (53)²⁰

Ez was ein küniginne gesezzen über sê;
ir gelîche enheine man wesse ninder mê:
diu was unmâzen schœne, vil michel was ir kraft.
si schôz mit snellen degenen umbe mine den schaft.

Die stein den warf si verre, dar nâch si wîte spranc.
swer an si wenden wolde sînen gedanc,
driu spil mouser an behaben der frouwen wol geborn:
gebrast im an dem einen, er het daz houbet sîn verlorn. (53)²¹

When Gunther decides to compete for Brynhild, he requests that Siegfried accompany him on the bridal quest. Siegfried opposes the quest, but agrees to the journey on the understanding that Siegfried will marry Kriemhild if Brynhild comes to Burgundy as Gunther's wife. The men seal their agreement with an oath.

Scholars argue, and the text itself seems to provide evidence, that Brynhild and Siegfried are familiar with each other prior to Gunther's party reaching Iceland. Because he knows of Brynhild's great strength and that Gunther will require assistance to successfully compete against her, Siegfried brings a cloak of invisibility that gives him, in addition to his own power, the strength of twelve men. He is familiar with the customs of the country and provides advice as to

²⁰ Hatto, A.T., trans. *The Nibelungenlied*. (London, 1969). All English quotations from *The Nibelungenlied* are from this edition. Hereafter, page numbers will appear in brackets within the text.

²¹ Henning, Ursula. *Das Nibelungenlied*. (Germany 1977). All German quotations from *Das Nibelungenlied* are from this edition. Hereafter, page numbers will appear in brackets within the text.

what Gunther's party should wear when presenting themselves at Brynhild's court. He also counsels that only four of them travel to Iceland and that his companions tell Brynhild that Siegfried is Gunther's vassal.²² Siegfried even captains the boat that takes them to Iceland because he knows the route.

When Brynhild receives Gunther's party, she does it with the expectation that Siegfried has come to take her challenge and try his hand at winning her in marriage, so it is no small surprise to her when Siegfried announces that it is Gunther who will compete in the games. Brynhild agrees to the competition on the understanding that Gunther is Siegfried's lord: "Si sprach: 'ist er dîn herre und bistu sîn man,/ diu spil, diu ich im teile, und tarrer diu bestân,/ behabt er des die maisterschaft, sô mine ich sînen lîp;/ anders muoz er sterben, ê ich werde sîn wîp'" (67). ("If he is your lord and you are his liegeman, and provided he dares essay my sports (whose rules I shall lay down for him) and proves himself the winner, I shall wed him. Otherwise, if I win, it will cost you all your lives!" [63]). Brynhild then explains the rules: "Den stein den sol er werfen und springen dar nâch,/ den gêr mit mir schiezen" (68). To win Brynhild, Gunther must "cast the weight, follow through with a leap, then throw the javelin" (63) farther and better than the Germanic Amazon herself. When Brynhild's warriors bring her weapons to the field, Gunther and his liegemen panic:

They thereupon carried out for the lady a great spear, both sharp and heavy, which she was accustomed to throw – it was strong, and of huge proportions, and dreadfully keen about the edges. And now listen to this extraordinary thing about the weight of the spear: a good three-and-a-half ingots had gone into its forging, and three of Brunhild's men could scarcely lift it, so that noble Gunther was deeply alarmed." (65)

Dô truoc man der der frouwen, swære und dar zuo grôz,
einen gêr vil starken, den si alle zîte schôz,
scarpf und ungefüege, michel unde breit,
der ze sînen ecken harte vreislîchen sneit.

Von des gêres swære hœret wunder sagen:

²² As a liegeman, Siegfried could not compete against his king for Brynhild.

wol vierdehalbiu mässe was der zuo geslagen;
in truogen küme drîe Prünhilde man.
Gunther der vil küene harte sorgen began. (70)

The stone she throws is also exceptional: “man brâht ir zuo dem ringe inen swæren mermilstein,/ grôz und ungefüege, michel unde wel;/ in truogen kûme zwelfe helde küen unde snel” (72). (They also bring “a heavy boulder to the ring for her, round, and of monstrous size – twelve lusty warriors could barely carry it!” [66].)

While preparations are being made on the field, Siegfried slips away to the boat to retrieve his invisibility cloak. He returns to the field before the competition begins and instructs Gunther to act as though he is performing the actions of the contest:

Siegfried went up to him unseen and touched his hand, startling him with his magic powers.

‘What was it that touched me?’ the brave man wondered, looking all around him, yet finding no one there.

‘It is I, your dear friend Siegfried,’ said the other. ‘You must not fear the Queen. Give me your shield, and let me bear it, and take careful note of what I say to you. Now, you go through the motions, and I shall do the deeds.’ (66)

‘Waz hât mich gerüeret?’ gedâht der küene man.
dô sac her allenthalben: er vant dâ niemen stân.
er sprach: ‘ich bin ez, Sîvrit, der liebe friunt dîn.
vor der küniginne soltu gar âne angest sîn.

Den schilt gib mir von hende, den lâ du mich tragen,
und merke mine lêre, die du mich hœrest sagen.
nu habe du die gebærde, diu werc wil ich began.’ (72)

Although the men use their combined strength, magnified by the cloak, to compete, the first volley nearly kills them both. Brynhild begins the competition with a potentially fatal javelin toss:

[T]he noble lady let fly with great power at the large, new shield which the son of Sieglind [Siegfried] bore, so that sparks leapt up from the steel as though fanned by the wind, while the blade of the stout javelin tore clean through the shield and a tongue of fire flared up from Gunther’s mailshirt. Those strong men reeled under the shock, and, but for the magic cloak, they would have died there and then. (67)

Dô schôz vil krefticlîche diu vil starke meit

den gêr gein eime schilde, michel unde breit:
den truog an sîner hende daz Sigelinden kint.
daz fiur spranc von stale, alsam ez wæte der wint.

Des starken gêres snide sô durch den schilt gebrach,
daz man daz fiur lougen ûz den ringen sach.
des schuzzes beide strûchten, die vil starken man.
si ertwelte si sô sere, daz si den lîp nâch heten lân. (72)

Realizing her sheer brute strength, Siegfried rallies himself, returns the javelin, throws his boulder farther than hers and flies past it with a leap, carrying Gunther with him. At this Brynhild commands her vassals to pay homage to Gunther, declares she will marry him, doles out her treasure in accordance with the festive occasion, appoints a regent to rule Iceland in her stead, and prepares to travel to Burgundy to become Gunther's queen.

The Germanic Amazon's super-human strength appears to be rooted in her virginity. According to Jenny Jochens, "the perception of female participation in war was limited to the time before wedlock...Marriage provided women with other weapons to handle men, but only unmarried women and virgins engaged in outright combat" (Old Norse Images of Women 94). Referring to male heroes, Dean Miller explains that the idea of asexual strength was widespread in warrior cultures:

In some part the hero-warrior's sexual inactivity can easily be connected to the notion, very widely current in warrior-dominated societies, that sexual abstinence secures and defends the heat and vital energy necessary to the fighter's deadly art; that in fact this energy can properly have no other outlet than battle and war. (The Epic Hero 319)

Just as men preserve their vital sexual energy for battle, so too does the Germanic Amazon. Marriage means a loss of physical power to the Germanic Amazon. With few exceptions, women in the Icelandic sagas do not raise arms after they are married.²³ In the northern story, Brynhild never returns to battle after her nuptials. The only time she takes up a weapon is when she takes

²³ Thornbjorg, the Maiden King from Hrolf Gautreksson, is a notable exception and will be discussed in Chapter Two.

her own life. But beyond no longer engaging in battle, the Germanic Amazon actually loses her physical strength upon the consummation of her marriage. In *The Nibelungenlied*, Brynhild does not submit to her husband on their wedding night. When Gunther tries to force his bride into accepting his embraces, Brynhild humiliates him:

Gunther grew very angry with her. He tried to win her by force, and tumbled her shift for her, at which the haughty girl reached for the girdle of stout silk cord that she wore about her waist, and subjected him to great suffering and shame: for in return for being balked of her sleep, she bound him hand and foot, carried him to a nail, and hung him on the wall. (88)

Dô ranger nâch ir mine; daz was fer frouwen leit.
dô grief nâch eime gürtel diu hêrlîche meit;
daz was ein starker porte, den si alle zîte truoc.
wie lützil si dem künige sînes willen dô vertruoc!

Die fûeze und ouch die hende ze samne si im bant;
si truog in zeinem nagele und hieng in an die want. (100)

To subdue his wife, Gunther again requires Siegfried's assistance. Using the invisibility cloak to disguise himself, Siegfried takes Gunther's place in the king's bedchamber. Brynhild's reaction to his advances is immediate: "er um beslôz mit armen die magt lobelîch./ si warfen ûz dem bette dâ bî ûf einen banc./ daz im sîn houbet lute an eime scamel erklanc" (105). (She "flung him out of the bed against a stool nearby so that his head struck it with a mighty crack" [91]). As the fight continues, Siegfried receives a nasty reminder of Brynhild's Amazonian strength:

She locked the rare warrior in her arms and would have laid him in bonds, like the King, so that she might have the comfort of her bed. She took a tremendous revenge on him for having ruffled her clothes. What could his huge strength avail him? She showed him that her might was the greater, for she carried him with irresistible force and rammed him between the wall and a coffer. (92)

Mit ir starken armen beslôz si den degen.
dô wolde si in gebunden alsam den künic legen,
daz si an ir bette möhte haben gemach.
daz er ir wât zerfuorte, diu frouwe ez grœzlîche rach.

Waz half sîn grôziu sterke und ouch sîn michel kraft?

si erzeigete wol dem degene ir libes meisterschaft:
si truog in mit gewalte -- dâ wart ir ellen schîn --
und truchtin ungefuoge zwischen der wende und einen schrîn. (105)

Eventually Brynhild is defeated, and once she has engaged in intercourse, willingly or unwillingly, she becomes as any other woman – physically smaller and less powerful than most men: “dô lâgen bî ein ander Gunther und Prûnhilt diu meit./ Er pflag ir minneclîche, als in daz beiden zam./ dô muoste si verkiesen ir zorn und ouch ir scham./ von sîner heinlîche si wart ein lützil bleich./ hey, waz ir von der mine ir vil grôzen krefte entweich!/ Dône was ouch si niht sterker dan ein ander wîp” (107). (“Gunther and the lovely girl lay together, and he took his pleasure with her as was his due, so that she had to resign her maiden shame and anger. But from his intimacy she grew somewhat pale, for at love’s coming her vast strength fled so that now she was no stronger than any other woman” [93].)

Marriage is a turning point in the Germanic Amazon's life. Long before Shakespeare wrote "The Taming of the Shrew", medieval literature had embraced the literary motif of marriage as a cure for female independence or waywardness.²⁴ The *Beowulf* poet defines the appropriate or expected role of a woman in a warrior society²⁵ by telling the audience what a queen ought not to do. He recounts the story of Queen Modthryth, a woman who allegedly killed for pleasure:

Great Queen Modthryth/ perpetrated terrible wrongs./ If any retainer ever made bold/ to look her in the face, if an eye not her lord's/ stared at her directly during daylight,/ the outcome was sealed: he was kept bound/ in hand-tightened shackles, racked, tortured/ until doom was pronounced -- death by the sword,/ slash of blade, blood-gush and death qualms/ in an evil display. (133, lines 1932-1940)²⁶

²⁴ The women portrayed in such stories usually do not conform to societal expectations, which is why a strong male hand is viewed as necessary in reforming their behaviour. See Wesiphal (2002) and Wahlgren (1938).

²⁵ See Pafenberg (1994-95). "Germanic warrior culture demands one single image of masculinity, masculinity as the domination of body and property through violence and direct control" (111).

²⁶ Seamus Heaney. *Beowulf* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001). 133, lines 1932-1940. All English and Icelandic quotations from *Beowulf* are from this dual language edition. Hereafter, page numbers will appear in brackets within the text.

Mōðþrýðo wæg/ fremu folces cwēn, firen' ondrysne./ Nánig þæt dorste dēor
 genēþan/ swæsra gesīða, nefne sin-frēa,/ þæt hire an dægum starede;/ ac him
 wæl-bende weotode tealde,/ hand-gewriþene; hraþe seoþðan wæs/ æfter mund-gripe
 mēce gepinged,/ þæt hit sceāden-māel/ scýran mōste,/ cwealm-bealu cýðan. (133,
 lines 1932-1940)

The poet condemns Modthryth's actions, declaring that "[e]ven a queen/ outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that./ A queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent/ with loss of life for imagined insults" (133, lines 1940-1943). "Ne bið swylc cwēnlīc þēaw/ idese tō efnanne, þēah ðe hīo ánlicu sý,/ þætte freoðu-webbe fēores onsáce/ æfter lige-torne lēofne mannan" (133, lines 1940-1943). He further explains that once she was married to a powerful man, the defects in her character were corrected, her bloodthirstiness abated, and she became a paragon of feminine virtue:

[S]he was less of a bane to people's lives,/ less cruel-minded, after she was married/
 to the brave Offa, a bride arrayed/ in her gold finery, given away/ by a caring father,
 ferried to her young prince/ over dim seas. In days to come/ she would grace the
 throne and grow famous/ for her good deeds and conduct of life,/ her high devotion
 to the hero king/ who was the best king, it has been said,/ between the two seas or
 anywhere else/ on the face of the earth. (133, lines 1946-1957)

[Þ]æt hīo lēod-bealewa læsgefremede,/ inwit-nīða, syððan árest wearð/ gyfen gold-
 hroden geongum ceman,/ æðelum dīore, syððan hīo Offan flet/ ofer fealone flōd be
 fæder lāre/ sīðe gesōhte. Ðær hīo syððan well/ in gum-stōle, gōde máre,/ līf-
 gesceafta lifigende brēac,/ hīold hēah-lufan wið hæleþa brego,/ ealles mon-cynnes
 mīne gefræge/ þone sēlestan bī sām twēonum,/ eormen-cynnes. (133, lines 1946-
 1957)

This is a common theme in medieval literature.²⁷ The female warrior who marries generally

disappears from narrative following her nuptials.²⁸ No longer an anomaly in the story, she fades

²⁷ Erik Wahlgren's 1938 dissertation, The Maiden King in Iceland, identifies a genre that embodies male-female violence during the bridal quest that results in the total subjugation of the woman. "Renowned for her beauty, her wisdom, and her many accomplishments, [the Maiden King] is wooed by princes from far and wide; but being arrogant of disposition, and furthermore, as she herself observes, being a king, she either rejects her suitors without parley, assigns them impossible tasks, or subjects them to various humiliations, imprisonment, torture, and even death. This continues until the proud lady is courted by the hero of the story, a young prince with energy and talent. He is treated like the rest, but possessing more perseverance, or being more virtuous and fortunate than they, he tries again and is rewarded. Outwitting the Maiden King, usually with the aid of a helper, he either humiliates her and then marries her, or he marries her at once and repays her at leisure" (1-2). This genre will be further discussed in Chapter Two.

²⁸ In The Nibelungenlied, Brynhild disappears shortly after she is sexually subdued. This theme will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

into the background, becoming yet another symbol of the hero's ability to conquer and subdue all foes.²⁹

Unfortunately for the hero, the transformation from sword-wielding woman to housewife is rarely smooth:

[I]t is the usual though not invariable fate of the warlike Amazon to be defeated and mated, in some fashion, to the hero - although the latter's victory may have to be accomplished by manipulative trickery, and it may not bode well for the future. The ex-Amazon may be transmuted, as wife and mother, into a paragon, like the "proud maiden" Oryu in *Beowulf* and certain examples described by Saxo, but the normative patterns are less happy. (*The Epic Hero* 112)³⁰

The Germanic Amazon is an uncomfortable literary figure caught between the definitions of a warrior and a courtly lady. *Völsunga saga* explains that the very origins of Brynhild's name suggest her propensity towards war: "Brynhildr fór með hjálm ok brynju ok gekk at vígum. Var hon því kolluð Brynhildr" (41). ("Brynhild took up helmet and mail coat and went to battle. Thus she was called Brynhild" [73].) Clearly such a contradictory woman does not fit into social norms. And as the Germanic Amazon archetype, Brynhild is more out of place than later Germanic Amazons because she fights for reasons of her own³¹ rather than to maintain familial honour. Even after being tamed by marriage, she never quite fits the mould of a courtly woman:

Brünhild suffers for being a kind of transitional figure. Chronologically and culturally she stands between the non- or pre-Christian Germanic tribal past and the Roman-Christian feudal present. In typological or exemplary terms she stands between the Christian virgin-warrior woman of the Latin texts (deprived of the legitimizing protection of Christ and the church as a *raison d'etre*) and the civilized and sophisticated lady of the modern vernacular court literature. ("Virginité (De)Valued: Kriemhild, Brünhild and All That" 122)

²⁹ Paffenberg (1994-1995). "By virtue of sex and gender a man should prove himself a successful warrior and an honorable, noble hero. He should not simply protect the woman, but rather take control of her private property and her private parts" (106).

³⁰ For examples of "defeated and mated" Amazons, see pages 111-114.

