

Háskóli Íslands
Hugvísindasvið
Medieval Icelandic Studies

Dread Sisterhood:

Conceptions of the Feminine in Norse Depictions of Death

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í 2015

Meredith Catherine Moore

Kt.: 300791-4849

Leiðbeinandi: Gísli Sigurðsson

Ágúst 2015

Abstract

The phenomenon of death is universal, and every culture develops stories and figures to reflect their conceptions of death with regard to the society in which the stories were made. Óðinn as a death-god is preeminent in Old Icelandic literature, and Valhalla reflects the societal views of a good death and a paradise of the masculine conception. This thesis, however, intends to argue that there was an overarching special relationship between the social feminine and death in the Old Icelandic theatre, even with regards to Óðinn; a subject that seems somewhat lacking in scholarship beyond specific investigations of individual cases like valkyries and *fylgja*. Looking through the cases present in the literature, this thesis will attempt to present the evidence for a connection between death and the feminine, and link those cases to themes of death that they share, especially in regards to women, but also with regards to subjects like that of Óðinn as a god of death, as he works with and through the feminine.

Ágrip

Fyrirbærinum af dauða er alhliða, og sérhver menning þróar sögur og tölur endurspegla hugmyndir þeirra dauða með tilliti til samfélagsins þar sem sögur voru gerðar. Óðinn sem dauða-guð er áberandi í forníslenskum bókmenntum og Valhöll endurspeglar samfélagslegu skoðanir gott dauða og paradís á karlkyns getnaði. Þessi ritgerð, þó hyggst að halda því fram að það var sérstaka samband á milli félagslega kvenleg og dauða í forníslenskum bókmenntum, jafnvel með tilliti til Óðins; efni sem virðist nokkuð ábótavant í námsstyrk út sérstakar prófanir á einstökum málum eins og valkyrjum og fylgja. Horfa í gegnum tilvikum til staðar í bókmenntum, þessi ritgerð mun reyna að kynna vísbendingar um tengsl milli dauða og kvenleg, og tengja þau mál til þemu dauða að þeir deila, sérstaklega í sambandi við konur, en einnig með tilliti til einstaklinga eins og að Óðinn sem guð dauðans, sem hann vinnur með og í gegnum kvenleg.

Acknowledgements

Here is where I sigh a breath of relief and finally get to recognize all the people who deserve to be thanked. Firstly, a great deal of thanks to the MIS program and those running it, for guiding me through the last year and giving me the opportunity to spend a year in a wonderful place, doing what I spent years dreaming of, but never thought I would actually be able to do. Thank you to my supervisor, Gísli Sigurðsson, for all of the thoughtful comments and advice that guided me towards this final draft. Finally and most especially, a thank you to my family and friends – to my grandparents, who through their stories fostered a love for history and the past, to my parents who have been so supportive and there for me when I was at my lowest, to my sister who kept me laughing, and to my friends Kate and Alison, who never doubted me and believed in me even when I didn't necessarily believe in myself. Thank you to everyone, and I love you all.

Introduction: The Beginning of the End

Everything that ends has a beginning – sun rises, sun sets; the first page of a book leads inevitably to the last; the opening sequence of a film to the credits; the opening and closing of a circle. Those endings – deaths – are the universal constant, the one experience everything that lives shares. Humanity has ever been fascinated with the ending of things, and where it leads – how the living conceive of the dead, and how the dead relate to them. To that end we have tried, over our millennia, to reconcile ourselves with the unknown that is death by storytelling about what comes after, and what it means to those still living. There are as many stories as there are communities of people for where the dead go, the nature of the spirit after death, the proper methods of caring for and disposing of the dead, notions of what the dead need both as memorial and as accompaniment into the next world, if such a world is conceived of. Such universal, if varied, stories have their mirrors in life – in power, and in ritual, and all the small actions we take to keep ourselves satisfied in the knowledge that we have done well by the dead, done by them as we would wish done by ourselves, and according to the tenets and customs of our people. Our relationship with death is both formulation and formulator of our conceptions of death as the living relate to it through our actions, our positions and our stories.

