The Valkyrian World of The Volsungs
- A study of Sexuality and Transgender

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* The appendix offers an overview of the three main families of the Saga; it is advised to study the appendix first.
Introduction

Research about female gender, norms, roles and depiction has become established in the academic world, especially among academics who want to read and analyse texts with new perspectives. Therefore I believe that an analysis of the presented female characters and Valkyries in *The Saga of The Volsungs* is of interest in order to examine how these female characters transgress norms of sexuality and gender roles. The purpose of this essay is to study how female characters contribute and affect the proceeding of the Saga, and how they are able to influence the events. How are the sexualities and the transgender roles of female characters portrayed in the Saga? More importantly, do any of the female traits change during the proceedings of the Saga, or do they remain the same? These are the questions this essay will answer and focus upon. Furthermore it is worth mentioning that the word “Saga”, with a capital letter, is used as an abbreviation for *The Saga of The Volsungs*.

By analysing the female characters we may further understand important values and common perceptions about gender roles of the saga era. For example we are told by Agneta Ney that warrior-women were viewed with a double perspective by authorities such as Saxo Grammaticus. The double perspective, Ney writes, lay in the fact that the warrior-women’s chastity was viewed as a thing positive; on the other hand, Saxo criticizes them for not following traditional female values such as marriage.¹

The analysis will be a study based on *The Saga of The Volsungs*, and a final conclusion will be presented in the end of the essay, with argumentative perspectives which are based on extracts from the text, as well as primary research. The essay will focus upon, and examine, five women, Hljod the Valkyrie, Signy, Brynhild, Gudrun and Svanhild. Their different characteristics will be studied to be able and find a common denominator, and the two themes which will be especially highlighted are female sexuality and, to some extent, their reproductive powers. By examining this I hope to achieve a deeper understanding of how women were able to affect, influence and even change people and events. The structure of the essay is based on different themes which can be found throughout the Saga, such as the Valkyrian reproductive powers and the female sexuality.

Background

*The Saga of The Volsungs* is believed to be based on a group of poems written in verse, which can be found in the poetic collection Codex Regius. The Saga was presumably written during the reign of the Norwegian King Haakon Haakonsson (r. 1217-1263). During his reign the monarchy was strengthened, an institution which would seek to obtain its legitimacy through genealogical ancestry. *The Saga of The Volsungs* would be a means to achieve legitimization for the monarchy through claims of ancestral descendant from Odin himself, and thereby the æsirs.

The Saga seems to be a prequel to *Ragnars saga Lodbrokar*, aiming to recall the maternal ancestry of Ragnar’s sons, whose mother was Aslaug, the daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild. Harald Fairhair for example claimed his descendence from Sigurd through Ragnar Lodbrokar, but since it was viewed as favourable to also have Christian kings in the genealogy the Norwegian kings included Olaf the Holy in their genealogy.

*The Saga of The Volsungs* displays a lineage begotten by Odin and furthermore six successive generations of that family line. The Codex Regius, though, does not mention the first four generations of the lineage; it is rather presumed that the author of the saga invented them with the help of other sources. The reader of Icelandic sagas should also be aware that all our literary evidence, including *The Saga of The Volsungs*, from Iceland was written during the Christian period. The sagas were produced and transmitted by Christian writers and therefore there is hardly any evidence, which has not been filtered through a Christian lens, dealing with the pagan period.

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5 Agneta Ney, *Drottningar och sköldmörs*, p. 106.
Onomastics

This chapter of the essay concerns only earlier research done by Agneta Ney, namely her onomastic one. Earlier research done by other authors will be imbedded throughout the “Analysis”.

With her onomastic study Ney tells us more than we may think at the first glance. In her article she discusses how people in The Middle Ages had a view that a child should live up to her already given name, which led to the fact that boys were often given names associated with heroism, battle and honour, while women were rather given names associated with beauty and love. That there was a continuity in the principle of name giving was an old Germanic pattern, that is, parts of the father’s or mother’s name was given to their children. This was done so that a genealogical line could be established, and further to transfer valuable traits and characteristics. The most prominent and obvious example of this would be our modern names, such as: Johansson, etcetera.

In the saga, this continuing principle of name giving is only seen in the family of the Volsungs. It is the prefix ‘Sig’ (‘Victory’) which appears frequently during the different generations of the family lineage. It begins with the son of Odin, named Sig-i, reoccurred again in the fourth generation with Sig-mund and his twin sister Sig-ny, the last one being the hero of the saga, Sig-urd. Ney also points out that the suffix ‘-mund’ and ‘-urd’ both mean ‘-protector’ or ‘-guardian’, and gives the name a patriarchal sense – indicating who is the head of the family. Typical male-names would be such as: Agn-arr, Gunn-arr and Sig-arr where the suffix ‘-arr’ means ‘-battle’. Another example would be: ‘Hogni’ – ‘Chop’, to chop something down. Female-names on the other hand, as mentioned earlier, would rather be thus: ‘Fridr’ – ‘Beauty’; but this is something which The saga of the Volsungs actually transgresses. The most common suffix among female-names in the saga is the suffix ‘-hild’ (‘-battle’): Borg-hild, Bekk-hild, Grim-hild, Svan-hild, and the most prominent; Bryn-hild. Ney says that this kind of name giving among women in the saga could illustrate some sort of shieldmaiden-idealization. She further writes that Valkyries are given names which associate to war, battle or weapons and that only Brynhild (‘Bryn’- means ‘[Coat of] Mail’) has the name of a Valkyrie, a statement I would like to criticize. There are only two women in the saga who, in a

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9 Ibid. p. 95-103.
direct sense of way, are mentioned to be Valkyries – Brynhild being the second, the first being Hljod. ‘Hljod’ means ‘Sound’ and the semantic field of Valkyrie names suggests that it is the clamorous sound of battle which here is depicted in her name, Quinn writes. The apparent differentiation between male/female-names in the saga tells us about the contemporary gender-world and how the Valkyries, in their male-names, were transgender.

**Analysis**

This part of the essay will construe different themes concerning women, themes which may be found in the Saga. First this chapter will show how the Saga moves from a mythological realm to a legendary realm.

**From Myth to Legend**

*The saga of the Volsungs* begins with a genealogical portrayal of the Volsung kin; and its ancestral father, the Saga tells, was Odin himself. We are told of how Sigi, the son of Odin, commits a murder and is therefore forced to leave his home. Odin takes it upon himself to guide his son, and thereby the pawns of fate are set in motion. The Saga, as the reader may see, begins with a strong connection to the mythological past of German beliefs, making Odin spark a dynasty which would last forever – maybe not physically, but in tongue and scripture. Throughout the Saga we may notice a move from myth to legend and the greatest example of this would be the frequency of Odin’s appearance. He is the first character to be mentioned, and thereby initiates the Saga, and is then frequently seen throughout the mythological part. He guides his son Sigi, he answers the prayers of Rerir, he gives Sigmund the sword and later claims it back, he takes the body of Sinfjotli, he instructs Sigurd how to deal with Fafnir, and then suddenly disappears. It is not until the very end of the Saga that Odin reappears, this time advising King Jormunrek – as he had advised Sigurd – how to deal with his enemies. Odin is actually the very last character speaking, thereby not only initiating the Saga but also ending it: by instructing King Jormunrek he literally ends the Saga and the lives of Hamdir and Sorli.