³¹ In *Völsunga saga*, Brynhild explains her propensity for battle twice to Sigurd. The first time is when he proposes to her at the home of Bekkhild and Heimer. She says to him, "I am a shield-maiden. I wear a helmet and ride with the warrior kings. I must support them, and I am not averse to fighting" (75). The second time is when Sigurd assumes Gunnar's shape and crosses the wall of flames to Brynhild's keep: "I was in battle with the king of Gardariki and our weapons were stained with the blood of men, and this I still desire." (81)

Charles Nelson says that this discomfort represents a social attitude transferred to the literature. The Brynhild stories create "ethical dimension models for behavior, behavior to be emulated and behavior to be shunned. Underlying and suffusing the "fictional" stories it tells are the naturalised attitudes (*credulitates*) - in this case those concerning women and virginity - which animate the society" ("Virginity (De)Valued: Kriemhild, Brünhild and All That" 116). These attitudes disapprove of female warrior culture,³² reducing tales of the Germanic Amazon to folklore, fairytales, and myth.³³

Returning once more to the northern story, we see that once married, Brynhild assumes the role of a courtly lady, a role that she previously practiced successfully at the home of her foster-father Heimer, where she and Sigurd met for the second time. According to the terms of the curse, Brynhild no longer engages in battle. As a result of her marriage, her association with men is limited and she is firmly planted in the midst of women, which limits her political and economic power. However, this transformation into courtly lady is not permanent. Brynhild's brief appearance as a woman of courtesy is indicative of her inability to remain submissive in traditional female roles. The courtly lady reverts to the Germanic Amazon and resituates herself in a position of power when she discovers she has been deceived during a verbal altercation with Gudrun at the river. Brynhild wades out farther into the water, which upsets Gudrun and starts a dispute about which woman, through her husband, has higher rank. This *senna* (quarrel) is a comparison of men, or *mannjafnaðr*, that reflects directly on the honor of each woman involved. When Brynhild claims her husband to be the more powerful man, Gudrun becomes angry and insults Brynhild, revealing that Sigurd killed Fafnir and crossed the wall of flames into Brynhild's keep, posing as Gunnar. She also knows that Sigurd took a ring from Brynhild during the time he stayed with her and

³² See Carol J. Clover "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons" Journal of English and German Philology (1986) 35-49.

³³ See Inger M. Boberg Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature (Munksgaard: Bibliotheca Arnamagnaeana, 1966.)

produces it as her evidence that she is speaking the truth. When Brynhild sees the ring that she had previously worn on her hand, a temporary gift from Sigurd, she knows Gudrun is being truthful and withdraws into silence.

Gudrun knows she has politically mis-stepped, betraying both her husband and her brother. She tries to right her relationship with Brynhild by broaching the subject a second time, but her peacemaking efforts backfire. Referring to her relationship with Sigurd, Brynhild confronts Gudrun with her foreknowledge that Gudrun would marry Brynhild's intended, reminding her that they had exchanged oaths, which Gudrun betrayed by marrying Sigurd. Herein lies the problem: Brynhild, who holds her oaths sacred, has foresworn herself by unknowingly dishonoring the terms she established for finding a suitable mate -- she had sworn to marry a man who never knew fear, but because she was deceived into believing Gunnar and not Sigurd had crossed the flames, she married a coward, breaking her oath to herself and the trickster god Odin. Now it is her duty to restore her honor and that requires taking vengeance on those who have deceived her.

Brynhild now wields the most powerful weapon a married woman has; she verbally attacks her husband until he is shamed into action. The precedent for female goading is recorded by Tacitus in his observations of German women when their men go to war. Claiming to have observed this activity, Tacitus notes that men are pushed into combat by a combination of female actions and words:

[W]hat most stimulates their courage is, that their squadrons or battalions, instead of being formed by chance or by a fortuitous gathering, are composed of families and clans. Close by them too, are those dearest to them, so that they hear the shrieks of women, the cries of infants. They are to every man the most sacred witnesses of his bravery -- they are his most generous applauders. The soldier brings his wounds to mother and wife, who shrink not from counting or even demanding them and who administer both food and encouragement to the combatants. (The Complete Works of Tacitus 712)

This goading is positive.³⁴ It encourages men to fight for home and family. Tacitus continues to say that "armies already wavering and giving way have been rallied by women who, with earnest entreaties and bosoms laid bare, have vividly represented the horrors of captivity, which the Germans fear with such extreme dread on behalf of their women" (713). Brynhild's life is not endangered by an external threat, yet with the loss of her physical strength the Germanic Amazon has no alternative but to use verbal persuasion to avenge her honor. Carol Clover argues that "...it is as incumbent on a woman to urge vengeance as it is incumbent on a man to take it; and despite what appears to be the "official" disapproval of a whetting woman in the literary sources, they are still repeatedly described in admiring terms ("Hildigunnr's Lament" 145). Andersson and Miller claim that since it was not appropriate for a married woman to become an avenger, "[w]e should not then be surprised to see women adept in the rhetorical and psychological skills needed to motivate men to represent women's interests adequately (Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: *Ljósvetninga saga* and *Valla-Ljóts saga* 20). No longer able to take what she wants at the tip of a sword, the Germanic Amazon bends male strength to her will through tears, seduction, insult, and shame.

Gunnar is presented with four reasons that motivate and justify Sigurd's murder. In inciting violence, Brynhild follows the formula for whetting: "a woman – injured by an injustice for which revenge is beyond her capability – addressed a male relative(s), explained the crime's effect on him, reproached him for not acting sooner, specified the requirements, and threatened dire consequences for noncompliance" (Old Norse Images of Women 165). First Brynhild tells Gunnar that "Sigurðr hefir mik vélt ok eigi síðr þiik, þá er þú lézt hann fara í mina sæng. Nú vile k eigi tvá menn eiga senn í einni holl, ok þetta skal vera bani Sigurðr eða þinn eða minn, því at hann hefir þat

³⁴ Chapter Three will discuss perceptions of positive and negative goading. For a discussion of appropriate and inappropriate goading, see Jane Tolmie Persuasion: Blood-feud, Romance and the Disenfranchised. (Diss. Harvard, 2001. Cambridge, Massachusetts: UMI, 2001. 3011502.)

allt sagt Guðrúnu, en hon brigzlar mér” (57). (“Sigurd has betrayed me, and he betrayed you no less, when you let him come into my bed. Now I do not want to have two husbands at the same time in one hall. This shall be Sigurd's death or yours or mine, because he has told Gudrun everything and she reviles me” [88].) This is the beginning of the *hvöt* or whetting,³⁵ which requires immediate action, as Brynhild's loss of honor reflects directly on her husband's honor. Secondly, she threatens him: “skal ek fara heim til frænda minna ok sitja þar hrygg, nema þú drepir Sigurð ok son hans” (57). (She threatens to “journey home to my kin and remain there in sorrow unless you kill Sigurd and his son” [89].) Confronted with the possibility of losing his wife and living with her accusatory silence, Gunnar is torn between obeying his wife's wishes and his unwillingness to kill Sigurd, his bloodbrother and brother-in-law. But he realizes that his honor and Brynhild's honor are inextricably intertwined: “þótti þat þó mest svívirðing ef konan gengi frá honum” (57). (Gunnar thought that “the worst dishonor would be if his wife left him” [89].) The third and fourth reasons for killing Sigurd are paired. Gunnar discusses the problem with his brother Hogni and explains that he wants to kill Sigurd because of the betrayal.³⁶ His excuse for doing so is one based on power: “Ráðum vit þá gullinu ok ollu ríkinu” (57). (The brothers will then “control the gold and have all the power” [89].) Hogni agrees that “[e]ru engir konungar oss jafnir ef sjá inn hýnski konungr lifir” (57). (“No kings are our equal as long as this king of Hunland lives” [89].) The brothers then find a legal reason for killing Sigurd: “Gunnarr segir at þetta er gild banasok at hafa tekit meydóm Brynhildar” (58). (“Gunnar said it is a valid felony punishable by death for having taken Brynhild's maidenhead” [89].) They also urge their younger brother Guttorm to perform the deed, as he is not bound by the oath of blood-brotherhood. Through these

³⁵ From the verb *hvetja*, ‘to whet’.

³⁶ This statement is incredibly ironic, as Gunnar knowingly stands by while Sigurd goes in to court Brynhild, wearing the “Gunnar suit”, and keeps the secret from her after she marries him.

means, the brothers are neither committing murder -- there is a legal reason for Sigurd's death -- nor are they breaking any vows.

When Brynhild does speak again, she unleashes a venomous tongue on those who deserve it most -- her betrayers. When Gunnar goes to see what ails Brynhild and keeps her bedridden, she tells him that there were two reasons that she married. The first is that Gunnar and his brothers had threatened to burn and destroy her father's lands if she refused to marry Gunnar. Being a warrior, Brynhild wanted to fight: “en ek buðumk til at verja landit ok vera hofðizi yfir þriðjungi liðs” (53). (She had "offered to defend the land and to be a commander of a third of the army" [85].) But her father told her she would either marry or “vera án alls fjár ok hans vinátt” (53). (She would have to "give up all wealth and his pledge of friendship" [85].) The second reason she had married was to honor her vow. Without mincing words she explains to him exactly what the problem now is:

"I betrothed myself to the one who would ride the horse Grani with Fafnir's inheritance, to that one who would ride through my wavering flames and would kill those men who I decided should die. Now, no one dared to ride except Sigurd alone. He rode through the fire because he was not short of courage for the deed. He killed the dragon and Regin and five kings – unlike you, Gunnar, who blanched like a corpse. You are neither king nor champion. And I made this solemn vow at my father's home that I would love that man alone who is the noblest man born, and that is Sigurd. Now I am a breaker of oaths, as I do not have him." (85)

“[E]k hétumsk þeim er riði hestinum Grana með Fáfnis arfi ok riði minn vafroga ok dræpi þá menn ere ek kvað á. Nú treystisk engi at ríða nema Sigurðr einn. Hann reið eldinn, því at hann skorti eigi hug til. Hann drap orminn ok Regin ok fimm konunga, en eigi þú, Gunnar, er þú folnaðir sem nár, ok ertu engi konungr né kappi. Ok þess strengða ek heit heima at feðr míns, at ek munda þeim einum unna, er ágæztr væri alinn, en þat er Sigurðr. Nú erum vér eiðrofa, er vér eigum hann eigi.” (53)

Sigurd, who is sent by his wife to smooth things over, also receives a tongue-lashing from Brynhild, who wishes him dead: “Þat er mér serest minna harma at ek fæ eigi því til feiðar komit at bitrt sverð væri roðit í þínu blóði” (55). ("It is the most grievous of all my sorrows that I cannot

bring it about that a sharp blade be reddened with your blood" [87].) Prophesying their future, Sigurd responds by saying, ““Kvið eigi því. Skammt mun at bíða áðr bitrt sverð mun standa í mínu hjarta, ok ekki muntu þér verra biðja, því at þú munt eigi eptir mik lifa. Munu ok fáir várir lífsdagar heðan í frá”” (55). ("Hold your judgment. It is a short wait until a biting sword will stick in my heart, and you could not ask for worse for yourself, because you will not live after me. From here on few days of life are left to us" [87].)

Quite belatedly, Sigurd declares himself and proposes for the third time, explaining to Brynhild that he too was deceived:

"Always when my mind was my own, it pained me that you were not my wife. But I bore it as well as I could since I lived in the king's hall"...Brynhild answered: "You have delayed too long in telling me that my sorrow grieves you, and now I shall find no comfort." "I should like us both to enter one bed," said Sigurd, "and you to be my wife." (87)

“[Á]vallt er ek gáða míns geðs, þá harmaði mik þat er þú vart eigi mín kona...”
Brynhildr svarar, ‘Of seinat hefir þú at segja at þik angrar minn harmr, en nú fám vér enga líkn.’
Sigurðr svarar, ‘Gjarna vilda ek at vit stigim á einn beð bæði ok værir þú mín kona.’ (56)

For Brynhild, the honor and upholding of her oath is more important than life. She refuses to act dishonorably: Brynhild answered: ““Ekki er slíkt at mæla, ok eigi mun ek eiga tvá konunga einni holl, ok fyrr skal ek líf láta en ek svíkja Gunnar konung – ok mnisk nú á þat er þau fundusk á fjallinu ok sórusk eiða, -- ‘Enú er því ollu brugðit, ok vile k eigi lifa”” (56). ("Such things are not to be said. I will not have two kings in one hall. And sooner would I die before I would deceive King Gunnar." Then she remembered their meeting on the mountain and the promises that had passed between them, but exclaimed,"now everything has changed and I do not want to live" [87-88].) Brynhild explains her unwieldy position, where we see for the second time that she has the ability to bend powerful men to her will through words:

Then Brynhild spoke: "I swore an oath to marry that man who would ride through my wavering flames, and that oath I would hold to or else die." "Rather than have you die, I will forsake Gudrun and marry you," said Sigurd. And his sides swelled so that the links of his mail burst.³⁷ "I do not want you," said Brynhild, "or anyone else." Sigurd went away. (88)

Þá mælti Brynhildr, 'Ek vann eið at eiga þann mann er riði minn vafrlöga, en þann eið vilda ek halda eða deyja ella.'

'Heldr en þú deyrir, vik ek þik eiga, en fyrirláta Guðrúnu,' segir Sigurðr, en svá þrútnuðu hans síður at í sundr gengu brynjuhringar.

'Eigi vik ek þik,' sagði Brynhildr, 'ok engan annarra.'

Sigurðr gekk í brott. (56)

Though she does not physically touch him, Brynhild has wounded Sigurd more deeply than any weapon ever could and he too resigns himself to death, knowing that it is appropriate and will only be a matter of time before she brings it about.

The ill-fated lovers soon die, a price that is exacted for honor. Sigurd is killed by Gottorm, who dies while committing the killing. Brynhild dies at her own hand: "Nú bað hon taka mikit gull, ok bað þar koma alla þá er fé vildu þiggja. Síðan tók hon eitt sverð ok lagði undir hond sér ok hneig upp við dýnur ok mælti, 'Taki hér nú gull hvern er þiggja vill' (60). ("Brynhild asked for a large amount of gold to be brought and requested that all who wanted to accept a gift of wealth come forward. Then she took a sword and stabbed herself under the arm, sank back into the pillows, and said: 'Let each one who wants to receive gold take it now'" [92].) Before she expires, Brynhild requests that she and Sigurd be burned together: "Ok er bálit var allt loganda, gekk Brynhildr þar á út ok mælti við skemmumeyjar sínar at þær tæki gull þat erhon vildi gefa þeim. Ok eptir þetta deyr Brynhildr ok brann þar með Sigurði, ok lauk svá þeira ævi" (61). ("When the pyre was ablaze, Brynhild went out upon it and told her chambermaids to take the gold that she wanted

³⁷ This swelling is a sign of grief, as recorded in Egils Saga (London: Penguin Books, 1976). "People say that when Bodvar was laid under the mound, Egil was dressed in this way. He wore his hose tight upon the leg, and a red fustian tunic tight in the upper part and laced together at the side. People say that he grew so swollen that both tunic and hose burst apart upon his body" (203).

them to have. Then Brynhild died and her body burned there with Sigurd. Thus their lives ended" [93].)³⁸

The southern version of the story is woven with similar threads. Once married, Brynhild and Gunther live together quite peacefully. One of Brynhild's main concerns, however, is about why Gunther would marry his sister to a liegeman, which is beneath her social rank, and why that liegeman exhibits an apparent lack of fealty to his lord. Partly to satisfy her curiosity on the matter, Brynhild asks that Siegfried and Kriemhild be invited to a festival and visit Burgundy for an extended period of time.

Again Brynhild learns how she has been deceived as the result of a *mannjafnaðr* between the queens. Watching the knights compete at games one evening, the two women each take to praising their husbands:

‘I have a husband of such merit that he might rule over all of the kingdoms of this region,’ said fair Kriemhild.

‘However splendid and handsome and valiant your husband may be,’ replied Brynhild, ‘you must nevertheless give your noble brother the advantage. Let me tell you truly: Gunther must take precedence over all kings.’

‘My husband is a man of such worth,’ answered lady Kriemhild, ‘that I have not praised him vainly. His honour stands high on very many counts. Believe me, Brunhild, he is fully Gunther’s equal.’ (111)

[D]ô sprach diu frouwe Kriemhilt: ‘ich hân einen man,
daz elliû disiu rîche zuo sînen henden solden stân.’

Des antwurt ir Prûnhilt: ‘daz möhte vil wol sîn,
ob niemen mere enlebte wan sîn unde dîn,
sô möhten im diu rîche wol wesen undertân:
die wile aber lebt Gunther, sô kundez nimmer ergân.

Dô sprach aber Kriemhilt: ‘nu sihstu wier stat,
wie rehte herrenlîche er vor den recken gât,

³⁸ In a footnote to his “Narrative Composition in the *Saga of the Volsungs*”, Acquirre offers an explanation for Brynhild’s suicide: “I suggest that her death by fire is one attempt at rationalizing an enigmatic textual symmetry: she belongs behind the fire-threshold, emerges from it for love of a hero, and withdraws into it after causing his death” (19, footnote 3).

alsam der liehte mane vor den sternen tuot:
des muoz ich wol von schulden tragen vrœlfichen muot.’ (129-130)

This comparison dissolves into a *senna* that again reflects directly on the honor of each woman involved. Because Kriemhild is married to one of her vassals, Brynhild is sure that she holds a higher social station than Kriemhild, and informs her that she has knowledge of this firsthand:

‘Now do not misunderstand me, Kriemhild, for I did not speak without cause. When I saw them for the first time, and the King subdued me to his will and won my love so gallantly, I heard them both declare – and Siegfried himself said so – that he was Gunther’s vassal, and so I consider him to be my liegeman, having heard him say so.’ (111-112)

Dô sprach diu hûsfrouwe: ‘swie wætlîch sî dîn man,
swie schœne und swie biderbe, sô muostu vor im lân
Gunthern den recken, den edeln pruoder dîn:
der muoz vor allen kûnigen mit lobe wærlîche sîn.’ (130)

Kriemhild, who knows that Siegfried is stronger, wealthier, more powerful than Gunther, as well as a king in his own right, takes this as a grave slight to her personal honor and declares that she will prove herself of a higher station than Brynhild:

“‘You must see visible proof this day that I am a free noblewoman, and that my husband is a better man than yours. Nor do I intend to be demeaned by what you say. You shall see this evening how your liegewoman will walk in state in Burgundy in sight of the warriors. I claim to be of higher station than was ever heard of concerning any Queen that wore a crown!’” (112-113)

‘Ich laze dich wol schouwen, daz ich bin adelvrî:
mîn man ist verre tiuwerr danne der dîne sî;
dâ mite wil ich selbe niht bescholten sîn.
Du muost daz hînte kiesen, wie diu eigene diu dîn

Ze hove gê vor recken in Buregonde lant.
ich wil selbe wesen edeler danne iemen habe bekant
deheine kûniginne, diu krône ie her getruoc.’ (131)

When the queens meet again, Kriemhild further insults Brynhild by calling her Siegfried’s paramour and entering the chapel before the sovereign queen. When Brynhild has an opportunity to question Kriemhild about the slight, Kriemhild announces in front of their retinues that

“den dînen schoenen lîp/ minnet êrste Sîvrit, mîn vil lieber man:/ jâ enwas ez niht mîn brooder, der dir den magetuom an gewan./ War kômen dine sinne? Ez was ein arger list” (133). (“Siegfried was the first to enjoy your lovely body, since it was not my brother who took your maidenhead. Where were your poor wits? – It was a vile trick’ [114].) Kriemhild then produces the evidence of her claim -- a ring and a girdle that Siegfried had taken from Brynhild the night he assisted Gunther in subjugating his bride.