The Norse corpus of stories is rich with death, in both a fantastic, mythological sense, as Snorri's Eddas, and a more normalized sense, as of the *Íslendingasögur*. The sagas are rife with death as result of feud, of weather and illness – they are, in their ways, the literary pictures of death as it could have occurred in Iceland in the centuries when they were written, even if they were depicting a much earlier time. Death by exposure would naturally have been part of a medieval Icelander's world, and attempting to travel the country in the winter months was dangerous, even as it continues to be dangerous today if one approaches it without proper preparedness. The system, or cycle, of honour and revenge inherent to these sagas, especially in the family sagas and most famously exemplified in *Njála*, while dramatized, is an operant part of death in the society, just as much as the weather, or bad crops. Deaths could be had at sea, or in sickness, in revenge or as a result of the fantastic, and that presence is as rife in the storytelling as in life. It is a powerful phenomenon, and part of our way of dealing

with the power that death has over us all is to attribute that power to certain specific things – certain ideas and images that help us to understand it, and to reconcile ourselves with the otherworldly, whether in a supernatural or social sense. That kind of storied imagery has power, and importance with how we relate to death, whether as an indiscriminate claimer of souls, or as a careful selection of those who are fated to die. The focus of this thesis is on those supernatural figures that capture death in that manner. That is to say, the figures that catch that idea of death in those old stories as part of their identity.

As it stands, what we know about the Norse idea of death is largely dictated by a comparatively small corpus of literature, if one looks at the mass corpus of the Christian tradition, which, given the Christian focus on heaven and resurrection, is understandably large. For example, in the Christian tradition we have corpuses of literature exclusively dedicated to hell-visions, from swaths of time spanning Gregory to Dante, and written from Italy to Ireland and beyond, all dealing with death and the agents of it in formulaic detail, though admittedly in an often more political or allegorical sense than a mythological one.¹ Not so in Scandinavia. Our corpus is largely limited to Eddic texts, courtesy of Snorri Sturluson, things gleaned from saga texts (both *Íslendingasögur* or, more commonly, *Fornaldarsögur*), a few episodes from Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, and a smattering of poetry found buried in other works – omitting, of course, legal documents and the like for their more grounded social setting rather than necessarily their mythological weight (though of course it must be noted that laws are not *immune* from real social and religious anxieties). This understood, we have to take the already enormously broad idea of 'death' as it is in whole form, and pare it to the idea of death as it is understood in a supernatural context, which is to say, more or less unconcerned with its appearance in ritual so much as its appearance and agents in a folkloric or mythological realm. Of course the necessary issue with any investigation of the pagan mythology and folklore of Scandinavia requires an eye to the shortcomings of the sources that carry it.

¹ A good English book for classic visionary literature from periods spanning periods contemporary to the times spanning pre-settlement down to the 15th century is Eileen Gardiner's *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante*, New York: Italica Press, 1989. It presents translations of major visionary works in the tradition spanning from early Christianity up to, as the title suggests, the period immediately preceding Dante.

Not only is the corpus regarding death rather small compared to the Christian preoccupation with death and afterlife, but it is out of its time. That is to say, the views of the pagan world we have were roundly written in a Christian setting, by Christian individuals, and so the material has to be regarded in that light. Beyond the mythological aspect, as death as a folkloric concept is an exhaustive subject that could fill volumes even by itself, the question becomes the issue of agents of death, specifically women in that role, as looking specifically at the women in this office, beyond individual aspects like valkyries or *fylgja*, seems to be exceptionally rare. The question, then, for this thesis, is whether women, or rather, femininity as a concept, has any kind of special relationship with death, and whether, when viewed next to what sources we have, that is reflected in the mythological or folkloric motifs that are preserved.

Ellis, in her *Road to Hel*, tries to cover death in its main iterations, progressing through evidence and thematic elements including the practice of constructing, sitting on and appealing to the spirits in barrows, and then valkyries, *fylgja*, the role of the dead, raising the dead, the idea of rebirth, and so on, in what is likely the most helpful catch-all book on death in English.² Books like these that look specifically at the phenomenon of death are, however, not terribly common, and less common still in English. Following that route, to read about death, one looks instead to the larger scale of articles and books on individual ideas to which death can relate. This includes valkyries and *fylgja*, dream-imagery and barrow-sitting, which all provide necessary insight on the phenomenon of death. Lindow's *Murder and Vengeance Among the Gods* is another great English-language resource for death as it regards the Baldr myth specifically, which is fairly wide-ranging, looking at topics from the role of Loki, and, more importantly for a paper of this nature, the role of Hyrrokkin and the valkyries – it talks about the significance of murder and ties a great deal of these themes of death back to possibly the most notable mythological death in the Norse mythological corpus, both building off and, in some senses limited by that focus.³ Jochens, in her book on *Old*

² Ellis, Hilda Roderick. *The road to Hel: a study of the conception of the dead in Old Norse literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943.