It is during this great gap of absence: from the instructions given to Sigurd till the instructions given to Jormunrek, that the legendary part of the Saga takes place. I would like to emphasize that Odin should be viewed as a parallel symbol to the heathen beliefs of contemporary Iceland. The heathen beliefs are the historical foundations of Icelandic history as Odin is to the

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Saga itself; and as the heathen beliefs were gradually suppressed in Iceland, Odin is gradually forgotten until he is mentioned no more and the legendary part takes form.

Another important distinction which should be stressed, between the mythological and legendary parts of the Saga, is the occurrence of halls contra strongholds/palaces. James W. Earl writes that the hall is “a symbol of the world of human existence”, since the one most distinguishable image the pagan Germanic people had from the other world was Valhall. It served as the dwelling place of great heroes fallen in battle, and it is from the Valhall that the heroes venture out against the forces of chaos at Ragnarok. Therefore the hall symbolizes cosmic order, and not only in this world but also the other one. It served as a place of formality; it “structured a traditional way of life” and “preserved a constellation of values and distinctions essential to the culture and therefore was not to be exchanged lightly for some more ‘advanced form, such as the city, the villa, the castle or the palace”, Earl writes. Therefore I’d like to emphasize that when King Volsung has the great hall built we may read it as a construction of order, structure, tradition and the birth of civilization. We are further told that there also was a large tree called Barnstock, which means “child-trunk”, in the hall. Raudvere points out the kind of association this tree brings to life, namely Yggdrasil – and the hall, she writes, therefore becomes the centre of the world and the Volsungs its ruler. The image of the hall as a residence of Kings occurs only during the mythological part, for example the hall of Volsung or the hall of Siggeir, but is later, during the legendary part, exchanged to strongholds – for example the strongholds of Heimir, Gjuki and Atli.

Valkyrian Fertility

When Sigi after many years establishes a kingdom he is murdered by his brothers-in-laws and it falls upon his son, Rerir, to avenge his father’s death. After Rerir’s successful revenge he marries but receives no children, and so he and his wife pray to the gods for help. Frigg, the wife of Odin, hears their prayers and mediates it to Odin who then orders Hljod, who is a Valkyrie and daughter of the giant Hrimnir, to give an apple to Rerir. Thus one day while he sits on a burial mound she, in the shape of a raven, drops the apple on his lap. The burial mound maybe pictures what awaits if Rerir does not succeed in begetting a child – and it is a

11 James W. Earl, *Tinking about Beowulf*, p. 115-120.
12 Ibid. p. 114.
strong contrast to the apple, death and life. Quinn points out that the apple, from other sources of Old Norse mythology, symbolizes the prime of life, and exemplifies it by mentioning the giant Thjazi who stole Idunn’s apples causing the gods to lose their vitality and grow old.\textsuperscript{14}

The burial mound scene may also be interpreted as if the contemporary time of the Saga (Re-rir) was made into being because of earlier accounts (the burial mound). And therefore Rerir (the present) rests upon the deeds of his ancestors (the dead and the past). Rerir returns to his wife and eats from the apple, she is then pregnant while Rerir has to return to the battlefields but he falls sick and dies. Notice what the narrator tells us about the death of Rerir: “He intended to go to Odin; in those days that seemed desirable to many.” His wife remains pregnant for six winters until she can’t live any longer, with her pregnancy, and requests to have the child cut out. Already in his birth the child is of great strength and, he kisses his mother before she dies – indicating some sort of awareness. He is given the name Volsung. Volsung takes after his father and becomes King of Hunland. He marries the daughter of Hrimnir, Hljod – the Valkyrie – and has ten sons and one daughter with her. The first son, Sigmund, and the daughter, Signy, are twins.

Concerning Hljod we should notice that she is the second woman in the Saga being mentioned by name, the first one being Frigg, the wife of Odin. We thereby should notice that the first two female characters mentioned by name are two women with great roots in the mythological realm, the first being a Goddess and the second a Valkyrie. The difference between these though would be the fact that Frigg is only mentioned in haste and her only interaction is with another God, Odin. Hljod on the other hand later becomes integrated in the genealogical line of the Volsung dynasty and plays a key role, not only for the dynasty’s continuing survival, but also for the Saga itself. When she begets Volsung she also begets a continuation. The interesting similarity between these two female characters; Frigg and Hljod, would be their similar functions. When Rerir and his wife age and remain childless they prey to the gods for divine help, but it is Frigg who hears their prayers and mediates it to Odin – as Hljod mediates between Odin and Rerir. The prayer goes thus, from utterance to action: Rerir – Frigg (mediating) – Odin – Hljod (mediating) – Rerir. Odin’s role would be to transform the uttered prayer into action and thereby fulfilling the prayer. In the case of Hljod we may also see that the Valkyries did not only choose among dead men but also among the living as well. Hljod for example “chooses” Volsung, a man who she sort of “begot”, and as Hljod has “begotten”

\textsuperscript{14} Agneta Ney (red.), \textit{Fornaldarsagaerne}. Judy Quinn, \textit{The Realisation of Mythological Design}, p. 132.
Volsung Brynhild also in a way “begets” Sigurd, by teaching and transferring her wisdom to him so that he may become a man. When Hljod gives birth to eleven children we clearly see that the Valkyries stand as a strong symbol of fertility among the living men. The fertility role of the Valkyries may easily be neglected as to only grant life among humans, as Hljod does, but we should also observe that the Valkyries grant life to the realm of the Gods, more explicitly to Valhalla, since they “beget” new heroes there as well, by choosing among fallen warriors on earth. Thereby the Valkyries incarnate fertility, whether it is among Gods or humans.

When Hljod then marries Volsung she becomes a link between the mythological past of the Saga and the Saga’s social life as she is gradually integrated.

**Female Desire**

In this chapter we are interested in the lives of Signy and Gudrun and their respective relations to their respective brother[s] and kin. Here I aim to show how Signy and Gudrun act in their respective pursuit of vengeance.

**Signy**

Siggeir is introduced in the Saga as the King of Gautland and he requests the hand of Signy in marriage. Volsung first asks Signy, who in return answers that it is his decision and that she will not disobey, even though it might be against her own will. The same evening as the marriage festivities take place Siggeir and Signy consummate their marriage by going to bed and soon after Siggeir leaves for Gautland. He invites Volsung to his hall since their meeting had been so short. When three months passes Volsung and his entire kin visit Siggeir, they travel by ship and when they arrive Signy calls on them for a private meeting where she tells them of Siggeir’s treacherous mind. She desires her kin to leave, gather their forces and come back another day, she further foresees that they will fail and die if they do not heed her advice. Upon this advice Volsung answers that he will not flee from fire nor iron, he asks her why he should not continue to keep this vow in his old age. Quinn writes that such zealous warriors as Volsung “were imagined as ultimately wishing death onto themselves in order to return to Odin.”15 This is a reasonable thought since we are told by the narrator himself that Rerir returned to Odin and that it was “desirable to many”.