It is not long before Gunther, Siegfried, and their warriors happen upon the scene, with Kriemhild spitting insults like a cat and Brynhild crying in shame. When Gunther demands to know what has transpired, Brynhild replies: ““Von allen mînen êren mich diu swester dîn/ gerne wolde schieden. dir sol geklaget sîn,/ si giht, mich habe gekebsset Sîvrit ir man”” (134). (“Your sister means to rob me of my honour. I accuse her before you of having said for all to hear that her husband made me his paramour!”[115].) Brynhild further demands that Siegfried be called forward to account for the boast.

Brynhild’s demand and formal accusation against Kriemhild turn the gathering into a judicial proceeding requiring legal action – a serious problem for Gunther and Siegfried, who neither want to lie or forswear themselves. Unknown to Brynhild, who only wants to have her reputation redeemed in front of her retainers, her demand places each man in a precarious position. Sure of her innocence, she incites her husband to action in front of his kingdom:

The show-and-tell of female incitement relies on assailable manhood to function properly. It hinges on the notion that manhood is publicly contested, and that reputation needs to be shored up with both word and deed. Reputation is vulnerable to the spoken word, and certain combination of words and gestures can puncture a reputation like a collapsed lung, spurring the injured party to perform drastic acts of self-preservation. (Persuasion: Blood-feud, Romance and the Disenfranchised 18)

Siegfried offers to take an oath that he never told his wife that Brynhild was his paramour, but Gunther intervenes saying, “mir ist sô wol erkant/ iuwer grôz unschulde: ich will iuch ledic lân,/

des iuch mîn swester zîhet, daz ir des nine habt getân” (136). (“Your great innocence is so well known to me that I acquit you of my sister’s allegation and accept that you are not guilty of the deed” [116].)

Although Gunther claims to be satisfied with Siegfried’s innocence, others of the court are not so easily appeased. Brynhild’s *hvöt* in the *Nibelungenlied* is not as directly apparent as in *Völsunga saga* or the *Edda*. Compared to the lengthy description of the goading that takes place in the northern story, the southern version is brief and bereft of detail:

Brunhild was so dejected that Gunther’s vassals could not but pity her. Then Hagen of Troneck came to his liege lady, and, finding her in tears, asked her what was vexing her. She told him what had happened, and he at once vowed that Kriemhild’s man should pay for it, else Hagen, because of that insult, would never be happy again. (116)

Mit rede was gescheiden manic schœne wîp.
dô turret alsô sere der Prünhilde lîp,
daz ez erbarmen muose die Guntheres man.
dô kom van Tronege Hagene zuo sîner frouwen gegân.

Er vrâgte, waz ir wære: weinende er si vant.
dô sagtes im diu mære. er lobt ir sâ zehant,
daz ez erarnen muse der Kriemhilde man,
oder ern wolde nimmer dar umbe vrœlîch gestân. (136)

What the reader does know is that once Hagen kills Siegfried, Brynhild fades into the backdrop, and the story continues until Kriemhild has exacted her revenge.

The tragedy sets the stage for female warriors to come. The reader sees in Brynhild's life the early development of the Germanic Amazon: the powerful maiden warrior, the loss of physical strength, the re-situation of power through verbal persuasion. The following chapters will explore these themes further, examining in detail the change from women who engage in physical confrontation to women whose primary means of conducting feud is through verbal persuasion.

3. Chapter Two: The Sword-Wielding Maiden Kings

Konungr mælti: “Frétt hefi ek, at hún er bæði vitr ok væn, ok svá er mér flutt, at svá sé hún stór ok stolt, at hún vili, at engi maðr kvenkenni hana...Heyrt hefi ek þat ok sagt, at hennar hafi beðit nokkurir konungar ok hafi suma látit drepa, suma hafi hún látit klækja á einhvern hátt, suma blinda, gelda, handhöggva eða fóthöggva, en valit öll orð hæðilig með svívirðu, ok vili hún svá af venja, at þessara mála sé leitat.”

"[S]he's good-looking and intelligent," said the King, "and I've also been told she's so proud and arrogant she won't let anyone address her as a woman... They tell me several kings have proposed to her already; some of them she's had killed, and others maimed one way or another, some blinded, some castrated, some have had their arms or legs cut off, and she's ridiculed and insulted everybody."

-- Hrólf's saga Gautreksson

The Germanic Amazon archetype established in Chapter One directly contributes to the characterization of the Maiden Kings who seize land and power, casting aside needlework and domestic chores in favor of warfare. In the *Fornaldursögur*, the Icelandic prose narratives that are based on early heroic traditions but recorded after the classical saga period,³⁹ the Maiden Kings are introduced as haughty women who rule over a kingdom and subject potential suitors to various agonies before being themselves humiliated and married. There are two notable exceptions to this genre, who illustrate the first evolution in the development of the Germanic Amazon over time: Thornbjorg of *Hrólf's saga Gautreksson* and Hervor of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks Konungs*. Each of these women masculinize their names, dress like men, establish a *comitatus* (a band of warriors), and declare themselves king. They also marry and eventually assume the role of a wise woman in counseling her husband, particularly when he considers going to war. It is the shift from warrior to counselor that makes the *meykonungr* (Maiden King) the literary bridge between valkyries and shield maidens, supernatural and mortal women who engage in combat, and the notorious female whetters of the family sagas who access power through verbal persuasion.

³⁹ See Phillip Pulsiano. Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia (New York: Garland, 1993). 206

The Maiden King is usually an only child, and as such, prepares herself to inherit and rule her father's kingdom by training in the arts of war. She knows that if she cannot maintain control of her kingdom through her own military prowess and the loyalty of valiant warriors, it will be taken from her by a stronger male opponent seeking her hand in marriage and the leadership of a powerful kingdom.⁴⁰

From the time of her birth, the *meykonungr* is noteworthy. Although she trains in weaponry and battle tactics as a young woman,⁴¹ her beauty and skill in the feminine arts are what gain her her first renown. The Maiden King is always depicted in the superlative. In fact, the best way of describing the *meykonungr* may be to call her the most -- the most beautiful, the most wise, the most skilled in domestic arts, the most worthy of marriage, and the most difficult to woo.⁴² In Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland Marianne Kalinke notes that "[d]espite the fact that maiden kings are without exception depicted as most eligible marriage partners, as the quintessence of feminine virtue and beauty, they do not enjoy an unsullied reputation, and with good reason. They are notorious for their cruelty, for their physical and mental abuse of all suitors" (74).

Thornbjorg, the Hrólf saga Gautreksson *meykonungr* who wreaks havoc in the lives of her father and suitors, is famous throughout her country for her beauty and feminine skill:

There was a king ruling over Sweden called Eirik; he was married to a clever and charming queen, and they had an only daughter called Thornbjörg. She was unusually good-looking and intelligent, and people thought there wasn't a girl to

⁴⁰ Maiden Kings do not rule after they are married. See Erik Wahlgren. The Maiden King in Iceland (Ph.D. Diss. Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries) and Jenny Jochens. Old Norse Images of Women (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

⁴¹ Jochens (1996) 87-112. Jochens argues that the Maiden Kings are pre-pubescent and unaware of their own sexuality, which contributes to their interest in battle rather than traditional female pursuits, but the age of both Maiden Kings discussed in this chapter is never specifically mentioned within the text.

⁴² See Wahlgren (1938) 25-26 and Inger Boberg Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature. Bibliotheca Arnarnagaeana, 27. (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1966.).

compare with her. She was brought up at home by her father and mother, and it's said she was better at all the feminine arts than any other woman. (34)⁴³

Sá konungr réð fyrir Svíþjóð, er Eirekr hét; hann átti sér eina drotningu vitra ok vel siðuga; þau höfðu átt eina dóttur barna, sú er Þornbjörg hét; hún var hverri konu vænni ok vitrari, þeirra men vissu. Hún fæddist upp heima með feðr sínum ok móður. Svá hafa menn sagt af mey þessari, at hún var hverri konu kænni, þeirra er menn höfðu spurn af, um alt þat er til kvenmanns handa kom. (49)⁴⁴

As pleasing as her feminine accomplishments might be to a medieval father who wishes to marry her off well, King Eirik is not so pleased with his daughter's exceptional skills on the battlefield, Thornbjorg having trained herself from youth to wield weapons and ride with the skill of a knight: "Þar við vandi hún sik burtreið ok skilmast með skjöld ok sverð; hún kunni þessa list jafnframt þeim riddarum, er kunnu vel ok kurteislega at bera vopn sín" (49). ("She used to tilt on horseback too, and learnt to fence with sword and shield, mastering these arts as perfectly as any knight trained in the courtly skill of plying his weapons" [34-35].) Her fighting skills irritate her father, who urges her to "hafa skemmusetu sem aðrar konungadætr" (49) ("stay in her boudoir like other princesses" [35]).

Powerful men consider Thornbjorg a great prize, a means of furthering their own prestige and honour⁴⁵. As the most beautiful woman in the country and the sole heir to the Swedish throne, she is hard sought after and explains to her father that she must defend her person and her kingdom with vigour:

"'Since you've been given only one life to govern this kingdom and I'm your only child and heir,' she said, 'it seems very likely that I'll have to defend it against a few kings or princes, once you're gone. It's also hardly likely I'll be very keen to marry

⁴³ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, tr. *Hrólfr Gautreksson: A Viking Romance* (Edinburgh: Southside, 1972). All English quotations from *Hrólfr Gautreksson* are from this edition. Hereafter, page numbers appear in brackets within the text.

⁴⁴ Valdimar Ásmundarson. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (Reykjavík, 1885-89). All Icelandic quotations from *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* are from this edition. Hereafter, page numbers appear in brackets within the text.

⁴⁵ In conversation with Hrolf, King Eirik makes the connection between Thornbjorg's inheritance and the powerful men who pursue her: "You must have heard our daughter isn't staying with us anymore and that we've given her a third of our kingdom...Plenty of kings and princes have proposed to her, but she's turned them all down with words of ridicule, and she's even had some of them maimed (51)."

any-one against my will, if it ever comes to that, and that's why I want to get to know something of the skills of knighthood.” (35)

“Nú með því,” segir hún, “at þú hefir eigi meir enn eins manns líf til ríkisstjórnaar, ok ek er nú þitt einberni, ok á ek allan arf eftir þik, má vera at ek þurfi þetta ríki at verja fyrir konungum eða konungssonnum, ef ek missi þín við; er eigi ólíklegt at mér þyki ilt at vera þeirra nauðkván, ef svá berr til, ok því vil ek kunna nokkurn hátt á riddaraaskap.” (49)

Thornbjorg proposes a plan that will make her king over a third of Sweden and declares that she will decide if, when, and whom she marries: “ef nokkurir menn biðja mín, sem ek vil ekki játa, þá er líkara at ríki yðvart sé í náðum af þeirra ofsa, ef ek held andsvör í móti þeim” (49-50). (“[I]f any-one asks to marry me and I don't want him, there'll be a better chance of your kingdom being left in peace if you leave the answers to me” [35].)

Perhaps King Eirik understands her need to establish a stronghold, or perhaps he realizes the futility of arguing with his daughter while she emotionally blackmails him. Whatever the motivation,⁴⁶ he helps Thornbjorg establish a keep and a comitatus that allow her to gain experience in governing part of the kingdom.

To legitimize her claim to sovereignty, Thornbjorg calls a *þing* (assembly) and has herself elected King over the land her father has entrusted to her care. Once she has been crowned, she masculinizes her name⁴⁷ and assumes the title *konungr* (king):⁴⁸

When she got all this out of her father, she moved over to Ullarakur. Next she held a big assembly and had herself elected as king over one third of Sweden, just as King Eirik had agreed. At the same time she changed her name to 'Thorberg', and anyone so bold as to call her a maiden or woman was in serious trouble. (35-36)

⁴⁶ Jochens (1996). “Fear or admiration of female warriors are prominent in the older poems, but in the later prose stories these notions are transmuted into general disapproval articulated directly by the author or by another person in the narrative” (104).

⁴⁷ For the duration of Thorberg's rule, from this point in the text until she accepts Hrolf's “proposal,” the character is referred to as a male.

⁴⁸ Assuming the title *konungr* is relevant to definitions of power, not gender. See Kalinke (1990) 68.

Sem hún hafði þetta altsaman þegit af feðr sínum, ferr hún á Ullarakr. Síðan stefnir hún þing fjölment, ok lætr taka sik til konungs yfir þriðjung Svíaveldis, sem Eiríkr konungr hafði játat henni til forráða; þar með lætr hún gefa sér nafn Þórbergs; skyldi ok engi maðr svá djarfr, at hana kallaði mey eða konu, enn hverr, er þat gerði, skyldi þola harða refsing. (50)

King Thorberg rules in the manner of her father, taking responsibility for her subjects and establishing financial contracts with her warriors: “Síðan gerir Þórbergr konungr bæði riddara ok hirðmenn og gefr þeim mála á einn hátt ok Eiríkr konungr á Uppsölum faðir hans. Stendr nú Svíaveldi með þessi skipan nokkura vetr” (50). (“Then 'King Thorberg' started dubbing knights and appointing courtiers, and gave them pay the same as King Eirik of Uppsala, and that's how things stood in Sweden for some years” [36].) As soon as she is crowned, she refuses to be acknowledged as a woman and institutes life-threatening consequences for anyone who makes the mistake of addressing her as a female. Erik Wahlgren, whose 1938 dissertation is the foundation of *meykonungjar* studies, describes the Maiden King as temperamental and arrogant:

Renowned for her beauty, her wisdom, and her many accomplishments, she is wooed by princes from far and wide; but being arrogant of disposition, and furthermore, as she herself observes, being a king, she either rejects her suitors without parley, assigns them impossible tasks, or subjects them variously to humiliations, imprisonment, torture, and even death. (The Maiden King in Iceland 1)

As beautiful as she may be, Thorberg is deadly, with the skills and the temper to persecute men who foist their unwanted, unsolicited attention upon her, with no respect for her crown or power.

As would seem apparent in the psychological and physical torture that Thorberg inflicts on her would-be suitors, critics claim that the *meykonungjar* are misogynous.⁴⁹ Although so labelled, Thorberg is the sole inheritor of a large and wealthy kingdom, being pursued by power-hungry men of lower social rank.⁵⁰ There are two points of defense for this behaviour. First, Thorberg proceeds in the capacity of a king defending home, retinue, and personal self. The misogamy label is

⁴⁹ See Jochens (1996) 102 and Kalinke (1990) 66.

⁵⁰ Hrolf is aware of this discrepancy, as is discussed later in the chapter.

gender-biased. Her actions answer the duties of kingship. If Thorberg were a man rather than a woman, the reader would expect that he would do everything possible to defeat an enemy, particularly an enemy who is fighting to gain power over the sole heir of a ruling family and the accompanying kingdom. After all, her suitors have a tendency to appear with the backing of a small army⁵¹ and behave little better than Viking berserks. Thorberg's actions admittedly do not fit those of typical female stereotypes. In Brides and Doom: Gender, Property, and Power in Medieval German Women's Epic, Jerold C. Frakes argues that the

"blind dualistic reduction of gender...possibilities to those of conventional male or conventional female render non-conformist characters necessarily gender-based anomalies, such that the cowardly male was deemed effeminate, while the independently active female emasculates in her pseudo-maleness. No provision seems to have been made for other possibilities" (139).

Yet, the basic premise upon which the *meykonungr* sagas are composed is that these women are exceptional and memorable,⁵² functioning beyond the parameters of socially gendered expectations. The foundation of the genre is the Germanic Amazon herself, the battle-hardened woman who rules through strength of arms.

Second, Thorberg's mental and physical abuse of suitors functions as a strength and suitability test. There is no Maiden King who remains unattached from the hero of the story, even if she does not marry him.⁵³ Thorberg expects to marry, as is made apparent from the terms she establishes with her father concerning suitors. That being said, the man Thorberg marries will one

⁵¹ In his first attempt to win Thorberg, Hrolf enters her castle with 12 men and the prince of Denmark (52) while his other retainers wait outside. Concerning this appearance, Thorberg's mother previously dreamt that 60 men were en route to Sweden. In the second attempt, Hrolf has 100 men dine with him at King Eirik's table (61), although Thorberg's mother has dreamt that there are enough soldiers coming to fill several ships (60).

⁵² For a discussion about exceptional Icelandic women and gender roles, see Carol Clover's "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe" Speculum 68 (1993).

⁵³ See Wahlgren (1938) 36-40.

day rule Sweden;⁵⁴ her decision regarding when and whom to marry has personal and national impact. She cannot marry a weak man, no matter what his title. Because the *meykonungr* is the most, the hero too must be the strongest, best-looking, smartest man available, as they match wits and strength in the battle that precedes their union.