³ Lindow, John. *Murder and Vengeance Among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology*. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1997.

*Norse Images of Women*⁴ very briefly covers subjects like *fylgja*, valkyries, *disir* and the like, focusing, as I will, on the women as they appear in the corpus, but her focus, and her aim, is somewhat separate from my own, as she intends to focus on women's place in the corpus as a general whole, and I intend to focus on women's place in death, but her book provides other insights into women on a larger scale that is invaluable to an understanding of the role of death as it relates to women, given that death is so intimately wound up in other social phenomena.

⁴ Jochens, Jenny. *Old Norse Images of Women*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

Óðinn and the Feminine

Within the literature given on death, Óðinn himself takes precedence in the bulk of material, and this follows his role as a god of battle and poets, both of which are elements related to death; and as, importantly, the owner of famous *Valhöll*, where the chosen slain, the *einherjar*, go to live an afterlife of eternal drink and battle in preparation for the end of the world. Óðinn as a death god comes part and parcel with the corpus of his mythology, and contributes a significant amount to his appearance as a liminal god. Liminality, in the realm of death, is the rule rather than the exception. Figures involved tend to fall into places on the general outside of the constructed social circle of power. In Wanner's article "God on the Margins," he argues that Óðinn, as a wandering god, spent a great deal of his mythological and, indeed, folkloric (here to mean his appearances in *fornaldarsögur* and the like) appearances outside of the central locus of power that is the realm of the gods – he more often appears in the periphery, a wanderer and a guest, a quester for knowledge, than necessarily as a central figure, a king of the gods, even as he's characterized as such.⁵ One of his common names is, in fact, *Gestr*, a guest – a figure that does not belong to that homestead, and stays only for a while.⁶ He is an itinerant god, meandering through lands varied in the stories, often in disguise. Not just the land of men, showing up as a bearded old man in a hooded cloak⁷ to meddle in affairs (like the episode in *Völsungasaga*), but also the lands of the dead, as he appears on the Hel-road in *Baldurs draumar* and in *Völuspá*, to wake a *völva* for prophecy.⁸ No, first we have to acknowledge Óðinn's presence on the periphery, as, for all of his apparent kingliness, keeping to the edge of the power structure, because in being on that periphery, his powers and attributes align themselves with other peripheral gods and figures – who, in large part, also happen to be related to death. Not least of which is Freyja herself.

⁵ Wanner, Kevin J. "God on the Margins: Dislocation and Transience in the Myths of Óðinn." *History of Religions*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (May 2007): 316-350.

⁶ Wanner, "God on the Margins", 328.

⁷ Wanner, "God on the Margins", 329.

⁸ "Baldursdraumar" in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Kritesjónsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslenzk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014): 446-448.

One of Óðinn’s attributes, we know, is his ability to shapeshift, either by sleeping and sending his spirit away in various forms, or by changing his physical shape in some way. This brings him away from figures like Þórr, who have never shown any propensity for shapeshifting, and more into the realm of Freyja and Loki, who both come from communities on the peripheries of mythological space, exist as liminal gods (Loki as a trickster-figure, inherently liminal, and Freyja as a Vanir hostage-goddess), and have strong connections with death. Loki’s transformative nature is well-documented in episodes across literature, shifting gender as well as shape, and Freyja we know bears a feathered cloak that allows the wearer to transform into an eagle by way of magic – a cloak that Loki is lent in *Þrymskviða* in order to fly to Jötunheim to search for lost Mjöllnir.⁹ Óðinn himself has been known to transform into an eagle on occasion, as in the episode of *Skáldskaparmál* when he steals away the mead of poetry.¹⁰ This eagle-transformation is not insignificant, as not only does it identify these figures as practitioners of magic, setting them somewhat outside the realm of social acceptability (especially in the case of Óðinn as a male practitioner of *seiðr*), but it evokes a symbolism we find elsewhere as associated with death and violence. The bird of prey is found in dream-imagery (both hawk and eagle) as often prophetic of death, as hawks figure in a dream about the death of children, flying to “the domain of the dead,” and an eagle, in a second, sprinkles blood on everyone in King Atli’s hall, foretelling treachery.¹¹ Further, we see falcons in another dream announcing death, falcons tearing a man to pieces in a prophetic dream regarding the dreamer’s own death, and further still, a fight between an eagle and a vulture – each of these prophesying death or harm, and emblematic of it.¹² Both Kelchner and Ellis identify animal fetches in dream imagery as related to the conception of what they call the soul (though the terminology could be argued), in whatever form it manifests – as the animals in question are not limited to birds, though birds are often present, linking the bird to iconographic death and migration of the soul. Valkyries are mentioned by Donahue in his article on the relationship between valkyries and Irish war-goddesses as having a close relationship

⁹ “Þrymskviða” in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Krísjásson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslenzk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014): 422-427.