Volsung wants no one to be able to taunt his sons as cowards, fearing death, and says that death is inevitable and nothing a man may escape. Signy begins to cry, and asks for relief

from Siggeir whereupon Volsung encourages her to fulfil her duties as a wife and return to her husband. Later a great battle takes place between the forces of Volsung and we are told that Volsung and his men went through King Siggeir’s ranks eight times but upon the ninth King Volsung fell. I believe this to be an allusion to the future when nine of Volsung’s sons die in the woods.

The Volsungs lose the battle and the brothers are taken prisoners and Signy talks with Siggeir in private where she says to him:

I want to ask that you not have my brothers killed so quickly, but rather that you have them put in stocks. For it is with me as in the saying, ‘the eye takes pleasure while it yet beholds.’ I do not ask anything further for them, for I do not think it would be of any use.

Siggeir approves of her request, only for sadistical reasons, that they may be tortured for a longer time. The brothers are bound to trunks and put out in the woods and every night a she-wolf comes and eats one of the brothers until Sigmund is the only one left – the earlier mentioned allusion becoming actualized. Signy sends honey to Sigmund and with the honey he manages to overpower the she-wolf and break free. There in the woods Sigmund stays and builds an underground dwelling after meeting and consolidating with his sister. Signy provides her brother with necessary items – Siggeir believes all of the Volsungs to be dead. The reader is not told how much time has passed during these events and the story continues by telling of Signys two sons, by Siggeir, who she sends to Sigmund so that he may see if they possess what is needed to avenge the Volsungs. Sigmund deems them unmanly, the first child only ten winters old, and Signy tells him to have them slain with the words: “Then take the boy and kill him. He need not live any longer.”

While Signy sits in her chamber there comes a witch passing by who Signy wishes to change shape with. The witch agrees to sleep with Siggeir instead and in the meanwhile Signy goes the woods where her brother dwells and claims to be lost, therefore Sigmund offers her shelter and she is allowed to sleep the night over. We are told that he constantly glances at her and finds her attractive. During the night Sigmund takes the initiative and they end up consummating but it’s not until three nights later Signy leaves and reshape-shifts. She then gives birth to her and her brother’s son whom she gives the name Sinfjotli, and only ten winters old he is sent to Sigmund for trial. Though, before he leaves, Signy also tests him. It is then mentioned

16 Jesse L. Byock (trans.), The Saga of The Volsungs, p. 41.
of Sigmund’s resistibility against poison but which Sinfjotli’s body can’t handle; whether it is in drink or food. Sinfjotli can only resist poison from the outside, for example if a snake would strike. Catharina Raudvere points out that a father’s essential function was to transfer his own traits to his son and this has partly been done in the case of Sigmund-Sinfjotli.17

They both go to Siggeir’s hall at evening tide and hide at the porch and Signy who is aware of this meets them and makes council, but one of her children sees them and tells Siggeir. Signy acts quickly, takes both her children and offers them to Sigmund and Sinfjotli so that they could be slain because of their betrayal. Sigmund answers “I will not kill your children, even if they have betrayed me” and this is where it gets interesting – since Sigmund earlier had slain two of Signy’s children, why one might ask? What justified the earlier cases but not these ones? Sinfjotli, though, acts and kills them both before Siggeirs feet – all this in vein since they both end up imprisoned in a barrow. Here Quinn argues; that which has been lost in “super-human poison immunity [concerning Sinfjotli] had been made up for in hyper-human kin loyalty, a trait encouraged by and exemplified by Signy.”18 This is a valid thought, especially since Signy, before she returns to the fire and her death, says to Sigmund: “Because of this he [Sinfjotli] has so much zeal” – when she reveals Sigmund to be the father of Sinfjotli. See her entire speech, marked in italic, in the next page.

Once again Signy becomes the saviour of her kin by smuggling in a sword to Sigmund and therefore enabling a way out for them from the barrow. When they’re both out of the barrow they set fire on the hall and Sigmund can reclaim the honour of his kin by declaring to Siggeir that not all of the Volsung’s are dead. Sigmund then calls out his sister, for he wants her to be saved, but she answers:

Now you shall know whether I remember the slaying of King Volsung by King Siggeir. I had our children killed when I thought them too slow in avenging our father, and I came to you in the forest in the shape of a sorceress, and Sinfjotli is our son. Because of this he has so much zeal; he is the child of both a son and a daughter of King Volsung. In everything I have worked toward the killing of King Siggeir. I have worked so hard to bring about vengeance that I am by no means fit to live. Willingly I shall now die with King Siggeir, although I married him reluctantly.19

19 Jesse L. Byock (trans.), The Saga of The Volsungs, p. 47.
She then kisses her brother and son and goes back into the fire and dies with her husband. The death of Signy after her revenge was completed, Jochens writes, indicates that revenge was her sole function.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Gudrun}

Gudrun accuses her brothers of having begrudged her of a husband and man, without equal, and that even Sigurd’s horse, who she talked with, was sorrowful and let his head down looking toward the earth. Gudrun then leaves her home and disappears into the woods, but soon continues to journey and finally reaches Denmark and stays there for three and a half years. There she entertains herself by making tapestry, depicting Sigmund among others. When Grimhild finds out where Gudrun is staying and Grimhild tells her sons that they are obliged to compensate her of her sorrows, her husband and son. They all travel to Denmark, in a great company of men, and there Grimhild once more gives a potion of forgetfulness, but this time to Gudrun. She forgets her grievances and rejoices in according desire with her brothers and mother, and later remarries with Atli. The Saga tells of King Atli’s deceitful plot to uncover the hidden treasure of King Sigmund, which the brothers of Gudrun now possessed. Gudrun tries to warn her brothers about Atli’s plot but her warnings end up in vein. Atli sends a man of his called Vingi who convinces Gunnar and Hogni to pledge that they will visit Atli. We are further told that Gunnar’s and Hogni’s wives were serving drinks and “It happened that Gunnar by this time was very drunk and was being offered much power. He could also not escape his destiny” and therefore he pledges Vingi that he and his brother Hogni will visit Atli. The two brothers then journey to Atli in the company of men but are soon betrayed at the gates of King Atli’s stronghold. A battle begins in the courtyard and Gudrun hears of the battle and throws off her cloak, runs out to meet her brothers and kisses them. During this episode the narrator himself tells us: “Gudrun, seeing that the game was going against her brothers, set a bold course. She put on a mail coat, took up a sword, and fought beside her brothers, advancing like the most valiant of men.” (my italic). We can now clearly see that a fighting woman is a bold woman and something unusual. The battle ravages on until a short armistice is introduced and Atli begins a brief dialogue with Hogni. Atli tells his enemies that the death of his sister, of all his woes, was the greatest one. After a while, when the battle takes place indoors, Gunnar and Hogni are captured and Atli orders the latter’s death. Atli’s goal is to find out the hidden location of the gold and when he taunts Gunnar with Hogni’s heart Gun-

nar tells him that he, now that the location is known to only him he has nothing more to waver about – since his brother already is dead. Gunnar is then thrown into a pit with snakes. Here though we are told that Gudrun sends him a harp which he plays with his toes, his hands being bound, so artfully that the snakes fall asleep – apart from the one who strikes him at the heart and causes his death.