The hero of the story, Hrolf Gautreksson, is the second son of King Gautrek of Gotland. While yet a boy, people recognise in Hrolf qualities of leadership, the qualities that make him a suitable match for the Maiden King:

Hrólfr was unusually tall and strong, and very handsome. He was a man of few words, always honored his promises, and wasn't over-ambitious. Whenever something was said or done against him, he used to pretend he hadn't noticed, but later, when it was least expected, he was ruthless in taking his revenge... Once he'd made up his mind, he had to have his way. (30)

Hrólfr var manna mestr ok sterkastr, fríðr sýnum; hann var fámáligr, fastorðr ok óframgjarn, ok þótt í móti honum væri gert eða mælt, lét hann fyrst sem hann vissi eigi, enn nokkuru síðar, þá er aðra varði sízt, hefndi hann grimmelega sinna mótgerða... varð þat þá fram at ganga, sem hann vildi vera láta. Hann var vinsæll af alþýðu; unnu menn honum ok mikit. (45-46)

According to the medieval custom of primogeniture, Hrolf should not inherit his father's kingdom.⁵⁵ However, King Gautrek recognises different strengths and weaknesses in his sons, and against custom, has Hrolf made his successor.

Hrolf's older brother Ketil, who appears to step aside without demur and allow Hrolf to assume his birthright, encourages the match with Thorberg, knowing that such an alliance would increase their family prestige and social standing. His description of the famous *meykonungr* is filled with praise:

⁵⁴ King Eirik promises Sweden to Hrolf if he can defeat Thorberg: “[A]s her dowry you can have the kingdom we’ve given into her charge. When we no longer govern this country you’ll take charge of the whole realm to rule after we’re dead – that’s to say, if you win her” (62).

⁵⁵ For a definition of primogeniture, in which the “eldest son inherited all of his father’s estate,” see Brian Tiernay, Western Europe in the Middle Ages: 300-1475 (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1992) 170.

“I’ve heard there’s no better match throughout the whole of Scandinavia, she’s an ornament of womanhood, and in some things she’s the equal of most valiant knights, at jousting and fencing with sword and shield. That’s something she’s got over all the other women I’ve ever heard of.” (39-40)

“[H]efi ek svá frétt, at eigi muni fást slíkr kostur hingat á Norðurlönd fyrir allra hluta sakir, þeirra er kvenmann má prýða, enn hún hefir suma hluti til jafns við hrausta riddara; þat er burtreið ok at skilmast við skildi ok sverði; þat hefir hún umfram allar konur, þær ek hefi spurn af.” (53)

But Hrolf realizes that his pursuit of this woman may not be complimentary to her position of power. When first approached about the prospects of seeking a bride he says, “er land þetta lítit, ok mun engum þykja slægr til vórs ríkis” (53) (“this is a small kingdom and nobody’s going to find it very attractive to join me on the throne” [39]). Ketil persists in his argument, urging Hrolf to pursue Thorberg for her beauty and wealth. But Hrolf responds to the eggings with a practicality beyond Ketil’s short-tempered understanding:

“It’s ridiculous when a man fools himself into aiming far beyond his powers. It seems likely to me that if I go and ask to marry the daughter of King Eirik of Sweden as you want me to, I’ll be turned down, and then probably have to take a few nasty insults into the bargain. I’ll have to stand for it all, too, as I have no way of taking my revenge on a man as powerful as him, and I’m not the man to put up with that.” (40)

“[E]r þat ilt, at ætla sér á dul, er vonlaust er, at hann fái risit með; lízt mér svá, þótt ek fari at biðja dóttur Eireks konungs í Svíþjóð, sem þú vildir, þá þykumst ek vita, at mér mundi synjat konunnar, ok eigi ólíklegt, at ek fengi nokkur orð hæðileg, ok yrði ek at þola þat alt, með því ek hefði engi föng á at hefna sakir ríkis konungsins, ok mundi ek við svá búit þessu una allilla.” (53)

Years later, when Hrolf decides he is ready to seek a wife, he returns to the idea of winning both Thorberg and Sweden. He travels to King Eirik’s court with a sizable army and gets permission to court Thorberg.⁵⁶ However, the first attempt to win her ends in humiliation and

⁵⁶ King Eirik gives Hrolf’s proposal a politically neutral response: “If you’re determined to win her at all costs, then, as far as we’re concerned, we’re willing to give our consent. In return we expect you and your men to show our people and our realm peace and friendship, even if you have to fight for what you want. We’re not giving her any support against you, and we’re going to stay completely out of this struggle between you (52).”

shame. Although he addresses her properly, calling her *herra* (lord) when he enters her court at Ullarokr, he insults her with his unchecked pride and arrogance:

“I’ve come to see you, sir, on the advice of your father, in order to favour you and advance myself by forming a union with you for pleasure and delight, so that each of us might please the other according to the dictates of nature, without any sin or sorrow.” (53)

“Ek er svá kominn, herra, á yðvarn fund eftir ráði ok samþykki Eiríks konungs, föður þíns, at leita yðr sóma enn mér framgangs til þess at binda við yðr unaðsamligt eftirlæti, þat sem hvórr okkar má öðrum veita eftir boði náttúrunnar, fyrir utan allt angr eðr ónáðir.” (64)

Hrolf makes it perfectly clear that he wants physical pleasure and self-advancement from a union with Thorberg. While she is a king and the sole heir to Sweden, she is also the most beautiful woman in the country. Referring to a natural physical relationship between husband and wife rather than an unnatural power relationship between king and king, Hrolf announces that he expects Thorberg to assume a subservient female role while he takes over the kingdom.⁵⁷

A *flyting* (an exchange of insults) immediately follows this proposal. The *flyting* is part of a shame system in which men, and occasionally women, insult each other. When Thorberg engages in *flyting*, she behaves as a king. After she dismisses him as a fool in front of her assembled warriors and humiliates him by suggesting that he is a beggar, Hrolf taunts Thorberg with her gender, an offense punishable by death:

"Since we know that you're the daughter, not the son, of the King of Sweden, we're going to state our business now in plain language. With your father's consent we're asking you to become our wife, to give strength and support to our realm, and to rear and increase our offspring, those that are born to us." (54)

“[E]nn með því at vér vitum, at þú ert heldr dóttir Svía konungs enn son, þá viljum vér nú ok með stöddu samþykki föður yðvars, ok biðja þín mér til kvánar, til styrktar ok stjórnar vóru ríki, til upphalds ok eflingar öllu vóru afkvæmi, því sem af okkr lifnar.” (65)

⁵⁷ The hero generally humiliates the Maiden King before they marry. See Walhgren (1938) 36-40.

This declaration serves to reinforce his expectation that she will step down from power, assuming the role of wife, mother, and queen rather than maintaining her position as king. He also tries to use her father's power and influence against her by telling her that King Eirik has consented to the match. But Thorberg's fury at his insults is so intense that he barely escapes with his life, as she grabs her weapons, handily hanging on the wall behind her, and runs him out of her hall.

Marianne Kalinke identifies the show-down between Thorberg and Hrolf as a power struggle. Thorberg does not have herself crowned *dróttning* (queen), a title "perceived primarily as a designation for a woman whose power is secondary and participatory, deriving from a husband who is king" (Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland 69). From the beginning, Thorberg creates a kingdom, is elected as *konungr*, and wields the power to rule as she sees fit. Knowing that Hrolf will return and threaten her position as king, she fortifies Ullarakr:

"We'd better look around for builders, start erecting strong and sturdy defences round the town and equip it with everything that's needed to make it impregnable against iron or fire, for one thing I do know, this king's made up his mind to get us." (56)

"[S]kulu vér leita at smiðum ok láta virki gera um allan stað vörn harðla styrkt ok rammgert, ok búa síðan með þeirri vélfími, at eigi megi sækja, hvórki með eldi né jární, því at ek hygg at þessi konungr hyggi á hendr oss." (66)

Her defences are extensive⁵⁸ and the keep is assumed to be secure "ef vaskir menn væri í vikinú" (66) ["as long as there were brave men inside to defend it" (56)]. She even restricts access to herself: "má nú engi á hans fund komast utan hans orlof" (66). ("No one was allowed anywhere near him without his permission" [56].)

Hrolf and his forces return and attack the fortress, finally gaining entrance after a prolonged battle, only to find that the King has escaped through an underground tunnel. Although Thorberg has left behind a lavish feast to distract Hrolf from his pursuit, he does not falter, but engages her in

⁵⁸ Thorberg has waterpipes installed in the ramparts to guard against fire, and uses burning pitch, boiling water, boulders, and catapults loaded with fire-shot to dissuade Hrolf from his attack (63-64).

battle in the forest. Realizing that she cannot defeat him, Thorberg honorably concedes to Hrolf and arranges a time that they might meet and agree upon wedding terms.

Thorberg then journeys to her father's home, puts aside her weapons of war, and assumes the feminine version of her name, along with domestic pursuits:

She went over to her boudoir, handed her weapons over to King Eirik, and began working at embroidery with her mother. She was the loveliest, most polished and courteous woman in the whole of Europe, intelligent, popular, eloquent and the best of advisers, but imperious too. (68)

Eftir þat gekk hún til skemmu, enn gaf í vald Eiriki konungi vápn þau, er hún hafði borit; settist hún til sauma með móður sinni, ok var hún hverri mey fegri ok fríðari ok kurteisari, svá at engi fanst jafn fríði norðrálfu heinsins; hún var vitr ok vinsæl, málsnjöl ok spakráðug ok ríklund. (77)

After she is married, she also assumes the title *dróttning* and bears two sons, but Thornbjorg does not spend the rest of her days embroidering in her bower. She counsels her husband concerning his international relationships with other kings, assuming a role practised by both of their mothers earlier in the story.⁵⁹

Before the saga ends, Thornbjorg does resume a military position, leading the armies of Sweden, Gotland, and Denmark in an effort to rescue her missing husband. Hrolf goes out a-viking one summer, planning to be back by fall. When he has not returned a full year later, Thornbjorg goes into action, sending word to Hrolf's brother Ketil and his blood-brother Ingjald, to prepare a search party, which she leads:

The Queen mustered an army in Sweden, took her shield and sword, and set out with her son Gautrek, who was twelve years old at the time, an extremely handsome lad, big and strong. All the leaders met with large forces at the appointed place with the Queen in charge commanding the whole army. (133-134)

Drotning dró ok her saman af Svíþjóð; tók hún þá skjöld ok sverð ok réðst til ferðar með Gautreki syni sínum; hann var þá tólf vetra gamall; hann var hinn vænsti maðr,

⁵⁹ In the *Fornaldarsögur*, queens are very often peacemakers. Hrolf's mother advises her husband to seek peace with his best friend when gossip nearly brings them to war (33). Thorberg's mother advises King Eirik how to behave after he insults and offends Hrolf (48-50).

mikill ok sterkr. Ok í ákveðnum stað fundust þau öll saman með milky liði; hafði drotning ráð ok skipan fyrir liði þeirra. (130)

Thornbjorg not only directs the actions of this force, she actively campaigns, raising her weapons in battle.

Her last appearance in the saga depicts Thornbjorg as a woman warrior again relinquishing her power to Hrolf, a scene that could be a later, literary rendition of an earlier scene in the oral saga background. Having thought her husband to be dead, killed by the Irish king, Thornbjorg allows the combined army to set fire to everything in sight, which, unknown to her, includes the bower where Hrolf is being entertained. Hrolf and his companions arm themselves, break through the walls of the room, and prepare to engage in battle when husband and wife come face to face: “[M]aðr einn stóð fyrir honum með alvæpni, ok var hinn víglegasti; hann tók af hjálminn, ok hnekti af aftr; kendi hann at þat var Þornbjörg drotning” (136). (“Facing him stood a man, fully armed and very warlike. The man lifted his helmet and pushed it on to the back of his head, and then King Hrólfr realised it was Queen Þornbjörg” [141-142].) Now aware that he faces his own forces from Sweden and Gotland, Hrolf is almost annoyed by Thornbjorg's presence, saying to her, “It takes a long time to tame a woman like you: now you're trying to suffocate me here like a fox in its lair” (142). Thornbjorg defends her actions, claiming that she only wanted to secure “you who matter most” (142), and promptly disappears from the tale. Hrolf takes command of the armies, puts out the fires, has his most important retainers happily married off, and returns home to retirement. Since nothing more is heard of Thornbjorg, it must be assumed that she accompanied him, returning to her role as counsellor and advisor as the reigning queen.

Although she does not rule a kingdom as the other Maiden Kings,⁶⁰ Hervor, the heroine of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks Konungs*, is also a woman who moves from a position of power through strength of arms to gaining power through verbal persuasion, and so is another example of the link bridging women's direct participation in physical violence and the indirect influence of speech. Hervor is the daughter of the viking berserk Angantyr and Svafa, the daughter of Bjarmar, a Swedish jarl. Hervor is born after the death of her father, and although she is a beautiful girl raised in a noble household, she too trains herself in weaponry and battle tactics:

Bjarmar's daughter was with child; and it was a girl of great beauty. She was sprinkled with water, and given a name, and called Hervör. She was brought up in the house of the jarl, and she was as strong as a man; as soon as she could do anything for herself she trained herself more with a bow and shield and sword than with needlework and embroidery. (10)

Dóttir Bjarmars var með barni; þat var mær einkar fögr. Sú var vatni ausin ok nafn gefit ok kalluð Hervör. Hon fæddisk upp með jarli ok var sterk sem karlar, ok þegar hon mátti sér nokkut, tamðisk hon meir við skot ok skjöld ok sverð en við sauma eða borða. (10)⁶¹

Hervor has no need to train in anticipation of ruling a kingdom, but chooses to develop combat skills for her own reasons. That she does so is no surprise, since Hervor's lineage suggests that she will violate societal traditions as her parents have done.⁶² Her father Angantyr and his brothers were famous throughout their berserk careers for "hav[ing] done nothing but evil" (4): "þeim er illt eitt hafa gort" (4). Her mother Sváva steps outside feminine tradition by "crossing the social boundary and marrying someone who was not considered to be the perfect match".⁶³ Hervor, the child of this union, is characterized through bad behaviour and violence: "Hon gerði ok optar illt

⁶⁰ Wahlgren (1938). "[B]eing a captain of a band of vikings was during the saga-age not so remote from monarchy as the modern reader might suppose – for kingship was practiced on a small scale in mediaeval Scandinavia. Hence, Hervör may be related in fiction to other maidens who were actually kings" (61).

⁶¹ Tolkien (1960). All English and Icelandic quotations from *King Heidrek the Wise* will come from this dual-language edition. Hereafter, page numbers appear in brackets within the text.

⁶² Lena Norrman. "Woman or Warrior? The Construction of Gender in Old Norse Myth." (11th International Saga Conference: Sydney, Australia, 2000.) 379.

⁶³ Ibid.

en gott, ok er henni var þat bannat, hljóp hon á skóga ok drap menn til fjár sér” (10). (“She did more often harm than good, and when it was forbidden her she ran away to the woods and killed men for her gain” [10].) When her grandfather learns of these activities, he and his men force Hervor to return home, but they are never able to make her behave as a genteel young woman.

It is through her continued abuse of the people around her that Hervor learns where her father is buried. As appears to be usual, she is treating some slaves poorly when one of them lashes out at her, taunting her with low birth and evil parents:

“Your only wish is to do evil, Hervör, and evil is to be expected from you; the jarl forbids everyone to speak to you of your parentage, because he is ashamed that you should know of it -- for the basest serf lay with his daughter, and you are their child.” (10)

“Þú, Hervor, vilt illt eitt gera, ok ills er at þér ván, ok því bannar jarl öllum mönnum at segja þér þitt faðerni, at honum þykkir skömm, at þú vitir þat, því at inn versti þræll lagðisk með dóttur hans, ok ertu þeira barn.” (10)

When she hears this, Hervor confronts her grandfather, demands the truth, and learns about her father’s grave on the island of Sámsey. She then declares her desire to visit the gravesite to claim the inheritance that should pass to her as Angantyr’s only child: “Nú fýsir mik,/ fóstri, at vitja/ framgenginna/ frænda minna;/ auð mundu þeir/ eiga nógan,/ þann skal ek oðlask,/ nema ek áðr forumk” (11). (“Foster-father,/ I am filled with longing/ to seek them out,/ my slain kinsmen,/ for store of wealth/ they surely own;/ to me shall it pass/ if I perish not!” [11].)

For this journey, Hervor unsexes herself, disguising herself as a man. First she hides her hair,⁶⁴ then seeks her mother’s help in preparing for the journey, requesting male accoutrements:

“Bú þú mik at ollu/ sem þú bráðast kunnir,/ sannfróð kona,/ sem þú son mundir” (12). (“As quick

⁶⁴ Tolkien’s footnotes to the translation offer two explanations for the verse about her hair: Hervör either means that she will bind her hair so she is assumed to be male or that she is removing a linen kerchief from her hair, literally throwing away her female identity with the disposal of female attire (11). Helga Kress briefly comments on the significance of loose and bound hair in her article “Taming the Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature” *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*. New York: Rutledge (2002) 89-90.

as you can/ equip me in all ways,/ wisest of women,/ as you would your son” [12].) Reverting to earlier violent behaviour, Hervor arms herself, masculinizes her name, and seizes command of a Viking band, eventually forcing them to take her to Sámsey:

[T]aking the gear and weapons of a man she made her way to a place where there were some vikings, and for a time she went roving with them and called herself Hervard. A short while after, this Hervard became captain of the band, and when they came to Sámsey she demanded to be allowed to go up on the island, saying that there would be promise of treasure in the burial-mound. (12)

[T]ók sér karlmanns gørvi ok vápn ok sótti þar til, er víkingar nokkurir váru, ok fór með þeim um hrið ok nefndisk Hervarðr. Litlu síðar tók þessi Hervarðr forræði liðsins, ok er þeir kómu til Sámseyjar, þá beiddisk Hervarðr at fara upp á eyna ok sagði, at þar mundi vera féván í haugi. (12)

The Vikings refuse to set foot on the island. Hilda Roderick Ellis notes that when the dead are awoken, particularly by someone breaking into a burial mound to gain treasure, “the corpse within the grave is always represented with vampire-like propensities, superhuman strength, and a fierce desire to destroy any living creature which ventures to enter the mound” (The Road to Hel 92). The vikings know the legends of the berserk ghosts and fear the dead. Even a shepherd Hervor encounters after she arrives at the island runs off before nightfall, panicking because “hyrr er á sveimun,/ haugar opnask” (13) [“fires are moving,/ mounds are opening” (13)]. Again Ellis provides the explanation: “the barrier between the worlds of the living and the dead is marked by the cold fire that flickers around the barrows...Fire was, of course, the recognised sign of a haunted burial mound” (174-175).