¹⁰ *Snorra-Edda*, 92.

¹¹ Kelchner, Georgia Dunham. *Dreams in Old Norse literature and their affinities in folklore: with an appendix containing the Icelandic texts and translations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935, 18.

¹² Kelchner, *Dreams*, 26.

with birds of prey, solidifying an association of various birds of prey with death and the harvest and migration of souls, so far as the ‘soul’ was conceived of in a pagan sense.¹³

Óðinn’s transformative nature, his eagle-forms, probably related to his known practicing of “effeminate” *seiðr*, parallels well with Freyja, the bearer of a transformative cloak, and a goddess specially associated with *seiðr*. Associating Freyja with this death-related bird of prey imagery is no new thing, certainly, as it’s well known that there is mention of her claim to half the slain – she is by that count a death goddess, but associating her with the most prominent god of death in the pantheon lends that imagery more weight, especially in light of Óðinn’s transgressive nature in practicing *seiðr*. While he is a god of kings and battle, his magical affectations shunt those actions performed under their auspices firmly into the realm of the feminine. He is accused, in *Lokasenna*, of disguising himself as a *vǫlur*, and it is said that this is an unmanly thing to be doing.¹⁴ In this case of *flyting*, it’s something of the kettle being called black, given Loki’s history, a fact that does not go unnoticed or unremarked upon by the rest of the gods, but the overarching understanding is that the realm of magic is one of primarily (if not exclusively) feminine connotations, and something unseemly for men to perform. It must be noted that of the gods that display transformative qualities, Óðinn ranks almost exclusively beside Loki, whose gender-defying nature as a trickster god places him somewhat at odds with the status quo already, and Freyja, the owner and lender of that feathered cloak that allowed Loki, already gifted in shapeshifting, to change to something that, it seems, was not in his nature, else the cloak would have been unnecessary, suggesting that the form given was, perhaps, outside Loki’s iconographic sphere, and in some ways restricting that bird-of-prey guise more tightly to these two death gods, Freyja and Óðinn. Given this, we can say that Óðinn, so far as he operates outside of his nature as a god of kings and poets, has stepped into a realm of the more feminine iconography of transformation, magic, and, through the strong association of some of those magical acts with the Norse conception of the ‘soul’ and

¹³ Donahue, Charles. “The Valkyries and the Irish War-Goddesses.” *PMLA*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Mar, 1941): 1-12.; Gunnell, Terry. “Waking the Dead: Folk Legends Concerning Magicians and Walking Corpses in Iceland.” in *News from Other Worlds: Studies in Nordic Folklore, Mythology and Culture*, ed. Merrill Kaplan and Timothy R. Tangherlini. (Berkeley: North Pinehurst Press, 2012): 235-266.

¹⁴ “Lokasenna” in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Krítsjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslenzk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014): 408-421.

death, the realm of death, which, iconographically, also seems intrinsically linked to the feminine.

Perhaps at this point it is useful to take a look at what this mutability of gender was like in a larger social context. Carol Clover posits in her article “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe” that an old Icelandic concept of gender was less a binary mostly assigned to the sex of one’s birth, and more of an understanding of one’s performances within the social sphere, centering around the concepts of *hvatr* and *blauðr*, problematic terms to translate, but most easily understood within the framework of boldness/masculinity and cowardice/femininity, though the linking of them with the feminine and the masculine is problematic in its own way. Certain assumptions might be made about one’s standing based on one’s sex, but the scale seems to be largely based on performance – a woman could be *hvatr* and men could be *blauðr* depending on their actions. She makes the case that women’s ability to become *hvatr* takes performative action – proving to the audience that she is acceptable (more *hvatr*) on the sliding scale of gender – or a lack of a *hvatr* figure, as in cases of female inheritance when there is no identifiable male heir, in essence becoming a son when a son is needed. From the other side of this, a man’s ability to become *blauðr* is frighteningly easy, and largely linked with outside perception. In many ways, it is even more mutable than the feminine. She posits that there was one gender – essentially, maleness – and that in many ways it was – and reflected – a sliding scale of power. To be *blauðr* was to be in a position to be overpowered. To be *hvatr* was to be in a position to take power.¹⁵ *Lokasenna* tells us that the conception of the gods did follow to some extent the same culture of insult that is so dangerous to conceptions of *hvatr* in a man. Óðinn, in putting himself in a position to be labelled *blauðr* by way of his practice of *seiðr*, makes himself what Clover calls a social woman, and in so doing, places himself in a state of reduced social power.