Atli now initiates a conversation with Gudrun, bragging about the deaths he delivered to her brothers. He offers her peace and tries to satisfy her with gold but she says upfront: “You will never pay for my brothers to my satisfaction”, yet she immediately agrees with her next sentence “we women are often forced to bow to your strength. My kinsmen are now all dead and you alone have control over me. I shall accept my lot.” Gudrun and Atli now bury their respective relatives and during the evening Gudrun seizes her boys, which she has by Atli, and kills them. When Atli asks about the boys’ presence she answers that he has been served their skulls as cups, drinking their blood mixed with wine, and eating their roasted hearts. Afterward follows an exchange of accusations and malicious words.

The story continues and tells us that one of Hogni’s sons is left behind, named Niflung. He and Gudrun avenge the fallen relatives, Gudrun plunges the sword through Atli’s chest while he is asleep. Both of them planned and executed the deed together. Upon his death Atli speaks his last words with Gudrun and asks her to give him a proper funeral – she agrees and fulfills her promise.

“Signy” and “Gudrun” - A conclusion

These two women share the themes of *betrayal* and *vengeance*, themes which almost every woman in the saga encounters. Through the part chapter “Signy” we explicitly see that a woman should not execute vengeance herself, she should instead be the one inciting men to accomplish vengeance. She and Gudrun are the only women who kill their respective children, by their respective husbands, only to achieve a sort of vengeance. The interesting part is that Signy decides she should die with her husband, much because of the ill deeds that she has done to achieve her vengeance – ill deeds such as incest and the killing of her children. Gudrun as well tries to have herself killed, like Signy, but by water – and a strong contrast between these two women is created through *fire* and *water*. I believe the *fire* and *water* to be strong purifying acts: *fire* would be meant for the old heathens, the mythological part of the Saga – and *water* for the Christians, the legendary part. The contrast grows when we are told that Gudrun fails in her attempt of suicide and instead lives on, later she even remarries and
begets new children. For the children of Signy and Gudrun to be able and continue living, their mothers must have repented their ill deeds – maybe by a purification act as mentioned above. Signy does so by having herself killed and Sinfjotli therefore may see another day, but the story is different for Gudrun. The thought of repentance and absolution of sins would have been introduced to Iceland together with the Christian faith, making people more aware of their conscious sins. We can see that both Sigmund and Sigurd strive to make the right decisions, even though they sometimes fail, but the failure is unconscious – for example when Sigmund is too drunk to see that the poison would kill Sinfjotli. We may also notice, by the lives of Signy, Gudrun and Atli, that the foremost loyal bond between people was that between a brother and sister. We have Signy-Sigmund, Brynhild-Atli and Gudrun-Gunnar, both Atli and Gudrun give great lamentations for the deaths of their respective siblings, claiming that it has caused their greatest griefs in life. Both Signy and Gudrun try to warn their kin to come and visit, but their warnings are in vain and when the events unfold they reveal great devastation to their respective kin.

Signy, as I have pointed out, contrasts with Gudrun in many ways; another contrast which was not mentioned earlier would be the fact that Signy is an inciter, since she never tries to execute the vengeance against Siggeir with her own hands; while Gudrun takes up arms and fights side by side with her two brothers and thus takes the role of a shieldmaiden. Gudrun later also thrusts the sword through Atli when she and Niflung together call for vengeance. When Gudrun commits these acts she changes from an ordinary woman to a shieldmaiden, a spiritual transformation. Signy on the other hand changes her physical appearance when she shape-shifts and thereby both of them become some sort of anomaly. Whereby the mythological part emphasizes the physical transformation, Signy, the legendary part emphasizes the spiritual transformation, Gudrun.

There is one trait of Signy’s which I would like to emphasize more than any other, namely her zeal concerning her kin; how far she is prepared to travel on the road of vengeance. We may notice a continuance of traits and looks from father to child throughout the Saga. For example: Sinfjotli inherits a part of his mother’s zeal and a part of his father’s resistance to poison. Further we are told that Svanhild inherited her father’s, Sigurd’s, fierce eyes – which is the reason why the horses dare not move toward her until Jormunrek orders a bag to be put over her head and in such a way cover her eyes. There are many more contrasting events between the lives of Signy and Gudrun that could be mentioned. Signy for example manages to rescue her brother and her son, Sigmund and Sinfjotli, from the barrow while Gudrun does not –
when Gunnar lies in the snake pit. Signy gives her brother a sword, which he uses with his hands, while Gudrun gives her brother a harp, which he plays with his toes. The purpose of this conclusion would be to show how the female hearts of two different women lead to two different waypoints: one leading through the realm of mythology, represented by Signy, and the other through the realm of legend, represented by Gudrun. That is also why they constitute such contrasts.

The character of Gudrun raises many questions. How come that she seems to be the only female character who is more concerned of her husband than her own family? Her rage and anger against her own brothers makes her wander out to the woods and later reach Denmark where she stays. Her two brothers, mother, and other men, come and visit to try and conciliate with her so that she may return home with them. In no way do they succeed since her grief is too great, but what exactly is it that we see in this scenario? It is a scenario of its own sort. Never in the Saga has a sibling, as Gudrun, been betrayed to the extent of murder, her brothers having killed her husband. This leaves Gudrun paralyzed, not able to seek revenge for her husband since it would break all bonds of kinship and not able to forgive. There seems to be only one option left, to physically escape. But the brutal world soon once more reaches her, incarnated as the company who travels to Denmark. We have to remember that the Saga has moved from a mythological to a legendary level, and this could be one more sign of it. If that would be the case we could imagine the oath of marriage, which is given from husband to wife and vice versa, to be a symbol of the oath of vassalage, given from overlord to vassal and vice versa. Other interpretations should not be excluded and the scenario could be a teaching which the, presumably, Christian writers of the Saga would want to mediate. For as it says in the Scripture in various parts: Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:4-6 and Ephesians 5:31:

> And he answered and said to them, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”  

– Matthew 19:4-6.