Whether she is brave or greedy, Hervor is more motivated than any of her Viking companions, who will not approach the island of Sámsey at nightfall to gain treasure or fame.

Without hesitation, she walks through *hauga-eldrinn*, the burial-mound fires, to her father’s grave:

Now Hervör saw where out upon the island burned the fire of the barrows, and she went towards it without fear, though all the mounds were on her path. She made her

way into these fires as if they were no more than mist, until she came to the barrow of the berserks. (13)

Nú sér hon því næst út á eyrna, hvar haugaeldrinn brenn, ok gengr hon þangat til ok hræðisk ekki, þótt allir haugir væri á gotu hennar. Hon óð fram í þessa elda sem í myrkva, þar til er hon kom at haugi berserkjanna. (13)

Hervor's purpose in being at the gravesite is to collect her father's famous sword Tyrfing, which was crafted by dwarfs, guaranteed victory for whomever held it, and could not be unsheathed without causing death. In order to obtain the sword, which she believes is in the burial-mound, Hervor calls her father forth from death, identifying herself as his daughter, the only heir to this family line: "Vaki þú, Angantýr,/ vekr þik Hervor,/ eingadóttir/ ykk Sváfu" (14). ("Wake, Angantýr,/ wakes you Hervör,/ Sváva's offspring,/ your only daughter" [14].) When he is slow to respond to her summons, she lays a curse upon him and his brothers if they do not relinquish the sword: "Svá sé yðr ollum/ innan rifja/ sem þer í maura/ mornið haugi,/ nema sverð selið/ þat er sló Dvalinn;/ samir ei draugum/ dýrt vápni bera" (14-15). ("May it seem to you all/ within your ribs/ as if in mound of maggots, you mouldered away,/ if you fetch not the sword/ forged by Dvalin;/ it becomes not ghosts/ costly arms to bear" [14-15].)

Angantyr is not willing to give up his sword. He rebukes Hervor for her behaviour, calling her mad and evil to wake the dead: "æf ertu orðin/ ok ørviti,/ villhyggjandi,/ vekr upp dauða menn" (15). ("Mad are you now,/ your mind darkened,/ when with wits wandering/ you wake the dead" (15). He then tries to deceive her, telling her that his killers took the sword when they left the island, but she knows he has it and demands it as her inheritance. Grágás, the laws of early Iceland, identifies the legal rights and expectations placed upon unmarried daughters who are only children:

"There is also one woman who is both to pay and to take a wergild ring, given that she is an only child, and that woman is called "ringlady". She who takes is the daughter of the dead man if no proper receiver of the main ring otherwise exists but

atonement payers are alive, and she takes the three-mark ring like a son, given that she has not accepted full settlement in compensation for the killing, and this until she is married, but thereafter kinsmen take it. She who pays is the daughter of the killer if no proper payer of the main ring otherwise exists but receivers do, and then she is to pay the three-mark ring like a son, and this until she enters a husband's bed and thereby tosses the outlay into her kinsmen's lap.” (Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás: The Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from Other Manuscripts 181)

One can assume that if single daughters have obligations to their dead male kin, those same men, when animated as the undead, are obligated to treat only daughters as inheritors. But Angantyr does not comply easily, warning Hervor of the sword's danger: “sjá mun Tyrfinr,/ ef þú trúa mættir,/ ætt þinni, mæ,/ allri spilla” (16). “[T]rust what I tell you,/ Tyrfing, daughter,/ shall be ruin and end / of all your family” (16). When she persists further, he taunts her with her gender, assuming she lacks the courage to take it from him: “Liggr mér undir herðum/ Hjálmars bani,/ allr er hann útan/ eldi sveipinn;/ mey veit ek enga/ fyrir mold ofan/ at hjor þann þori/ í hond bera” (17). (“Beneath my back is laid/ the bane of Hjálmar,/ all around it/ enwrapped with fire;/ in the world walking/ no woman know I/ who would dare in her hand/ to hold this sword” [17].) Yet Hervor refuses to back down, and reaches for the sword against his protests.

Realising that he cannot prevent her from taking the sword, Angantyr promises to bring it forth from the grave-mound. But before he does so, he prophesies once more of the destruction the sword will bring to Hervor's family: “Veizt eigi þú,/ vesol ertu máls,/ fullfeikn kona,/ hví þu fagna skalt;/ sjá mun Tyrfingr,/ ef þú trúa mættir,/ ætt þinni, mæ,/ allri spilla” (18). (“You see it not --/ you're in speech accursed,/ woman of evil! --/ why you're rejoicing;/ trust what I tell you, Tyrfing, daughter,/ shall be ruin and end/ of all your family” [18].) Hervor's response to this final warning is callous, displaying her entire lack of regard for anyone beyond herself: “Ek mun ganga/ til gjálfrmara,/ nú er hilmis mæ/ í huga góðum;/ lítt ræki ek þat,/ lofðunga vinr,/ hvat synir mínir/ síðan deila” (18-19). (“I will go my way/ to the wave-horses,/ chieftain's daughter/ cheerful-

hearted;/ I care not at all/ O king's companion,/ how my sons shall/ strive hereafter" [18-19].)

Through words, she defeats her father, undertaking "the test most feared by viking men – to enter the mound of the dead and encounter its inhabitant, the *draugr*" (Old Norse Images of Women 100).

Upon her return to the shore, Hervor discovers that she is alone and without transportation. Whether out of fear of the ghosts or the desire to be rid of her, the Vikings abandon Hervor to her fate. The saga composer never mentions how she manages to leave the island, but does comment on her activities once she possesses Tyrfing: "Hervör kom sér til víkinga ok var í hernaði um hríð; en er henni leiddisk svá vera, fór hin til Bjarmars jarls ok settisk til hannyrðanáms. Fór nú mikil fregn af fríðleik hennar" (20). ("Hervör went off to join vikings, and was out raiding for a time; and when she grew weary of that she went to Bjarmar the jarl, and settled down to fine work with her hands. Many tales were then told of her beauty" [20].)

Having assumed a traditional feminine role for the first time, Hervor accepts a marriage proposal as arranged by Bjarmar and gives birth to two sons -- one good, one evil. And being Hervor, she favors Heidrek, the mischievous child, above his brother Angantýr. For a woman used to bearing arms and getting her own way, she does not interfere when her beloved son is sent away to be fostered, despised as he is by his father. Nor does she protest when Heidrek is exiled for accidentally killing his brother at a feast.⁶⁵ She does, however, ask her husband to counsel his son before they part and gains this favor, gifting Heidrek with patriarchal words of wisdom⁶⁶ and the sword that will destroy the entire family line.

⁶⁵ Heidrek misbehaves during dinner and is kicked out of the hall by his father, but decides to cause a little more trouble before he goes. "When Heidrek had walked from the buildings for a short time, it came into his heart that he had not yet done enough harm, and turning back towards the hall he took up a great stone and hurled it in the direction from which he heard men talking together in the darkness. He heard that the stone did not miss its mark, and he went there and found a man lying dead; and he recognised his brother Angantýr" (21-22).

⁶⁶ Heidrek's father refuses to give him any advice until Hervör makes the request (22).

Up to this point, at which she has retired from her viking career and settled into domesticity, Hervor has behaved in an unacceptable and there is no justification for this behaviour: she will not rule a kingdom as *konungr*, she is not threatened by unwanted suitors, and she does not seek vengeance or redress for the murder of her father and uncles. However, Hervor can be considered the *baugrýgr*, the only daughter, who, as discussed previously in a passage from Grágás, is responsible for accepting or paying the wergild. As such, she may also be responsible for pursuing revenge, which in this society, would be honorable and expected. But she does not take up the responsibility of the avenger.⁶⁷ Carol Clover has argued that in the absence of related male kin, a fatherless, brotherless girl becomes a “functional son,” assuming the rights and responsibilities of the non-existent male heir until she gives birth to a male child and so continues her father’s lineage:

So powerful is the principle of male inheritance that when it necessarily passes through the female, she must become, in legend if not in life, a functional son... Only when she becomes fully nubile and hence ready to bear a male heir on whom the ancestral legacy will be unloaded, as it were, can Hervor withdraw from the male sphere and return to the female one. ("Maiden Warriors and Other Sons" 39-40)

Hervor would appear to fit this description: she trains in weapons, kills for pleasure from her youth, masculinizes her name before taking command of a viking band, and is fearless in confronting her dead father to gain her inheritance. When she becomes bored of such adventures, she retires, marries, and produces two male children, thus completing her responsibilities as functional son. But Hervor displays little or no emotion towards familial duty, a response expected from a son.⁶⁸ And all of her early action is focused upon financial greed rather than honor -- she “kills men for her gain,” seeks out her father’s treasure, and twice is a successful viking, which means she specializes

⁶⁷ See William Ian Miller, “Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England,” Law and History Review 1 (1983), 159-204.

⁶⁸ Usually prodded by female whetters, men react strongly to insult and offense, particularly where family and personal honor are concerned. See Jesse Byock, Feud in the Icelandic Saga. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.)

in looting and robbing through violence.⁶⁹ Although she does serve to bridge the son-less generation, continuing the male line by giving birth to male heirs, she cares nothing for family responsibilities or obligations, ignoring the very foundation of the functional son model. She does not belong in either a male or female role, and because of that, Hervor is a figure of fear -- a strong-willed woman who acts against her father's counsel, unsexes herself, and takes pleasure in bloodshed. However, once she too assumes the title *dróttning*, Hervor starts to fade from the saga, disappearing altogether with her son's exile.

Although there are great differences between the Maiden Kings discussed here, each provides an example of the shift in female power dynamics from violence to verbal persuasion. The difference between the Germanic Amazon archetype and the Maiden King is that the archetype is violently forced into submission, while the Maiden King, an evolved version of the Germanic Amazon depicted centuries after the original Brynhild cycles, lays down her arms. The difference between the Maiden King and the further evolved *Íslendingasögur* whetters of Chapter Three is that the Maiden King eventually seeks peace, while the whetters goad and nag often reluctant husbands and sons to feud, pushing until the entire family of one woman is dead and there is no one left to take, or demand, revenge.

⁶⁹ Although going a-viking is a traditional and accepted male past time, it is unusual for women in the sagas to pursue this type of dangerous financial endeavor.

3. Chapter Three: Brandishing Words as Weapons -- The Notorious Inciters of Njáls's Saga

Uli Linke observes that in the Icelandic mythology of genesis, the earth was created when “the fluids of the primordial rivers solidified under the influence of the northern cold, turning into ice and rime” and that “the elements of ‘water’ and ‘ice’ have been interpreted consistently as metaphors for *female* reproductive powers” (“The Theft of Blood, The Birth of Men” 267). This first stirring of life associates coldness with women, an idea that is carried throughout the Íslendingasögur as a literary motif: *eru köld kvenna rað* (Brennu-Njáls saga 292) -- cold are the counsels of women. In Njáls saga, this gendered coldness is depicted through female-induced feuds and whetting. In order for women to ensure their family’s hegemonic authority⁷⁰ they must engage in blood feuds by inciting their male counterparts to exert physical force on their behalf, usually resulting in mass societal destruction. In her article, “Cold are the Councils of Women: The Revengeful Woman in Icelandic Family Sagas,” Susan Clark notes that “it is incontestable that the men fight the actual battles that are reproduced with such an economical fury of words, but it is the women who frequently set into motion the chain of events that lead to the slayings. In many sagas, a bloody family feud is not complete without a ruthlessly determined woman urging her kin to retaliation and revenge” (6). Because few of the family saga women directly participate in the physical act of war, verbal persuasion is the only means available to a woman dependent on her male relatives for action.⁷¹ Thus, in a society deeply rooted in an age of violence where peace is

⁷⁰ See Susan Clark. “Cold are the Councils of Women: The Revengeful Woman in Icelandic Family Sagas.” Women as Protagonists and Poets in the German Middle Ages (Göppingen: Kummerle Verlag, 1991.) “[R]evengeful women can be considered as members of a group that seek power, a group of exceptional, very capable women who sought to exercise control over others” (26).

⁷¹ See Theodore M. Andersson & William Ian Miller. Ljósvetninga saga and Valla-Ljóts saga (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989.)

fragile and power is determined by physical strength and battle prowess, a woman's words are her only weapons.

Prior to Iceland's settlement into a peaceful country, "the family was an instrument of fighting. When a man got involved in some enmity, he felt himself to have a right to appeal to his kinsman for assistance, and family revenge became a law of action in the sagas, as it was a part of old history" (The Old Norse Sagas 77). In a society in which men act according to the obligations of kinship, it is not surprising to discover women within the sagas who likewise guard the family's reputation. Thus in the *Íslendingasögur*, women find themselves largely defined by male or familial honour. A woman's status is a direct reflection of her husband's standing within the community:

[S]ocial stability and status were much needed and prized by Icelandic women in the family sagas, and in this respect the women represent a conservative force for individualism rather than a force for social accommodation, which they saw as contrived by the words of men, built on a fragile mutual trust, and therefore likely to break down when threatened by the reality of power. ("Valgerðr's Smile" 204)

Due to specific socially accepted gender roles, female dependence upon male kin for honor and prestige demanded that women protect and nurture familial standing within the community. This responsibility is illustrated within *Njáls saga* in the character of the two main female rivals, Hallgerd and Bergthora, women diametrically opposed in character and beauty. In A History of Icelandic Literature, Stéfan Einarsson explains that

Njala teems with living characters often arranged in couples for contrast...there is Njall's wife Bergþora, strong, sane and faithful, against the beautiful, headstrong, and sinister Hallgerðr, Gunnarr's wife. But Hallgerðr is no mere dark, evil spirit; her character has a complexity that reminds one of the Hamlet type, in so far as to have made her an everlasting source of controversy. (147)

Hallgerd is introduced and characterized from childhood as a beautiful villain. In conversation with her father Hoskuld, Hallgerd's uncle Hrut sees beyond her beauty, foreshadowing the deadly

woman coiled within the lovely child: “Ærit fogr er mæR sjá, ok munu margir þess gjalda; en hitt veit ek eigi, hvaðan þjófsaugu eru komin í ættir várar.” (7).⁷² (“The girl is quite beautiful, and many will pay for that, but what I don’t know is how the eyes of a thief have come into our family” [4]).⁷³ Hrut’s observation concerning Hallgerd’s complex character is further discussed by E.O. G. Turville-Petre who argues that Hallgerd is

among the most memorable women in Icelandic literature, and she is one of the most complicated. She is beautiful, but embittered, and was subject to evil influences in early youth. She was proud, but so ill-controlled that her dignity was nearly lost. She was guilty of theft, the basest of all crimes in the eyes of a peasant people. (Origins of Icelandic Literature 250)

This character development is integral to the progression of the story and to the characterization of the late Germanic Amazon, carefully crafted by the composer who perhaps sought to convey Hallgerd’s character as embodying conflicting traits often displayed in her male counterparts.

As she gets older, Hallgerd matures into a gorgeous, temperamental woman who does, as her uncle prophesies, bring trouble to many: “Hallgerðr vex upp, dóttir Hoskulds, ok er kvenna fríðust sýnum ok mikil vexti, ok því var hon langbrók kolluð. Hon var fagrhar ok svá mikít hárit, at hon mátti hylja sik með. Hon var orlynd ok skaphorð” (29). (“[S]he grew up to be a most beautiful woman, very tall, and therefore called Long-legs. She had lovely hair, so long that she could wrap herself in it. She was lavish and harsh-tempered” [18]). However, there is no physical description of Bergthora; certainly there is no meticulous portrait to compare with the account of Hallgerd’s silken hair and long legs. Bergthora is a respected and admirable woman. She is described as a “kvenskorungr mikill ok drengR góðr ok nokkut skphorð” (57) (“a woman with a mind of her own and a fine person, but a bit harsh-tempered” [36]). Whatever admirable attributes

⁷² Einar Ol. Sveinsson, ed. Brennu-Njáls saga. (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafelag, 1954). All Icelandic quotations from *Brennu-Njáls saga* are from this edition. Hereafter, page numbers appear in brackets within the text.

⁷³ Robert Cook, trans. Njal’s Saga. (London: Penguin Books, 2001.) All English quotations from *Njal’s Saga* are from this edition. Hereafter, page numbers appear in brackets within the text.

she has are not mentioned at the beginning of the saga, just as there is no evidence she is harsh-tempered. The composer does say that Bergthora is married to a handsome, wealthy, wise lawyer, and that they have six children, but spends no time foreshadowing Bergthora's character or her contribution to the saga; her actions seem merely a foil for those of the attention-grabbing Hallgerd.

Another character who receives little attention in this saga, and who is central to the original feud-causing insult, is Thorhalla, Bergthora's daughter-in-law. A scrutiny of the seating at Hallgerd's wedding to Gunnarr reveals Thorhalla sitting on the dais beside Hallgerd while Bergthora serves at the tables: "Brúðr sat á miðjum palli, en til annarrar handar henni sat Þorgerðr, dóttir hennar, en til annarrar handar Þórhalla, dóttir Ásgríms Elliða-Grímssonar" (89). ("The bride sat in the middle of the cross-bench. On one side of her sat her daughter Thorgerd, and on the other, Thorhalla, the daughter of Asgrim Ellida-Grimsson" [55]). Extreme discord between Thrain Sigfusson and his wife Thorhild disrupts the feast and causes a change of position among those on the dais. Thrain visibly lusts after Thorgerd, Hallgerd's fourteen year-old daughter, and when his wife Thorhild notices the looks he keeps sending the girl, she insults him in front of the company with a couplet: "Era gapriplar góðir, gægr er þér augum" (89). ("This gaping is not good/ Your eyes are all agog" [56]). Thrain immediately divorces Thorhild, has her thrown out of the feast, and proposes a match between himself and the young Thorgerd. No one objects to the match, so Hallgerd betroths Thorgerd to Thrain, and the women exchange seats, signifying Thorgerd's change in status: "Þá var skipat konum í annat sinn; sat þá Þórhalla meðal brúða" (90). ("The women's places were shifted; now Thorhalla sat between the brides" [56]). William Ian Miller notes that "[s]eating arrangements provided one of the few occasions in the culture where relative ranking was clearly visible" (Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland 30).

Thus Thorhalla's placement between two of the most important people at the celebration, the brides, is indicative of her status not only at the table, but also within the community.

The autumn following the wedding, Gunnar and Hallgerd attend a feast at Bergthorshvol, where they are well received by Bergthora's husband Njal. This gathering proves to be the beginning of the feud. The reader is left to infer that Gunnar and Hallgerd are seated shortly after their arrival, for it is the disruption of seating that causes the bad blood between Bergthora and Hallgerd. Helgi and Thorhalla, Bergthora's son and daughter-in-law, are not at Bergthorshvol when Gunnar and Hallgerd arrive. Once they return home, Bergthora tries to displace Hallgerd from her position:

Bergthora went up to the cross-bench, together with Thorhalla, and spoke to Hallgerd: 'You must move aside for this woman.'

Hallgerd spoke: 'I'll not move aside for anyone, and I won't sit in the corner like a cast-off hag.'

'I decide things here,' said Bergthora.
After that Thorhalla sat down. (57)

Þá gekk Bergþóra at pallinum ok Þórhalla með henni, ok mælti Bergþóra til Hallgerðr: "Þú skalt þoka fyrir konu þessi." Hallgerðr mælti: "Hvergi mun ek þoka, því at engi hornkerling vil ek vera." "Ek skal hér ráða," sagði Bergþóra. Síðan settisk Þórhalla niðr. (91)

The most interesting detail in this exchange is that it takes both Bergthora and Thorhalla to approach Hallgerd and alter her position at the table. Until this time the families have been friendly; Thorhalla has been shown great honour by being seated between the two brides at Hallgerd's wedding. But now that Hallgerd is a guest and rightfully expects to receive similar courtesy within Bergthora's home, she is ordered to move from her seat so that Thorhalla can be placed honourably at table. As the female authority in this home, Bergthora voices the demand, leaving Thorhalla's culpability unclear. However, regardless of individual responsibility, both Bergthora and Thorhalla act in a manner that wounds Hallgerd's pride and compromises her

position as a welcome and honoured guest. By insisting that she move, and doing it through a show of power, Bergthora and Thorhalla have discredited their hospitality.

This attack on her integrity, be it deserved or not, leaves Hallgerd with no option but to defend her honor. Miller argues that “one's status depended on the condition of one's honor, for it was in the game of honor that rank and reputation was attained and retained. Honor was at stake in virtually every social interaction” (Bloodtaking and Peacemaking 29). When Hallgerd verbally strikes back, there is a further exchange of insults:

Bergthora came to the table with water for washing hands.

Hallgerd took her hand and said, “There’s not much to choose between you and Njal -- you have gnarled nails on every finger, and he’s beardless.”

“That’s true,” said Bergthora,” and yet we don’t hold it against each other. But your husband Thorvald was not beardless, and yet you had him killed.” (57)

Bergþóra gekk með handlaugar at borðinu. Hallgerðr tok hondina Bergþóru ok mælti: “Ekki er þó kosta munr með ykkur Njáli: þú hefir kartnagl á hverjum fingri, en hann er skegglauss.” “Satt er þat,” sagði Bergþóra, “en hvárki okkart gefr þetta oðru at sok; en eigi var skegglauss Þorvaldr, bóndi þinn, ok rétt þú honum þó bana.” (91)

With the verbal exchange, Bergthora fails in her role as hostess, provoking her guest with a reference to Hallgerd’s previous marriage and possible complicity in murder. Walter Scheps observes that “[f]euds are begun through malicious gossip or lying, or a simple misunderstanding of the terms of an agreement; individual combats are preceded by spoken insults” (“Historicity and Oral Narrative in Njals Saga” 129). Because the women cannot engage in individual combat, urging their male relatives to engage in familial feud is the only available option to defend personal and familial honor.

Having been doubly insulted, first by being forced to move by both Thorhalla and Bergthora, and secondly by being accused of Thorvald's murder, Hallgerd naturally turns to her male defender, Gunnar. Within her words, specifically in the demand she places on her husband for vengeance, lies the echo of the married Germanic Amazon:

“There’s little use to me in being married to the most manly man in Iceland,” said Hallgerd, “if you don’t avenge this, Gunnarr.”

He sprang up and leaped across the table and spoke: “I’m going home, and it would be best for you to pick quarrels with your servants, and not in the dwellings of others. I’m in debt to Njal for many honours, and I’m not going to be a cat’s-paw for you.” (57)

“Fyrir lítit kemr mér,” segir Hallgerðr, “at eiga þann mann, er vaskastr er á Íslandi, ef þú hefnir eigi þessa, Gunnarr.” Hann spratt upp ok sté fram yfir borðit ok mælti: “Heim mun ek fara, ok er þat makligast, at þú sennir við heimamenn þína, en eigi í annarra manna híbýlum, enda á ek Njáli marga sœmð at launa, ok mun ek ekki vera eggjanarfífl þitt.” (91)

Gunnar disappoints Hallgerd by siding with friends rather than his wife and by shaming her in public with his rebuke. As she walks out the door, Hallgerd foreshadows the continued action of the saga, uttering a threat: “Mun þú þat, Bergðóra,” sagði Hallgerðr, “at vit skulum eigi skilðar” (91). (“Keep this in mind, Bergthora,” said Hallgerd, “that we’re not finished yet” [57]).

In Icelandic society, where blood-feuds were rampant, women took an active role in initiating male-dominated reactions. Judith Jesch argues that culturally expected roles created a “division of labour between the woman, whose task it was to keep track of their family standing in the community and to initiate retaliation when the standing had been diminished in some way, and the men, whose task was to carry out this retaliation, or arrive at a settlement which gave satisfaction to both parties” (Women in the Viking Age 190). Acting in accordance with her culturally constructed role as protector of her familial honor, Hallgerd waits until the men, Gunnarr and Njal, are away at the Althing to strike the first blow by sending her servant Kol to kill Bergthora’s servant Svart, a man of whom the Njalssons are fond. In order to secure Kol’s obedience, Hallgerd goads him into action using the *hvöt*, taunting him with what she perceives as his cowardice:

[I]n the morning Hallgerd said to Kol, “I have thought of a job for you,” and she handed him a weapon. “Go up to Raudaskrid. You’ll find Svart there.”

“What am I to do with him?” he said.

“Do you need to ask that?” she said. “You -- the worst sort of person? Kill him!”

“I can do that,” he said, “and yet it’s likely to cost me my life.”

“Everything grows big in your eyes,” she said, “and this is bad of you after all the times I’ve spoken up for you. I’ll find another man to do this if you don’t dare.” (58-59)

[O]f morgininn kom Hallgerðr at máli við Kol ok mælti: “Verk hefi ek hugat þér,” segir hon ok fekk honum vápn ok mælti: “Far þú í Rauðaskriður; þar munt þú finna Svart.” “Hvat skal ek honum?” segir hann. “Spyrr þú at því,” segir hon, “þar sem þú ert it mesta illmenni? Vega skalt þú hann.” Gort mun ek þat geta,” segir hann, “en þat er þó líkast, at ek gefa mik við.” “Vex þér hvetvetna í augu,” segir hon, “ok ferr þér illa, þar sem ek hefi mælt hvern hlut eptir þér. Mun ek fá mann til annan at gera þetta, ef þú þorir eigi.” (93)

Kol immediately illustrates his masculinity by taking up arms, intent on dealing Svart a deathblow.

When Bergthora receives the news of Svart’s death she reacts similarly, seeking revenge. As the guardian of family integrity, it is her duty to seek vengeance by inciting her male kin to bloodshed: “An insult such as the killing of a slave must be revenged, lest shame fall on the whole family -- past, present, and future generations.” (“The Revengeful Woman in Icelandic Family Sagas” 21) William Ian Miller discusses a balance-sheet model of feud, “which emphasizes reciprocity and symmetry but could still accommodate complex and far-reaching rules of vicarious liability.” (“Justifying Skarphedinn” 317) According to this model, “specific wrongs create debits of blood or debits of honour which require repayment.” (316) Vengeance is a means of “restoring the balance to the scales of justice,” (The Virtues of Vengeance 3) but is not necessarily initiated by negative emotion:

[T]he impulse to revenge derives not only from such destructive feelings as hatred, rage, pride, and vindictiveness, but also from many that are heroic and essential to individual and social existence, like indignation, gratitude, compassion, loyalty, appropriate self-regard, a sense of integrity, and a passion for justice. (The Shapes of Revenge: Victimization, Vengeance, and Vindictiveness in Shakespeare 9)

Bergthora relies on heroic feelings -- gratitude, compassion, and loyalty -- to manipulate those who are obliged to enact vengeance on her behalf. The heroic revenge impulse provides continual motivation for the action she incites. Within the sagas “honor always appears as the fundamental

motive force, and honor demands revenge for every kind of outrage”...thus family honor becomes the “dominant force of action,” a noble quest for those individuals desiring to leave for his descendants an “unstained reputation” (The Old Norse Sagas 83).⁷⁴

In cementing her recovery of familial honour, Hallgerd boasts of Svart's killing, which in turn irritates Bergthora, who responds with a display of independence, fulfilling her duty to family and anticipating further fighting by hiring Atli. Although she is not yet prepared to involve her sons in conflict, and yet cannot take physical action against Hallgerd herself, she must employ a man to take vengeance on her behalf, establishing a network of obligation.⁷⁵ The interaction during Bergthora's interview with Atli establishes Bergthora's matriarchal position within the household⁷⁶ and creates a power dynamic:

“I do field work,” he said, “and I'm good at many other things, but I won't hide the fact that I'm a harsh-tempered man and that many have had to bind up wounds on account of me.”

“I won't hold it against you,” she said, “that you're not a coward.”

Atli said, “Do you have any authority here?”

“I'm Njal's wife,” she said, “and I have no less authority in hiring than he does.”

“Will you take me on?” he asked.

“I'll give you a chance,” she said, “provided you do whatever I ask you to -- even if I send you out to kill someone.”

“You surely have enough men,” he said, “that you don't need me for such things.”

“I set the terms as I please,” she said. (60-61)

“Ek em akrgerðarmaðr,” segir hann, “ok mart er mér vel hent at gera, en eigi vil ek því leyna, at ek em maðr skapharðr, ok hefir margr hlotit um sárt at binda fyrir mér.” Ekki gef ek þér þat at sok,” segir hon, “þótt þú sér engi bleyðimaðr.” Atli mælti: “Ert þú nokkurs hér ráðandi?” “Ek em kona Njál's,” segir hon, “ok ræð ek ekki síðr hjón en hann.” “Vill þú taka við mér?” segir hann. “Gera mun ek kost á því,” segir hon, “ef þú vill vinna slíkt, er ek legg fyrir þik, ok svá þó at ek vilja senda þik til

⁷⁴ Halvdan Koht. “We may be inclined to think that what the chiefs of ancient Iceland were really fighting for was above all their power as the leaders of their district and their men... Always a man will have to think of his fame, the judgment of contemporaries and posterity...the sagas have taken hold of this idea, making it the dominant force of action, because it is at once more noble and more dramatic than the mere rivalry for power” (83).

⁷⁵ See Jesse Byock, Feud in the Icelandic Saga (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.) “[T]he saga narrative reflects issues inherent in societal decision making, the acquisition of status and wealth, and the formation and maintenance of networks of obligations” (25).

⁷⁶ See Jenny Jochens. “The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?” Sagas of the Icelanders (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989.)

mannráða.” “Átt þú svá til varit of menn,” segir hann, “at þú munt eigi þurfa mín at slíku.” “Þat skil ek, sem ek vil,” segir hon. (95-96)

Whether it is because he is *skygn* (prescient) or because he is all too aware of his wife's personality, Njal knows what is coming. When he and his sons ride to the Althing that year, he takes with him the bag of money that Gunnar paid the previous summer for Svart's death (61). Back at Bergthorshvol unsupervised by her wise husband, Bergthora goads Atli into action by threatening him with her potential displeasure: “...þú skalt fara at leita Kols, þar til er þú finnr hann, því at nú skalt þú vega hann í dag, ef þú vill minn vilja gera” (96-97). (“Go and look for Kol until you find him, for you must kill him today -- if you want to do my will” [61]). Once he has complied with her demand, Atli is concerned as to Njal's reaction:

“I don't know,” said Atli, “what Njal will think of this.”

“He can handle it,” she said, “and as a sign I can tell you that he took with him to the Thing the slave's price we received last summer, and this money will now pay for Kol. But even though there's a settlement, you must be on your guard, for Hallgerd will not honour any settlement.”

“Don't you want to send someone to Njal to tell him of the slaying?”

“No, I don't,” she said. “It would suit me better if Kol's death went uncompensated.” (62)

“Eigi veit ek,” segir hann, “hversu Njáli mun þetta þykkja.” “Vel mun hann í hondum hafa,” segir hon, “ok mun ek segja þér eitt til marks um, at hann hefir haft til þings þrælskjöld þau, er vér tókum við fyrra sumar, ok munu þau nú koma fyrir Kol. En þó at sættir verði, þá skalt þú þó vera varr um þik, því at Hallgerðr mun engar sættir halda.” “Villt þú nokkut senda mann til Njáls at segja honum vígit?” segir hann. “Eigi vil ek þat,” segir hon; “mér þœtti betr, at Kolr væri ógildir.” (98)

Bergthora condemns Hallgerd as a settlement-breaker even though she herself has broken the settlement between households by insisting on Kol's murder. Gunnar does not blame Bergthora for demanding Kol's death but because it is reactionary, Bergthora's crime appears less evil than Hallgerd's, in fact it is expected. Bergthora is portrayed in a much more sympathetic light than Hallgerd in *Njal's Saga*, although it appears the first offence lies at her door. Perhaps because her inciting actions in the feud are reciprocal, Bergthora's eggings are considered appropriate as she is

merely fulfilling her duties as the family matriarch and is viewed with more lenience than her rival. While Hallgerd relies on her beauty and charm to incite men, Bergthora uses her wits, manipulating male ego to defend family honour.

In a stratified society, it is essential that feuding families are social equals. Miller points out that in order “for the continuing hostile exchanges that constitute feud, each party had to consider the other worthy of giving offense and worthy of retaliation. In other words, feuding relations were congruent with the boundaries of the field of honor. One contended for honor with those who had honor to lose and of the kind that one could acquire” (Bloodtaking and Peacemaking 185). Bergthora’s vow to “aldri vægja skyldu fyrir Hallgerði” (99) or “never give in to Hallgerd” (63) is situated in their social equality.

The male reaction to female feud is indicative of how serious the conflict is becoming. Knowing it is merely a matter of time before his posterity will be dragged into the middle of the feuding women, Njal reprimands Bergthora for going against his counsel and wishes. And yet the saga composer makes it clear that Bergthora fulfils her role as the defender of the family name by promising further bloodshed.

As the killings proceed, each woman turns to an avenger of higher social status, involving her husband, who attempts to maintain peace, in a spiraling struggle: “the conflict between Hallgerd and Bergthora continues, drawing in their husbands in the same way two farmers might draw in local chieftains or chieftains might draw in other chieftains” (Feud in the Icelandic Saga 181). Else Mundal suggests that if the women appear to disregard the legal settlements made by their husbands, it may be because they are “inclined to focus in their narratives on aspects of life which were familiar to them and consequently more important to them” (“Women and Old Norse

Narrative” 141). Legal disputes are beyond their daily realm. They do not attend the Althing, nor are they involved in compensation discussion.⁷⁷

The distance from both battle and peace-making intensifies the cold words of the vengeance-hungry woman, and the feud creates a ripple-effect, drawing in even those unwilling to participate. Both women begin to manipulate their victim’s familial obligation to force unwilling men into the on-going slaughter. Every time the women send yet another man out to extend the feud, they give significant thought to how close the violence is drawing to their own homes.

As it becomes more evident that Njal’s sons will soon be drawn into feud by their mother, Njal tries desperately to quell it, cautioning them against taking action: “Skammt munt þú til þess eiga,” segir Njáll, “at þik mun slíkt henda, ok mun þik þó nauðr til reka” (105). (“‘You have only a short time,’ said Njal, ‘before your turn will come, and then necessity will drive you’” [68]). It would appear that Njal recognizes that his sons will soon be obligated to retaliate through bloodshed claiming that “necessity will drive” their actions. He attempts to protect his sons from the feud by keeping them far from the clutches of their mother. However, Thord, Njal’s son with Hrodny, is quickly overrun by the feuding females and is killed while out working on the farm.

Although grieving for the loss of his son, Njal has his sons promise not to break the agreement with Gunnar. They honour their father's wishes, but add this caveat: “ef til verðr nokkut með oss, þá munu vér minnask á inn forna fjandskap” (111). (“[I]f anything comes up between us, we shall have this old hostility in mind” [72]).

⁷⁷ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans. *Eyrbyggja Saga* (London, Penguin Books, 1989.) Blanket female exclusion from legal disputes is recorded as the result of poor legal action taken by women over a single killing: “On Arnkel’s death, the legal heirs to his estate were all women, and it was their responsibility to take action over the killing. As a result, the case was not followed up as vigorously as people might have expected after the killing of so great a man...Because the action over the killing of this great man had gone so badly, the leading men of Iceland made a law that neither a woman, nor a man under the age of sixteen, should ever again be allowed to raise a manslaughter action, and this has been the law ever since” (102).