Ney points out that this scenario could indicate a move from the natal family towards the marital\(^{21}\) – as a contrast to Signy’s relation to her husband and her kin. It is of importance to mention Jenny Jochen’s view concerning Gudrun’s desire for revenge against her own brothers for their slaying of Sigurd. Jochens writes that during the prehistory of the tribes young women

\(^{21}\) Agneta Ney, *Drottningar och sköldmör*, p. 94.
remained at home with their families while men rather roamed with their horse, sword and courage. During this period, which persisted into the age of migrations, social units remained small and women absorbed their suitors into the family, and therefore the bond between the woman and her family was more important than to her husband. Later though, as tribes became more settled, young men could no longer roam freely but had to stay at home, or sooner or later return, to secure their inheritance; thus the woman was rather absorbed into her husband’s family and became daughter-in-law. Jochens explains Gudrun’s desire for revenge against her brothers as a depiction of this change which occurred in the social life among settled tribes and large states; a change which led from uxorilocal to virilocal family units and finally made women feel more obliged and loyal towards their marital rather than their natal families.22

Female Sexuality

The Saga tells of when Sigurd came to the estate of Heimir, who was married to Brynhild’s sister, Bekkhild. The narrator tells that Bekkhild had “stayed at home and learned needlework and other feminine skills” while Brynhild took up arms and went to battle. Heimir and Bekkhild had a son named Alsvid. The narrator further says that “outside, men were playing at their sports” and “to amuse themselves they prepared their weapons, making arrow shafts and hunting with their hawks.” These passages clearly show the difference between female and male and their respective fields. Women have to stay indoors and use the needle, while men have to be outdoors and use the sword, the threshold is the line which divides men from women and their respective domains. This change which Brynhild undergoes is interesting; Jochens writes that Valkyries first were personified as goddesses and wise women, but later as prominent women in male roles – for example the maiden warrior or the traditional Valkyrie on horseback – and finally they were domesticated as weaving women.23

Alsvid greets Sigurd and offers him to stay and Sigurd accepts. Now one day, returning home from the woods with his hawks, hounds and followers, Sigurd’s hawk flies up to a high tower and settles by the window. When Sigurd goes after the hawk he sees Brynhild who is sitting with her maidens in a bower and the narrator says that she was more skilled in handicraft than other women. She was making a tapestry and embroidering it with gold and on the tapestry could be seen the past deeds of Sigurd: the slaying of Fafnir, the treasure and the death of Re-

gin. Both the beauty and work of Brynhild affects Sigurd and he is determined to speak with her. When he doesn’t join the men in their sports Alsvid talks with him and asks why he’s so quiet. Sigurd explains his problem and says that he will “give her gold and gain her love and mutual affection”. Alsvid explains that “There has yet to be a man that she allows to sit by her or to whom she gives ale to drink. She wants to go to war and win all kinds of fame” – and with these words he declares her a shieldmaiden, giving her the attributes of handing out drinks and strikes, with her hands and swords. The next day though, Sigurd visits the chambers of Brynhild and they have a talk. Sigurd declares his love and requests hers in turn but she explains herself to be a shieldmaiden –as Alsvid had done the day before. This kind of repetition I believe works to confirm Alsvid’s trustworthiness. The talk ends when they vow each other and Sigurd gives her a gold ring as a token of his love. The ring he gives to her, we are later told, is Andvaranautr – the cursed ring. It symbolizes death, and thereby we may read it as if Sigurd had given her a promise with a fate already sealed in failure and death.

Matters do not develop as Sigurd and Brynhild may wish. After this meeting Sigurd continues to travel until he reaches the estates of King Gjuki. Grimhild, the wife of Gjuki and mother of Gudrun, thinks of how more fortunate they will be if Sigurd would settle and marry her daughter. Thus one evening Grimhild offers a drink to Sigurd. He accepts, drinks, and then she says to him “King Gjuki shall be your father, and I your mother, while Gunnar and Hogni and all who swear the oath shall be your brothers. Then your equal will not be found”. Now Sigurd doesn’t remember Brynhild anymore and Gjuki and his sons later offer Gudrun as a bride to Sigurd, an offer which he accepts and they wed.

Now Gunnar seeks to marry Brynhild but he is not able to cross the great wall of fire – the fire I believe to be a symbol of her vow to Odin. Odin had, in a sort of way, forced her to marry but Brynhild made a counter-vow and swore to marry him who was the bravest. The fire would then serve as a sort of strainer which only the bravest might pass. Sigurd is the only one able to pass it and therefore he and Gunnar change appearances with each other. Sigurd rides through the flames and goes in to the hall where Brynhild sits. They begin a conversation and Sigurd succeeds in the matters of marriage on behalf of Gunnar and sleeps in Hlymdale for three nights.

During the nights Sigurd sleeps with his sword on the bed, between himself and Brynhild to symbolize that no sexual intercourse has occurred. After those three nights he returns to his waiting companions.
Later when Brynhild discovers their trick she becomes sorrowful and afflicted with great anger, since her vow – that she would only marry the bravest of men - given to Odin would not be fulfilled. Sigurd then visits her and I would like to emphasize Sigurd’s futile attempt to have her love instead of wrath. He offers himself in bed but she denies him, declaring that “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.” He then says that he would rather leave Gudrun and marry Brynhild than let her die, but she simply dismisses him by saying “I do not want you or anyone else” Brynhild wishes for Sigurd’s blood on a blade and he predicts and says to her “/…/ you will not live after me.” Later during their conversation the reader should notice that Brynhild is a steadfast woman. She knows what is left for her to do in life and she explains it in one of her sentences: “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.” Because of this conversation the reader clearly sees the future: Sigurd will die and then Brynhild soon after. There are also three steps in Sigurd’s attempt of appeasement: first he tries to ease her wrath by praising the sons of Gjuki and telling her of their great deed and worth. Secondly he offers himself in bed, and thirdly to leave Gudrun altogether. After his third attempt we are told that “his sides swelled so that the links of his mail burst” indicating his extreme sorrow and strength. Lars Lönnroth calls this a jartegn, omen, and a supernatural manifestation of pagan myth.24

“Female Sexuality” - A conclusion

Many things have changed as the Saga has moved from a mythological part to a legendary one. We may also notice a move from attractiveness toward love as Ney points out. Ney gives the examples of Helgi-Sigrun and Sigmund-Signy, attractiveness, and puts them in juxtaposition with Sigurd-Brynhild, love.25 By this change we may further notice that the mythological part emphasizes the physical while the legendary part emphasizes the spiritual – as we earlier saw with the anomaly changes of Signy and Gudrun.

When Helgi meets Sigrun he requests her to follow him but she answers briefly that “We have a different task before us from drinking with you.” Sigrun at this time already has a suitor, who she doesn’t want to wed, and therefore leaves Helgi with a choice. If Helgi is man enough to slay her suitor in battle she will gladly wed him, and so it happens. By this example we notice Helgi’s reaction to an, we have to presume, attractive woman. He immediately in-

25 Agneta Ney, Drottningar och sköldmör, p. 87.
vites her to follow him. Concerning the case of Sigmund-Signy we are told that Sigmund glanced at her, indicating the pleasure of the eye, and he acts out of sheer attractiveness when he invites her to bed. There is no room for feelings in their cases, but when the Saga moves from myth to legend we also notice a move from attractiveness toward love, here represented by the case of Sigurd-Brynhild. In the chapter above we see a clear distinction between the spheres of men and women: women are to sit indoors and make tapestries, which Brynhild does as we have seen, while men are out hunting game. Nature becomes a contrast to the house. In the chapter above we see that Sigurd is the one who pursues a marriage and expresses his feelings for her, while Brynhild is the one explaining her warrior-like nature – notice that the positions of man/woman have changed. From this we may also conclude that the text moves from attractiveness toward love. In the mythological part Helgi invites Sigun to follow him, because of her beauty, and we are told that Sigmund glanced at his sister and slept with her for three nights – when she has shape-shifted.

When Sigurd’s hawk flies up to Brynhild’s tower and Sigurd sees her for the first time after their last encounter we may notice a touch of classical troubadour love, amour courtois – in the shape of distant love. All in all, Sigurd’s and Brynhild’s love shows us a great share of feelings, even causing Sigurd’s iron mail to bursts because of his sorrow. The difference between the mythological and legendary part seems to be the feelings for one another.

The two most important traits of men through the Saga are courage and strength, and with these traits many great deeds may be accomplished and affect the political domain of men. This is most explicitly seen when Sigurd is married to Gudrun, a political affair, because of his courage and strength, two traits he had which ultimately led to the acquiring of great wealth. Women on the other hand only have one trait which enables them to influence and, if possible, even change the tide of politics among men. It is their sexuality. Throughout the Saga we see how women use their bodies, or the thought of a possible sexual encounter, “against” men to be able and influence their deeds, and ongoing or forthcoming events. First is Hljod who, by her fertility, ensures the survival of the Volsung kin. Then there is Signy who, by using her reproductive powers, ensures the possibility to execute a vengeance against Siggeir. Later there is Brynhild who incites Gunnar to kill Sigurd and threatens Gunnar with sexual absence, and even goes on to threaten to leave him altogether, if he does not obey her. Lastly there is Svanhild who makes king Jormunrek mad by the mere thought of her having had a carnal affair with his own son – to that point that he has both of them killed.
Transgender contra Anomaly

In this chapter the transgender acts of Brynhild and her later acts of femininity will be examined. Furthermore this chapter treats Gudrun, especially her deeds as a shieldmaiden, and her three marriages with Sigurd, Atli and Jormunrek.

Brynhild the Valkyrie

When Sigurd reaches Hindarfell for the first time he sees a great light “as if a fire were burning and the brightness reached up to the heavens.” Here I’d like to quote the whole scene:

And when he came to it, there stood before him a rampart of shields with a banner above it. Sigurd went into the rampart and saw a man lying there asleep, dressed in full armour. First he removed the helmet from the man’s head and saw that it was a woman. She was in a coat of mail so tight that it seemed to have grown into her flesh.

Sigurd believes her to be a man since she is fully dressed in armour, and it’s not until he removes her helmet that he realises his mistake. Note the last sentence which says that her armour seems to have grown into her flesh. This last sentence I believe to be literal but also metaphorical. It has literally grown into her flesh since she has been lying there for years waiting for someone like Sigurd to awaken her, but it has also grown into her flesh in another sort of way. She, later in the Saga known as Brynhild, was a Valkyrie who descended to the human world, punished by Odin for disobeying orders. The armour here stands as a symbol for her warlike character and because of her many years of service it has “grown into her flesh” – it has “become a part of her”. The armour has even become a part of her name: “Brynja”, which means “[Coat of] Mail”. Ney writes that it was prohibited for women to wear men’s clothing, and vice versa. The punishment for such a crime against identity could be banishment for three years. One may ask then why the Valkyries are allowed to dress in men’s clothing and even be mistaken, as Brynhild was, for a man. I believe it to serve a higher purpose. Even Thor, the macho-god himself, dresses as Freya when the giant Thrym steals his hammer Mjollnir, endangering the very balance of power between the gods and the giants. Thrym declares that only Freya’s hand in marriage could suffice as ransom for the weapon

26 Jesse L. Byock (trans.), The Saga of The Volsungs, p. 67.
27 Agneta Ney, Drottningar och sköldmör, p. 9.
and since Freya rejects this falls upon Thor to dress as her, pretends to agree and regain Mjollnir and thereby restore the order of balance.28

Brynhild tells Sigurd about Odin’s punishment: when she slew Hjalmgunnar, who Odin had promised victory, Odin had stuck her with a sleeping thorn in revenge. The god had said that she should never have victory again and he had made a vow that Brynhild would marry. She in her turn made a countervow that she would only marry a man who did not know fear. Forced to marry, her independence would diminish. Brynhild is demoted from the ranks of Valkyries, and instead becomes a shieldmaiden. Here we need to make a distinction between “Shieldmaiden” and “Valkyrie”. Even though both of them carry weapons, engage in battles and even perform acts of vengeance, they are not to be confused with each other. Valkyries are after all chosen by Odin, and their primary activity is that of choosing among fallen heroes. Shieldmaiden on the other hand are what the name indicates, maidens with shields, and need not be chosen as the Valkyries – shieldmaidens are rather a sort of an anomaly. Brynhild further transgresses gender roles when she names her daughter Aslaug, the privilege of name-giving belonged to fathers.29

In this encounter between Sigurd and Brynhild the theme of wisdom is put to the fore when Sigurd says to her that he has been told of her beauty and wisdom and that he wishes to put those to the test. He then says to her “Teach me the ways of mighty things” whereupon she answers “You know them better than I /…/” and then continues by offering to teach him about runes or other matters. She offers to drink with him and wishes that he will gain profit and renown from her wisdom and that he may remember what they speak of. Brynhild fills a goblet, gives it to Sigurd and begins speaking about the different types of runes, their meaning and where they should be written – proving her knowledge. For example: “Branch runes shall you know / if you wish to be a healer / and to know how to see to wounds. / On bark shall they be cut / and on needles of the tree / whose limbs lean to the east.” In this fashion she teaches him until she ends her speech. Sigurd then requests more words of wisdom from her, after praising her, and she continues. She tells him not to crave extreme revenge for the wrongdoings of his kinsmen. To control his temper with “foolish men at crowded gatherings, for they frequently speak worse than they know”, not to sleep close to the roads when traveling since creatures that bewilder men often live there. In such fashion she continues and gives

28 Thrymskvida.

29 Jenny Jochens, Old Norse Images of Women, p. 28.
him counsel. In the chapter of “The Valkyrian Fertility” I discussed how the wisdom of Brynhild fulfills Sigurd as a man and therefore in a sort of way she “begets” him. The Valkyrian fertility should therefore not only be restricted to physical begetting but also include a spiritual one.