It does not take long in the saga development for yet another insult to arise between these warring families. This time Hallgerd makes the unfortunate mistake of verbally insulting Njal's family. When talking to beggarwomen, Hallgerd inquires after Bergthorsvol to which the women relate activities taking place around the farm, including the information that Njal had ordered manure carried into the fields to encourage hay growth. Hallgerd responds to this by ridiculing Njal and his sons, and commissioning Sigmund, one of Thord's killers, to compose a poem about Njal's beardlessness:

“Njal's wisdom is uneven,” said Hallgerd, “although he has advice on everything.” “What do you mean?” they said.

“I'll point to what's true,” said Hallgerd – “he didn't cart dung to his beard so that he would be like other men. Let's call him “Old Beardless”, and his sons “Dung-beardlings”, and you, Sigmund, make up a poem about this and give us the benefit of your being a poet.”

Sigmund said he was up to this and came up with three or four verses, all of them malicious. (74)

“Misvitr er Njáll,” segir Hallgerðr, “þar er hann kann til hversvetna ráð.” “Hvat er í því?” sögðu þær. “Þat mun ek til finna, sem satt er,” segir Hallgerðr, “er hann ók eigi í skegg sér, at hann væri sem aðrir karlmenn, ok kollum hann nú karl inn skegglaus, en sonu hans taðskegginga, ok kveð þú um nokkut, Sigmundr, ok lát oss njóta þess, er þú ert skáld.” Hann kvezk þess vera albúinn ok kvað þegar vísur þrjár eða fjórar, ok váru allar illar. (113)

Gunnarr comes upon the scene and demands that everyone in the house keep their silence on this matter, as slanderous verse is illegal and acceptable grounds for killing. Robert Cook identifies the significance of Hallgerd's comments, by insisting that

the slanderous nature of Hallgerðr's remarks and Sigmund's verses cannot be exaggerated. First, Njal's strong point, his wisdom, has been impugned. Second, the epithets for both Njál and his sons are a slur on their manhood: ‘Old Beardless’ is an insulting reference to a physical characteristic of Njál, and “Dung-beardlings” implies that his sons can only have beards by putting dung on their faces. (Njál's Saga 317)

By questioning Njal's masculinity and that of his offspring, hostilities between the families are refueled when the beggarwomen hurry to Bergthorsvol in order to share this information with Bergthora.

There is little written in the sagas concerning relationships between mothers and children, but what is known is that it is preferable to have dead, honourable male kin than living husbands and sons who bring shame to the family. It is within the female sphere of responsibility to remind her family of past wrongs when a new injury occurs: "In these Icelandic scenes of incitement, women recall to men the dishonour done to their families and often through the related dishonouring means of shame, satire, and accusations of unmanliness remind men of their unfulfilled duties in a vendetta society" ("Women's Work and Words: Setting the Stage for Strife in Medieval Irish and Icelandic Narrative" 60). After the beggarwomen tell Bergthora of Hallgerd's slander, she operates within her female domain by presenting her men with knowledge of the ironic gift:

Bergthora spoke to the men while they were at table: "Gifts have been given to you all, father and sons, and you're not real men unless you repay them."

"What gifts are these?" said Skarphedin.

"You, my sons, have all received the same gift: you have been called 'Dung-beardlings', and my husband has been called 'Old Beardless'".

"We're not made like women, that we become furious over everything," said Skarphedin.

"But Gunnarr became furious on your behalf," she said, "and he is said to be gentle. If you don't avenge this, you'll never avenge any shame." (74-75)

Bergþóra mælti, er menn sátu yfir borðum: "Gjafir eru yðr gefnar feðgum, ok verðið þér litlir drengir af, nema þér launið." "Hvernig eru gjafir þær?" segir Skarphedin. "Þér synir mínir eiguð allir eina gjof saman: þér eruð kallaðir taðskegglingar, en bóndi minn karl inn skegglausi." "Ekki hofu vér kvenna skap," segir Skarphedin, "at vér reiðimsk við ollu." "Reiddisk Gunnarr þó fyrir yðra hond," segir hon, "ok þykkair hann skapgóðr; ok ef þér rekið eigi þessa réttar, þá munuð þér engrar skammar reka." (114)

Due to the socially condoned expectation that Bergthora protect family honour at all cost, she never considers keeping the slander to herself, but uses it to try to incite her male kin into a rage that matches her own, demanding that they return the unwanted, unacceptable gift:

The Icelanders did have a model of feud and of disputing process. It was a model of balance and reciprocity. The central notion was one of requital, of repayment, captured variously in the verbs *launa* (to repay, to requite), *gjalda* (to repay, return, to pay), and *gefa* (to give). The model takes over the entire vocabulary of gift-exchange and inverts it. Spears thrown at someone are “gifts” that demand requital, as are broken bones and insults. Wrongs done to someone, like gifts given to him, unilaterally make the recipient a debtor, someone who owes requital. But in the world of feud, unlike the world of gift-exchange, the debts are debts of blood. (Bloodtaking and Peacemaking 182)

When Skarp-Hedin rebukes his mother for excessive emotion, she insults him by insinuating that, when compared to Gunnar, he does not react appropriately:

[I]t is not proper for Gunnar, who is not the object of the insult, to be more enraged than the victim of the insult. Bergthora's point is that the even-tempered Gunnar is unlikely to make inappropriate emotional displays, so the sole source of impropriety here would lie with her son if he should not be even more angry than Gunnar. (“Emotions and the Sagas” 101)

According to Stephan Grundy, Bergthora achieves her objective: “While the taunts of men could be ignored or met with other taunts and, if necessary, weapons, the shame laid on a man by a woman could only be dealt with by direct action in the matter that she had brought up to him” (“The Viking’s Mother: Relations Between Mothers and Their Grown Sons in Icelandic Sagas” 229). Once her sons have left the house armed, Njal remarks on her success: “Úti váru synir þínir með vápnum allir, ok munt þú nú hafa eggjat þá til nokkurs.” “Allvel skal ek þakka þeim, ef þeir segja mér víg Sigmundar,” segir Bergþóra (115). (“Your sons were outside, all of them, with weapons, and you must have egged them on to something.” “I will give them all my thanks if they tell me of the slaying of Sigmund,” said Bergthora [75-76]).

Following Gunnar's death and the events of the Atlantic interlude,⁷⁸ the Njalssons are threatened by Thrain Sigfusson's protection of the outlawed killer Hrapp. They travel to Thrain's home at Grjótá to address the grievances they suffered in Norway as the result of Thrain's actions concerning Hrapp, but are stymied in their attempts by the appearance of Hallgerd on the porch. Harsh words are exchanged, similar to those of a *senna*, and once again Hallgerd slanders all of the Njalssons, terminating compensation negotiations that would serve as the appropriate redress for past wrongs: "Farið heim, taðskegglingar," segir Hallgerd, "ok munu vér svá jafnan kalla yðr heðan af, en foður yðvarn karl inn skagglausa" (229). ("Go home, Dung-beardlings," said Hallgerd. "We're going to call you that from now on, and we'll call your father 'Old Beardless'" [156]). In response to the insult, Bergthora goads her sons and son-in-law Kari to take action against Thrain and Hrapp by insinuating that they are cowards and casting aspersions on their manhood: "Þat mun eigi nú ætla," segir Bergþóra, "at þér þorið vápn at hefja" (229). ("No one thinks any longer," said Bergthora, "that you have the nerve to use your weapons" [156]). Kari warns Bergthora that her sons are already eager enough to take action without her encouragement, and tension builds as the insults pile up.

Throughout the saga random women are drawn into the storyline to enforce the feminine role of urging the continuance of this bloodfeud. As Thrain, Hrapp, and companions are traveling to visit friends, they encounter poor women who need help crossing the Markarfljót. They assist the

⁷⁸ In chapters 81 through 90, Thrain Sigfusson travels to Norway where he develops a friendship with Earl Hakon. That same summer, Njal's sons Grim and Helgi take passage on a merchant ship that is driven off course by storms and is attacked by Vikings. Grim and Helgi fight well, earning the friendship of Kari Solmundarson, who is a retainer for Earl Sigurd Hlodvisson in Orkney and later marries into the family. The Njalssons spend some time in Orkney, then make their way to Norway. The Njalssons and Thrain Sigfusson prepare to return to Iceland at the same time when they are approached by a known murderer, Killer-Hrapp, who has impregnated an earl's daughter, burned down a temple and killed several men. The Njalssons refuse Hrapp passage to Iceland, but Thrain Sigfusson betrays his benefactor, Earl Hakon, by hiding Hrapp and sailing away before he can be detained by the Earl, who, in turn, decides the Njalssons assisted Thrain and orders that they be executed. The Njalssons are captured and imprisoned, but escape with the help of Kari Solmundarson, who brokers a peace-making exchange between the Njalssons and Earl Hakon. These events greatly contribute to the escalating aggression between the Njalssons and Thrain.

women, who continue in their journey until they reach Bergthorsvol, taking hospitality from Bergthora, who asks them about how they crossed the river. The women relate to Bergthora the unpleasant comments made about her family:

“Who helped you across the Markarfljót?” said Bergthora.

“The biggest show-offs around,” they said.

“And who were they?” said Bergthora.

“Thrain Sigfusson and his companions,” they said, “and we didn’t like the way they were so loud-mouthed and foul-mouthed in talking about your husband and his sons.”

“Many are unable to choose the words directed at them,” said Bergthora. (157-158)

“Hverr reiddi yðy yfir Markarfljót?” segir Bergþóra. “Þeir, er mestir oflátar eru,” segja þær. “Hverir váru þeir?” segir Bergþóra. “Þráinn Sigfússon ok fylgðarmenn hans,” sogðu þær; “en þat þótti oss at, er þeir váru svá fjolorðir ok illorðir hingat til bónda þíns ok sona hans.” “Margir kjósa ekki orð á sik”, segir Bergþóra. (230-231)

Far too helpful, these women also reveal the location of the insulters and how long they will be away from home:

Then the women went away, and Bergthora gave them good gifts and asked them how long Thrain would be away, and they said that he would be away four or five days. Bergthora then told this to her sons and her son-in-law Kari, and they talked at great length in secret. (158)

Síðan fóru þær í braut, ok gaf hon þeim góðar gjafir ok spurði þær, hversu lengi Þráinn mundi í brautu vera, en þær sogðu, at hnn mundi í braut vera fjórar nætr eða fimm. Síðan sagði hon sonum sínum ok Kára, mági sínum, ok toluðu þau lengi leyniliga. (231)

With her help and approval, the Njalssons dress in their best clothes and exact vengeance upon their enemies, killing both Thrain and Hrapp.

Although he had nothing to do with Thrain’s killing, Hoskuld Njalsson, Njal's illegitimate son, is killed as part of the ongoing Njalsson/Sigfússon feud. Claiming he never received compensation for Thrain’s death, Lyting, Thrain’s brother-in-law, strikes at the Njalssons where he sees a weakness, attacking Hoskuld as he rides alone towards his home. Hoskuld is killed and later found by his mother’s shepherd:

That evening Hrodny's shepherd found Hoskuld's body and went home and told her of the slaying of her son.

She spoke: "He isn't really dead -- was his head off?"

"No, it wasn't," he said.

"I'll know when I see him," she said. "Get my horse and sled."

He did and made everything ready, and then they went to where Hoskuld lay. She looked at his wounds and spoke: "It's as I thought -- he's not quite dead, and Njal can heal worse wounds than these." (169)

Þetta kveld it sama hafði smalamaðr Hróðnýjar fundit Hoskuld dauðan ok fór heim ok sagði henni víg sonar sins. Hon mælti: "Eigi mun hann dauðr, eða var af hofuðit?" "Eigi var þat," segir hann. "Vita mun ek, ef ek sé," segir hon, "ok tak þú hest minn ok akfæri." Hann gerði svá ok bjó um með ollu, ok síðan fóru þau þangat, sem han lá. Leit hon á sárin ok mælti: "Svá er sem mér kom í hug, at hann myndi eigi dauðr með ollu, ok mun Njáll græða stærri sár." (251)

When they arrive at , Hrodny and her shepherd place Hoskuld's body in the sheep shed, arranging it so it sits upright against the wall. Then Hrodny races into the house, disturbing Njal in bed, and claims that Hoskuld is injured and requires his father's help. When the Njalssons troop out to the shed to see Hoskuld, they immediately know that he is dead. Yet his mother had not performed the closing rite (169) for him -- closing his nostrils. This act of finality, as well as that of vengeance, she leaves for his half-brother Skarphedin: "Hróðný mælti: 'Þér fel ek á hendi, skarpheðinn, at hefna bróður þíns, ok þó at hann sé, eigi skilgetinn, þá ætla ek þó, at þér muni vel fara ok þú munir þó mest eptir ganga'" (252). ("Hrodny spoke: 'Skarphedin, I place in your hands the vengeance for your brother, and even though he was not born in wedlock, I expect you to do well and pursue this with the greatest zeal'" [170]). The bloody token, whether it be a corpse, body parts, or a blood-stained piece of cloth, is part of the inciting action.⁷⁹ Hrodny displays her dead son. This display of Hoskuld's body belongs to part of the "formalized ceremonies whereby a weak party within one group could incite a stronger member of the same group to take vengeance against another group for crimes committed against the inciter" ("Choosing the Avenger" 175). Bergthora supports her

⁷⁹ Hrodny displays her dead son. Hildigunnr uses a blood-stained cloak. Guthrun, of Laxdaela Saga, shows her sons a blood-stained sash, and Thorgerd, from Eyrbyggja Saga, uses her husband's severed head.

rival in this demand, egging her sons on though vengeance may cost them their lives. John Casey points out that no loss is too great for revenge; indeed, there is honour in vengeful sacrifice: “the greater a sacrifice a vengeance requires the more heroic it is” (Pagan Virtue: An Essay in Ethics

12). Bergthora is prepared to send her sons to meet death and goads them into action one last time:

Bergthora said, ‘You men amaze me. You kill when killing is scarcely called for, but when something like this happens you chew it over and brood about it until nothing comes of it. Hoskuld Hvitane-Priest will be here as soon as he hears about it; he will ask you to settle the matter peacefully, and you will grant his request. So if you really want to do anything, you must do it now.’ (170)

Bergþóra mælti: “Undarliga er yðr farit: Þér vegið víg þau, er yðr rekr lítit til, en maltið slíkt ok sjóðið fyrir yðr, svá at ekki verðr af; mun hér, þegar er spyrsk, koma Hoskuldr Hvitane-goði ok biðja yðr sætta, ok munuð þér veita honum þat, ok er nú til at ráða, ef þér vilið” (252)

Skarphedin recognises the pertinence of her words: “Skarpheðinn mælti: ‘Eggjar móðir vár oss nú logeggjun’ (252). (“Skarphedin said, ‘Our mother’s goading is well founded.’” [170]).

As she incites him, Bergthora intensifies Skarp-Hedin's anger but does not contradict his emotions: Bergthora's “words usually give form and shape to the desires of her sons, rather than forcing them into undesired positions or setting up conflicts between her words and their internal states” (Persuasion: Blood-Feud, Romance and the Disenfranchised 53). Jane Tolmie argues that the goadings are “sanctioned by the hotheaded sons and the culture of violent retribution, not by the thoughtful and peace-oriented Njal,” (Persuasion: Blood-Feud, Romance and the Disenfranchised 56) who is excluded from the scheming. Even when the Njalssons turn against their foster-brother Hoskuld Thrainsson, Njal is ignorant of their plans: “Bergþóra spurði Njál: “Hvat tala þeir úti?” “Ekki em ek í ráðagerð með þeim,” segir Njáll; “sjaldan var ek þá frá kvaddr, er in góðu váru ráðin.” (280). (“Bergthora asked Njal, ‘What are they discussing out there?’ ‘I’m not in their planning,’ said Njal, ‘but I was seldom left out when their plans were good’” [187]). Njal's exclusion is characteristic of the independence his sons display, choosing to keep their own counsel

rather than listen to their father preach about maintaining peace. Although Njal works consistently throughout the saga to secure the safety of his family,⁸⁰ the disobedience of both wife and sons places them all in peril.⁸¹

Within this particular saga women use a combination of several different techniques to force men to action. Although female inciting is the usual form of goading male kin to action, clever laughter is another device through which women urge their male relatives to uphold family honor.⁸² In the family sagas, women use cold humour to force action, as portrayed by Hildigunn, whose husband Hoskuld Thrainsson is killed by the Njalssons. Hildigunn's introduction to the reader delineates the kinship obligations that exist between her and Flosi and foreshadows the extremes to which she will go to avenge Hoskuld's death:

Hildigunn was the daughter of Flosi's brother Starkad. She was a woman with a mind of her own and very beautiful. Few women could match her skill at handiwork. She was an unusually tough and harsh-tempered woman, but a fine woman when she had to be. (163)

Hildiguðr hét dóttir Starkaðar, bróður Flosa; hon var skoungr mikill ok kvenna fríðust sýnum. Hon var svá hog, at fár konur váru, þær er hagari váru. Hon var allra kvenna grimmust ok skaphorðust ok drengr mikill, þar sem vel skyldi vera. (239)

Hildigunn wakes from nightmares the morning that Hoskuld is killed and sends people looking for him all over the farm. When he cannot be found, she takes two men with her into the field and discovers his body. Knowing the time may come when she has to push her relatives to seek the appropriate revenge, Hildigunn takes a blood-token from the slaughter -- her husband's cloak, a gift from her uncle Flosi: "Hon tók skikkjuna ok þerrði þar með blóðit allt ok vafði þar í blóðlifarnar

⁸⁰ Byock. "[T]he husbands consistently seek to settle their differences through compromise even though this constantly leads to conjugal conflict. This method is not the weakness of lamb-husbands, but is mature and reasonable conduct from heads of households hoping to maintain stability and to resolve disputes" (181).