One day Brynhild and Gudrun end up in a dispute while bathing in the river Rhine. The dispute begins because of Brynhild wading farther than Gudrun, whereupon Gudrun inquires of the reason. Brynhild tells her and says that they are not equals, her father and husband being more powerful and courageous than Gudrun’s. Thereafter Gudrun answers in anger and tells her the truth, that it in fact was Sigurd who rode through the flames. Brynhild becomes “as pale as death” and doesn’t speak one more word that day. During the night Sigurd and Gudrun talk about Brynhild and her silence and Sigurd advises her not to press matters any further “for once done, you will repent it”. That morning Brynhild and Gudrun have another talk, this time Gudrun begins the conversation asking for the reason of her silence. Brynhild explains that it is because of Gudrun enjoying Sigurd and his treasure instead of her and Gudrun immediately declares her innocence by telling Brynhild that she did not know their agreement of marriage. Brynhild calls it a lie, and her acts betrayal. Gudrun then says that Brynhild is better married than she deserves whereupon Brynhild says that she would have been content if Gudrun would not have had the nobler man. By not defending herself, but rather praising her adversary, Gudrun shows the ill minded character of Brynhild. Brynhild is the one who ends the conversation and her grief increases. During the night she lies down as if she’s dead and Gunnar asks what it is that waxes her, after some persistence by him she answers in a remarkable way, saying:

What did you do with the ring I gave you? King Budli gave me this ring at our last parting, when you, the sons of King Gjuki, came to him and swore you would destroy and burn if you did not get me. He then took me aside and asked which man of those who had come I would choose. But I offered to defend the land and to be commander of a third of the army. There were then two choices at hand: either I would have to marry the man he wished or give up all wealth and his pledge of friendship. He said that his friendship was more profitable for me than his anger. Then I debated with myself whether I should submit to his will or kill many men. I thought myself powerless to contend with him. So it happened that 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.\textsuperscript{30}

Gunnar makes an allusion to Brynhild being a Valkyrie when he says that she “tortment[s] dead men”, this negative portrayal of her could be a mere reflection of his temporary displeasure. She defends herself by professing her nature to be different and further says to him: “I will neither drink nor play chess, speak entertainingly, embroider fair garments with gold, nor give you advice” and strikes her tapestry so that it tears apart; then Brynhild tries to slay Gunnar but is fettered by Hogni.

“Brynhild the Valkyrie” - A conclusion

What we see during the episodes with Sigurd and Brynhild are transgender images: first when she is mistaken for a man because of her armour and secondly when she teaches her wisdom to Sigurd. The transgender traits of a Valkyrie are allowed since she ultimately helps to maintain balance between the forces during Ragnarok, equating Thor when he restored balance between the gods and giants when he dressed as Freya.

In the episode of Gudrun and Brynhild bathing in the river Rhine, Brynhild may easily seem to be acting out of pride when she claims the bravest of men. I would like to argue against this perception. Namely what we may see during her speech – quoted above – directed at Gunnar are some thoughts of her which made her act in certain ways. What may easily be viewed as pride, during the bathing episode, changes and takes the shape of concern for her future and father in the speech directed at Gunnar. As a woman she feels a sense of paralysis, an inability to act – which is seen when she offers to defend her father’s kingdom, debates with herself, and then concludes that she is powerless compared to him. But by marrying the greatest warrior alive she may strengthen herself because he would, as she herself says: “kill those men who I decided should die.” Marriage here becomes a paradox since she by marrying will lose her independence but yet may be strengthened because of her husband’s abilities and attributes which she will have at her disposal. Jochens writes that a woman’s strength was at its peak before marriage, during young adulthood, and that her warrior-like character could only be taken seriously at that period of life.\textsuperscript{31} Brynhild further transgresses gender roles when she names her daughter Aslaug, the privilege of name-giving belonged to fathers.

\textsuperscript{30} Jesse L. Byock (trans.), \textit{The Saga of The Volsungs}, p. 84-5.

\textsuperscript{31} Jenny Jochens, \textit{Old Norse Images of Women}, p. 94.
Brynhild, I would argue, is the most interesting character in the Saga since she lives and acts in both the mythological and the legendary parts. She therefore becomes a living historical relic, with other words she is *the mediating history incarnated*. Agneta Ney gives an example of this; she mentions the scene when Brynhild makes a tapestry depicting the historical deeds of Sigurd, and thereby Brynhild becomes a mediator of history, Ney argues.\(^{32}\) Brynhild does not only mediate other peoples’ historical deeds but also values of the past. During the mythological part of the Saga women are rather viewed as rewards which are acquired by men, the one most distinguishable case would be when Helgi first encounters Sigrun and he demands her to follow him, she denies. He first needs to have her other suitor killed before he can claim his reward. This view is carried on into the legendary part by Brynhild who wants to marry the bravest of men, since no other man deserves [the reward] her. Gudrun on the other hand is content as long as she lives a merry life with her husband and family.

**Gudrun the Shieldmaiden**

One day Gudrun tells one of her maidens about a dream of hers, that she in the dream had a hawk [Sigurd] with golden hue on her hand, and when Gudrun is not given any satisfactory answer about its meaning she decides to ask Brynhild about the dream. Brynhild had as well dreamt of Gudrun, that she would visit her. When Gudrun arrives they begin talking of valiant kings and warriors and who they view to be the greatest among them. It is during this conversation that Gudrun first hears about Sigurd. Gudrun then requests Brynhild to interpret her dream. The dream itself is of no essence to the essay, instead I will focus upon how it affects the continuing story, for it relates how Brynhild foretells the future when she interprets the dream. She tells Gudrun that she will meet Sigurd – the man Brynhild had chosen for husband. That Grimhild will give him bewitched mead and thus bringing them all to grief. Brynhild further tells Gudrun that she will marry Sigurd and quickly lose him: finally she will wed king Atli, losing her own brothers and then kill Atli herself. All of this which Brynhild foretells is later fulfilled. The foretelling ability of Brynhild is an indication of her wisdom, a sort of wisdom which women generally lack – but this lack of wisdom later changes in the case of Gudrun after she has wandered through the woods.

After a conversation between Sigurd and Brynhild Gunnar has a brief talk with Brynhild and she incites him to have Sigurd killed since she has shared the same bed with him and she “does not want to have two husbands at the same time in one hall”, thereby making Sigurd a

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\(^{32}\) Agneta Ney, *Drottningar och sköldmör*, p. 82.
traitor of oaths – since he and Gunnar has vowed each other brotherhood. Ney points out that in the institution of vengeance the woman’s role was to be the inciter, not the executer. Brynhild puts Gunnar in a dilemma and says that he will “lose both power and wealth”, life and her, unless he kills Sigurd and his son. Gunnar debates with himself for a while, seeing that it will be a disgrace breaking the oath given to Sigurd but decides that it will be an even greater disgrace if Brynhild were to leave him. He reasons with his brother Hogni who tries to convince him of Sigurd’s great worth. But Gunnar makes up his mind; they will have Guttorm execute the plan since he is not bound by oath. With the help of their mother Grimhild and her witchcraft they make Guttorm violent and fierce. Guttorm goes in to Sigurd’s room to complete the ill deed twice but turns back both times, the third time though he runs his sword through Sigurd’s chest and the wounded hero takes his sword Gram and throws it after Guttorm who is already leaving at the door. The sword strikes him and cuts him into two pieces from the waist, and Gudrun who was sleeping next to Sigurd wakes up in his blood with great grief and lamentations. Sigurd has a brief speech before he dies where he tries to comfort Gudrun and assures her of his innocence, not betraying her brothers and always keeping the oath. He also tells her that this was his fate and that Brynhild was the one who caused this. Upon hearing the lamentations of Gudrun Brynhild begins to laugh and Gunnar begins to realise his own crime and says that Brynhild deserves to see her brother Atli killed before her eyes. Hogni and Gudrun have their brief speeches; Gudrun tells her brothers how Sigurd was their luck and strength, and after that Brynhild talks. She tells them that an ill fate awaits their family for being breakers of oaths and she also assures them of Sigurd’s innocence, telling them that he put a sword between him and her in the bed – keeping to his oath. Jochens writes that it was considered improper for men to kill women; a solution would be if women committed suicide, and in pagan traditions suicide therefore became the favourite method of eliminating heroines. In accordance with Jochen’s statement Brynhild desires to die and stabs herself to death. She has a final request though; that they will build a great pyre and there burn the dead body of hers, Sigurd, and his three year old boy who she had ordered to be killed. It is done as she wishes and there the lives of Sigurd and Brynhild end. Gale R. Owen-Crocker makes an interesting point when she discusses the fourth and last funeral in the epic poem Beowulf. A pagan cremation was meant to immediately convey the dead one to ‘Paradise’