⁸¹ For more on the relationships between fathers and sons, see Cathy Jorgenson Itnyre. "The Emotional Universe of Medieval Icelandic Fathers and Sons." *Medieval Family Roles: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996.)

⁸² For a discussion of laughter and grinning in the sagas, see Jaques Le Goff "Laughter in *Brennu-Njáls saga*" *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (Enfield Lock, Eng.: Híslarík, 1992) 161-165 and William E. Judd. "Valgerðr's Smile". *Scandinavian Studies* 56 (1984): 203-212.

ok braut svá saman skikkjuna ok lagði í kistu sína” (282). (“She picked up the cloak and wiped up all the blood with it and wrapped the clotted blood into the cloak and folded it and placed it in her chest” [189]).

The men naturally expected to seek vengeance or compensation for Hoskuld’s slaying shy away from their duty, justifying their lack of action by claiming close relations to the Njalssons. Thus, Hildigunn is forced to operationalize extreme female methods in order to employ proper vengeance. When her uncle Flosi hears of the slaying, he gathers a force and prepares to settle the dispute at the Althing. As he travels towards his destination, he stops to visit Hildigunn, who has prepared for his arrival.

Hildigunn welcomes her kinsman Flosi, the man who is obligated to seek vengeance for her husband’s death, to her home. Suspecting Flosi will try to settle the murder peacefully, Hildigunn ensures that he cannot accept compensation for Hoskuld’s death by visibly forcing the issue upon Flosi in a way that guarantees he cannot back down peacefully. Stéfan Einarsson comments on Hildigunn’s skill at the *hvöt*: “[Bergthora] and many other women are alert guardians to the old code of honor and do some magnificent things when there is vengeance to be done, though none excels in egging like the young, proud Hildigunn, inciting her uncle to kill Njal and his sons” (*A History of Icelandic Literature* 147). In order to incite Flosi, Hildigunn places him in the high seat, a spot formerly reserved for her dead husband, where she proceeds to laugh at him in response to his queries concerning this action: “[T]he empty high seat at Hildigunnr’s is a graphic representation of someone missing, a gaping hole in the family unit. It announces at once that Hoskuldr is dead and that in the absence of brothers, son, and father, Hildigunnr is now turning to Flosi as her next of kin.” (Clover 175). Hildigunn’s icy laughter foreshadows her clever plan. The honor she shows him is an obvious mockery because she knows how powerful the Njalssons are

within the land and that Flosi is reluctant to seek bloodshed rather than payment. But Flosi is not easily drawn into the emotional trap. He throws down the high-seat and upbraids Hildigunn for trying to treat him above his station.

Hildigunn's second tactic involves a shredded towel, a grim reminder of Hoskuld's torn and stained cloak. Preparing to eat before proceeding to the Althing, the men wash their hands. But the only towel available was "raufar einar ok numit til annars endans" (290) or "all in tatters and torn off at one end" (194). Refusing to dry his hands on such a rag, Flosi tears a corner from the tablecloth, then sits at the table to eat.

Since she has not been able to rouse Flosi's fury, Hildigunn resorts to an act unusual for saga women -- crying. Carol Clover notes that "[r]eferences to overt grieving are rare in the sagas, partly because sagas by nature rarely go into such matters, but also, it would seem, because in literature if not in life, well-born Norse women, like well-born Norse men, cultivated the stiff upper lip" (152). Hildigunn expects that her blatant show of grief will urge Flosi into taking harsher action than what he plans thus far:

Hildigunn entered the room and went before Flosi and wiped the hair away from her eyes and wept.

Flosi spoke: "Your spirits are heavy, kinswoman, and so you weep, but it is well that you weep for a good man."

"What action can I expect from you for the slaying, and what support?" she asked.

Flosi said, "I will prosecute the case to the full extent of the law, or else make a settlement that good men see as bringing honour to us in every way."

She spoke: "Hoskuld would have exacted blood-vengeance if it were his duty to take action for you." (194)

Þá kom Hildigunnr í stofuna ok gekk fyrir Flosa ok greiddi hárit frá augum sér ok grét. Flosi mælti: "Skappungt er þér nú, frændkona, er þú grætr, en þó er þat vel, at þú grætr góðan mann." "Hvert eptirmæli skal ek nú af þér hafa eða liðveizlu?" segir hon. Flosi mælti: "Sækja mun ek mál þitt til fullra laga eða veita til þeira sætta, er góðir menn sjá, at vér sém vel sœmðir af í alla staði." Hon mælti: "Hefna mundi Hoskuldr þín, ef hann ætti eptir þik at mæla." (290 - 291)

Because her uncle refuses to be swayed by compassion or grief, Hildigunn resorts to applying the traditional blood-token:

Hidigunn then went out and opened up her chest. She took from it the cloak which Flosi had given Hoskuld and in which Hoskuld was slain, and which she had kept there with all its blood. She went back into the main room with the cloak. She walked silently up to Flosi. Flosi had finished eating and the table had been cleared. Hildigunn placed the cloak on Flosi's shoulders; the dried blood poured down all over him. (194-195)

Hildigunnr gekk þá fram í skála ok lauk upp kistu sinni; tók hon þá upp skikkjuna, er Flosi hafði gefit Hoskuldi, ok í þeiri hafði Hoskuldr veginn verity, ok hafði hon þar varðveitt í blóðit alla. Hon gekk þá innar í stofuna með skikkjuna. Hon gekk þegjandi at Flosi. Þá var Flosi mettr ok fram borit af borðinu. Hildigunnr lagði þá yfir Flosa skikkjuna; dunði þá blóðit um hann allan. (291)

Not content to have draped him in the most graphic proof of Hoskuld's violent death, gifting him with the responsibility to seek blood-vengeance, Hildigunn exacerbates the goad further by swearing an oath that demands Flosi act: "Skýt ek því til guðs ok góðra manna, at ek særi þik fyrir alla krapta Krists þíns ok fyrir manndóm ok karlmennsku þína, at þú hefnir allra sára þeira, er hann hafði á sér dauðum, eða heit hvers manns níðingr ella" (291). ("In the name of God and all good men, I charge you, by all the powers of your Christ and by your courage and manliness, to avenge all the wounds which he received in dying -- or else be an object of contempt to all men" [195]). Although her words and actions may seem excessive, it is Hildigunn's duty to incite the revenge impulse: "In the feud situation, women's (and old men's) words are the equivalent of men's deeds; it is as incumbent on a woman to urge vengeance as it is incumbent on a man to take it" (Clover 145). The *hvöt* serves both to support her own honour and that of her dead husband: "This may be a woman seeking revenge, but it is at the same time a woman paying her dues to the dead – indeed, speaking *for* the dead...As his lamentor, Hildigunnr is the medium through which Hoskuldr's wounded corpse demands revenge" (Clover 179). Hoskuld has no other spokesperson to guarantee his slaying receives justice.

Flosi, horrified at being covered in the blood of his kinsman flings the cloak at Hildigunn and utters the famous proverb – “ok eru kold kvenna ráð” (292) or “cold are the counsels of women” (195). He then gathers an even greater force, abandons compensation negotiations at the Althing, and ensures the destruction of the Njalssons, burning them in their home at Bergthorsvol. Although the other women fade into the background as the saga progresses, Bergthora dies in the flames, along with her posterity. Her vengeance-seeking, the constant demand for reciprocity which begins with a social slight, ends in the final blow that removes the Njalssons entirely from the saga that bears their name. As recorded by the *Njala* composer, female-initiated feuds do not end until the family of one of the women is dead and there is no one left to take, or demand, revenge.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that what happens to Brynhild in the various treatments of her narratives is formulaic in the representation of the northern female literary figures who follow her. She is the Germanic Amazon archetype upon which Icelandic female strength is modeled, her deeds, and especially her words echoed by the women of the sagas.

Perhaps the best means of examining the strength of that claim is a closer comparison of the Germanic Amazon archetype, the Maiden Kings, and the *Íslendingasögur* whetters. To begin, the exceptional Maiden King of Chapter Two is described in detail: she is an only child who prepares herself to rule her father's kingdom by training in the arts of war, including weaponry and battle tactics. She knows she must maintain control of her kingdom through her own military prowess and the loyalty of her *comitatus* to avoid an undesirable marriage to an unworthy suitor. She masculinizes her name, dresses as a man, establishes a band of warriors, and has herself declared a king or leader. Although the reader is given no knowledge of her childhood or background, Brynhild's predilection for battle, her manly armor, and her desire to lead men to war echo in the description of the Maiden King.

The *meykonungr* is beautiful and skilled in the feminine arts, particularly sewing and weaving. Thornbjorg is particularly noteworthy for her abilities: "Svá hafa menn sagt af mey þessari, at hún var hverri konu kærni, þeirra er menn höfðu spurn af, um alt þat er til kvenmanns handa kom" (*Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* 49). ("She was brought up at home by her father and mother, and it's said she was better at all the feminine arts than any other woman" [*Hrólfr Gautreksson: A Viking Romance* 34].) Hervor also has these skills, although she prefers to be otherwise occupied: "Hon fæddisk upp með jarli ok var sterk sem karlar, ok þegar hon mátti sér nokkut, tamðisk hon meir við skot ok skjöld ok sverð en við sauma eða borða" (*The Saga of King*

Heidrek the Wise 10). (“She was brought up in the house of the jarl, and she was as strong as a man; as soon as she could do anything for herself she trained herself more with a bow and shield and sword than with needlework and embroidery” [The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise 10].) Once again, the echo of the Germanic Amazon is clear: “Þá var komin til Heimis Brynhildr, fóstura hans. Hon sat í einni skemmu við meyjar sínar. Hon kunni meira hagleik en aðrar konur. Hon lagði sinn borða með gulli ok saumaði á þau stórmerki er Sigurðr hafði gert” (The Saga of the Volsungs 42). (“Now Brynhild, Heimir's foster daughter, had come home. She stayed in a bower with her maidens. More skilled in handicraft than other women, she embroidered her tapestry with gold and on it stitched the stories of the noble deeds that Sigurd had wrought” [The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurðr the Dragon Slayer 74].)

The Maiden King expects to marry, as evidenced in the terms Thornbjorg establishes with her father concerning suitors: “ef nokkurir menn biðja mín, sem ek vil ekki játa, þá er líkara at ríki yðvart sé í náðum af þeirra ofsa, ef ek held andsvör í móti þeim” (Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar 49-50). (“[I]f any-one asks to marry me and I don't want him, there'll be a better chance of your kingdom being left in peace if you leave the answers to me” [Hrólf Gautreksson: A Viking Romance 35].) This demand to choose her own husband reverberates with the voice of the Germanic Amazon archetype, when Gunnar and Sigurd present the *bónorð* to Heimer who encourages the suit while informing the men of Brynhild's terms: “Heimer fagnar þeim vel...Heimer kvað hennar kjor vera, hvern hon skal eiga” (The Saga of the Volsungs 48). “He was well disposed to the match, provided Brynhild did not refuse. He said she was so proud that she would marry only the man she wanted” (80). Heimer clearly elucidates her expectations: “...ok kvazk þat hyggja at þann einn mundi hon eiga vilja er riði eld brennanda er sleginn er um sal hennar” (The Saga of the Volsungs 48). (“[S]he would only want to marry that man who rode

through the blazing fire surrounding [her hall]" [The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurðr the Dragon Slayer 80].)

The mental and physical abuse of the Maiden King's suitors functions as a strength and suitability test. No *meykonungr* remains unattached from the hero of the story, even if she does not marry him, so choosing a mate is a vigorous process. This is a pattern established by Brynhild, who demands that her suitors pass an excruciating physical and psychological challenge – they must either beat her at games or hurdle over a wall of flames to win her hand and succeed on the bridal quest.

When she does marry, the Maiden King relinquishes her military power and assumes the role of a wise woman in counseling her husband, particularly when he becomes involved with politics or considers going to war. And here the comparison between the *meykonungr* and the Germanic Amazon archetype ends. The Maiden King illustrates the shift in female power dynamics from violence to verbal persuasion. The predominant difference between the Germanic Amazon archetype and the Maiden King is that the archetype is violently forced into submission, while the Maiden King, an evolved version of the Germanic Amazon depicted centuries after the original Brynhild cycles, lays down her arms by choice.

The difference between the Maiden King and the further evolved *Íslendingasögur* whetters of Chapter Three is that the Maiden King eventually seeks peace, while the whetters goad and nag often reluctant husbands and sons to feud, pushing until the entire family of one woman is dead and there is no one left to take, or demand, revenge. This is the ultimate parallel to the fate of the Germanic Amazon archetype. Where the comparison between the Maiden King and the Germanic Amazon archetype ends, so begins the comparison between the female whetters of the Icelandic family sagas and their literary antecedent, Brynhild. Women in the *Íslendingasögur* do not raise

arms in battle. Like the married Germanic Amazon, they use words to achieve their ends. But before there is any action, there must first be a dispute between women. In *Njal's saga*, Bergthora slights Hallgerd by forcing her to move from her seat at the table to make room for Thorhalla, who has arrived late. Previous to this incident, the families have been friendly; Thorhalla has been shown great honour by being seated between the brides at Hallgerd's wedding. But now that Hallgerd is a guest and rightfully expects to receive similar courtesy at Bergthora's home, Bergthora and Thorhalla act in a manner that wounds Hallgerd's pride and compromises her position at the feast:

Bergthora went up to the cross-bench, together with Thorhalla, and spoke to Hallgerd: 'You must move aside for this woman.'

Hallgerd spoke: 'I'll not move aside for anyone, and I won't sit in the corner like a cast-off hag.'

'I decide things here,' said Bergthora.

After that Thorhalla sat down. (*Njal's Saga* 57)

Þá gekk Bergþóra at pallinum ok Þórhalla með henni, ok mælti Bergþóra til Hallgerðr: "Þú skalt þoka fyrir konu þessi." Hallgerðr mælti: "Hvergi mun ek þoka, því at engi hornkerling vil ek vera." "Ek skal hér ráða," sagði Bergþóra. Síðan settisk Þórhalla niðr. (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 91)

By insisting that she move, and doing it through a show of power, Bergthora and Thorhalla insult their guest in front of the most respectable members of the community.

In *Völsunga saga* and *The Nibelungenlied*, the dispute takes the shape of a *mannjafnaðr*, a comparison of men between queens. The *Völsunga saga* dispute begins in the river when the queens are bathing. Brynhild wades out farther into the water, which upsets Gudrun and starts a dispute about which woman, through her husband, has higher rank. When Brynhild claims her husband to be the more powerful man, Gudrun insults Brynhild and reveals that Sigurd deceived her by crossing the wall of flames into her keep and claiming her for Gunnar. Gudrun then produces the ring Sigurd took from Brynhild during the three days he stayed with her to prove the

point. In *The Nibelungenlied* the *mannjafnaðr* begins as the queens watch their husbands compete in games one evening. Sure that Siegfried is her husband's vassal, Brynhild insists that she holds a higher social station than Kriemhild, who in turn reveals that Siegfried had to assist Gunther in subduing his wife so he could be intimate with her: "den dīnen schœnen lîp/ minnet êrste Sîvrit, mîn vil lieber man:/ jâ enwas ez niht mîn brooder, der dir den magetuom an gewan./ War kômen dine sinne? Ez was ein arger list" (Das Nibelungenlied 133). ("Siegfried was the first to enjoy your lovely body, since it was not my brother who took your maidenhead. Where were your poor wits? – It was a vile trick" [The Nibelungenlied 114].)

Once the dispute has begun, the women use the formula for whetting established by Brynhild in Chapter One to draw men into their dispute: "a woman – injured by an injustice for which revenge is beyond her capability – addressed a male relative(s), explained the crime's effect on him, reproached him for not acting sooner, specified the requirements, and threatened dire consequences for noncompliance" (Old Norse Images of Women 165). Jane Tolmie observes that "[t]he show-and-tell of female incitement relies on assailable manhood to function properly. It hinges on the notion that manhood is publicly contested, and that reputation needs to be shored up with both word and deed" (Persuasion: Blood-feud, Romance and the Disenfranchised 18).

Bergthora goads the men in her family into action by insinuating that they are cowards and casting aspersions on their manhood: "Þat mun eigi nú ætla," segir Bergþóra, "at þér þorið vápn at hefja" (229). ("No one thinks any longer," said Bergthora, "that you have the nerve to use your weapons" [156]). Hallgerd uses a similar technique: "Mun ek fá mann til annan at gera þetta, ef þú þorir eigi." (Brennu-Njáls saga 93). ("I'll find another man to do this if you don't dare" [Njal's Saga 58-59].) The slight to male honor and familial standing within the community is an echo of the *hvöt* used by the Germanic Amazon: "Sigurðr hefir mik vélt ok eigi síðr þiik, þá er þú lézt hann

fara í mína sæng. Nú vile k eigi tvá menn eiga senn í einni holl, ok þetta skal vera bani Sigurðr eða þinn eða minn, því at hann hefir þat allt sagt Guðrúnu, en hon brigzlar mér” (57). (“Sigurd has betrayed me, and he betrayed you no less, when you let him come into my bed. Now I do not want to have two husbands at the same time in one hall. This shall be Sigurd's death or yours or mine, because he has told Gudrun everything and she reviles me” [88].) The saga audience knew that “the shame laid on a man by a woman could only be dealt with by direct action in the matter that she had brought up to him” (“The Viking’s Mother: Relations Between Mothers and Their Grown Sons in Icelandic Sagas” 229), which foreshadowed the action of the narrative. There is no choice left to them – men must seek vengeance, even at the cost of their lives.

Brynhild’s words and actions, relatively untouched by the transitions of her legend, held great sway over Icelandic saga composers, as evidenced by the aforementioned literary parallels. She *is* the Germanic Amazon archetype upon which Icelandic female strength is modeled, her voice and her deeds the foundation for power dynamics in the development of the unforgettable saga heroines.

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