33 Agneta Ney, Drottningar och sköldmör, p. 58.
34 Jenny Jochens, Old Norse Images of Women, p. 146.
(presumably Valhalla in that case), she emphasizes.\(^{35}\) It is hard then not to imagine that Sigurd, as his ancestors before him (Rerir, Volsung and his half-brother Sinfjotli), is immediately sent to the great hall of the afterlife. The thought would be that Brynhild, who earlier had been a Valkyrie and whose job had been to send dead heroes to Valhalla, is carrying out her last “delivery” of a dead hero – since her body is burning together with Sigurd’s, accompanying him into the next life.

Gudrun later marries Atli who one night awakes with an awful dream, which Gudrun interprets. Atli plots to have her brothers killed but Gudrun is aware of his ill mind and tries to warn her brothers with a ring. Her warnings do not succeed and so her brothers travel to Atli where they are engaged in battle. During the battle Gudrun fights with them but in vain since her brothers end up imprisoned and are later killed. Gudrun avenges her brothers together with her nephew Niflung and kills Atli, as Brynhild earlier had foretold. Even though Gudrun has been given a potion of forgetfulness and remarries with Atli, and later Jormunrek, her great connection with Sigurd never fades. This is seen when she is willing to sacrifice the lives of her three sons only to be able and avenge her daughter Svanhild, by Sigurd.

“Gudrun the Shieldmaiden” - A conclusion

In the previous chapter we saw an inability of Gudrun to interpret dreams, an ability which needs wisdom and therefore an ability which only Brynhild possessed. My theory is that the woods which Gudrun wanders through become a ritualistic place. The woods are a place of hunting, danger and are therefore the sphere of men as I earlier have argued. There are three women who wander through the woods in the Saga, chronologically: Signy, Borghild and Gudrun. Signy makes it through the woods but soon dies; Borghild dies in the woods; therefore Gudrun is the only woman who makes it through and lives. Since she has survived the domain of men she therefore obtains the traits of men as well, which would be wisdom and energetics. This is explicitly seen when Gudrun first is able to interpret Atli’s dream and later when she fights along her brothers, and lastly when she kills Atli together with Niflung – making her deed equal to a man’s. Once Gudrun stepped outside the woods she came back reborn to the world of men, this time wiser and more energetic. Jochens, however, points out that none of Gudrun’s acts were especially male-like; it would not require any great strength from her to kill her sons and a sleeping man, and further to set fire to the building. All these acts, Jochens writes, fall within the physical capacity of a female. Furthermore she explains

the reason for Gudrun’s killing of her children. Jochens says that a wife, by having her children sacrificed, would make her husband understand that there could be no hope left that anyone would avenge him.\footnote{Jenny Jochens, \textit{Old Norse Images of Women}, p. 140-2.}

**Final Conclusion**

In the earlier conclusions the research questions have been answered, in this final conclusion though I will treat the purpose. This essay has shown that the female characters in the Saga are able to influence and alter men, politics and events, most of all through their sexuality and reproductive powers. These two qualities, though, change during the course of the Saga as it moves form a mythological realm to a more realistic and legendary period. The character with the greatest reproductive power is Hljod, the Valkyrie, who begets eleven children, two of whom are twins, and enables the survival of the Volsung kin and the Saga itself. This great fertile capability is never found again among other women and may therefore be attributed to her Valkyrian-like nature. As the Saga moves from myth to legend so do female characters change from goddess-like creatures to human beings, such as Brynhild. She, who first is found dressed in armour and battle helmet, and may therefore easily be mistaken for an energetic woman, turns out to become a weaving wife who rather urges other men to vengeance than acts herself. Brynhild therefore also makes a physical move from a stronghold where she controls the sword, Hindarfell, to a woman’s chamber where she uses her needle, in the palace of Heimir. The sexuality of characters also experiences a kind of alteration and a shift of focus, from physical attractiveness to love based on feelings, occurs. The female sexual infidelity is taken with uttermost seriousness and is viewed as betrayal. Two parts from the Saga which makes this equalisation distinct are: first when Brynhild lies to Gunnar, only to provoke him, that she and Sigurd have had carnal affairs: and then when king Jormunrek hears that his son has had sexual intercourse with his new bride, Svanhild. Interesting to note is that none of these two sexual affairs actually happened, Brynhild lied and Jormunrek heard lies as well. Both Gunnar and Jormunrek, though, avenge their presumed enemies. Gunnar plans the murder of Sigurd, and Jormunrek orders the execution of his son and Svanhild, exclusively because they are viewed as oath breakers and the avengers as afflicted by betrayal.

The themes of betrayal and vengeance are the two pillars which the Saga is built upon, and they pervade all male characters. One way, for female characters, to be able and influence or
alter male characters and their political affairs, or events, would be to exploit their feelings towards betrayal and vengeance, as Brynhild did with Gunnar against Sigurd. Since sexual infidelity is viewed as a form of oath breaking women in the Saga are able to use their sexuality to influence the opinion and actions of men. Sexuality though is not the only tool available for women to impinge their will, and Grimhild conveys that magic could affect as well. Twice she brewed potions of forgetfulness, first she gave it to Sigurd so that he forgot his vows, and later to her own daughter Gudrun, so that she would dispose her grudge against her own brothers. Even though Grimhild through her magic was able to alter their course of action at the moment, she seems to be unsuccessful all the more while time goes by. By all means, Sigurd did forget that he was engaged to Brynhild, he even forgot Brynhild herself, but his memories returned once he was married to Gudrun and the potion could then be viewed as a failure. The potion which was given to Gudrun did as well affect her, but her deep feelings of love towards her late husband Sigurd never broke, it manifested itself when she was willing to sacrifice her three sons only to avenge her daughter Svanhild, by Sigurd. Gudrun was well aware that she sent her three sons to a certain death, even though she tried to change the outcome by improving their armours, but it was an outcome that she was willing to risk. The potions made by Grimhild offered a temporary memory loss and gave the drinker a momentary pleasure by relocating her to a world without concerns. Her potions lose their intoxicating effect, much as the mead which was served in the halls, and much as the writing with which the poet distracts his thoughts.
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Appendix

Here are presented the two main family trees: Volsung and Gjuki, but I have also included the Budli kin.

* After the death of Sigurd
The kin of Gjuki

The kin of Budli