Of course, Óðinn’s sojourn into the social boundaries vis-à-vis his practice of magic assigns him a liminality that, as was mentioned, seems more rule than exception in the case of death. Loki, who is at the very least half-*jötunn* himself (by way of his father Fárbaúti), fathers by *jötunn* Angrboða his children Hel, Fenrir and the Midgard

¹⁵ Clover, Carol J. “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe.” *Representations*, No. 44 (Autumn 1993): 1-28.

Serpent. His relationship with death is defined by that very social boundary that separates him from the rest of the classical *Æsir*: namely, his paternal *jötunn* ancestry. The marrying of members of the let's call them 'ruling classes' of the gods (in order to conflate *Vanir* and *Æsir* for the sake of the example) to *jötunn* women is not unheard of, or even, necessarily, uncommon. Freyr arranges (or forces) marriage with *jötunn* Gerðr, Þórr is said to be lover of Járnaxa, Óðinn fathered his avenging son Váli by Rindr, Njörðr is made to wed Skaði as part of a settlement, and so on, and the children of such unions seem for the most part perfectly acceptable by the standards of the gods. Óðinn himself has *jötunn* blood, but importantly, it comes down through the female line, not the male, thus maintaining the power structure, and not counting him among their people. But the status quo is threatened when a male *jötunn* wishes to wed one of the goddesses – commonly Freyja, as in the episode of *Gylfaginning* where, in payment for constructing the wall that surrounds Asgard, the *jötunn* builder demands the sun, the moon and Freyja as payment, and in *Þrymskviða*, wherein Þrymr demands Freyja's hand in trade for stolen Mjöllnir. This reversal of the usual pattern threatens the power dynamic in the play of constant tension between *Æsir* and *Jötnar* that is such a persistent feature of the mythology, and is avoided by any means necessary – the gods resort to trickery and deception in order to nip those threats in the bud. Loki, however, is quite possibly a product of that sort of reversal of power, and presents a wild card role among the *Æsir*, securing him a place on the edge of acceptable social boundaries. It is a transgressive social other who fathers, by a *jötunn*, three potent symbols of death – the aforementioned Hel, Fenrir and the Midgard Serpent, each of whom will claim the lives of members of Óðinn's bloodline at the end of the world. Death follows social others, here – the children of a *jötunn* woman, and a father who is at the very least paternally half-*jötunn* himself. As a peripheral people, even beyond Loki we find *jötunn* with connections to death as a concept – it is the giantess Hyrrokkin, after all, who plays a key role in Baldr's funeral, shifting his death-ship where none of the other gods could budge it, and in *Gylfaginning*, we find her arriving to the funeral out of the mountains, appearing as an embodiment of that death-symbol triumvirate: the giantess, astride a wolf, using a serpent for reins. More on that subject, however, will be discussed later.

Freyja herself is a member of a different class of god. The *Vanir* are mentioned in pieces like *Völuspá* as being a separate people from the *Æsir*, with whom they were

once at war. It was to the *Æsir*, as part of the truce, that Njörðr, Freyja and Freyr were sent as political hostages to secure the peace, so while there may be a parallel with the kind of fostering of enemy children that one finds in sources like *Njála*, there is also the very real understanding that Freyja is a foreigner.¹⁶ Hers are a people with whom *seiðr* is apparently well-practiced, and was put to use during the war, by the mysterious figure of Heiðr, and in the resurrecting figure of Gullveig/Heiðr as she appears both among gods and men in *Völuspá*.¹⁷ Already this establishes the *Vanir* as a people at odds with the *Æsir* regarding their practices, like the use of magic on the whole vis a vis the apparent lack of *seiðr*-practicing *Æsir* beyond Óðinn, while simultaneously setting Freyja in a place where her own use of *seiðr* is a natural outbranching of her heritage and her nature, as a facet of her origin. But hers are also a people with other customs that were ill looked-upon by the *Æsir*, and forbidden once their *Vanir* hostages joined their ranks. Chief among them is mentioned Njörðr's marriage to his nameless sister, as mentioned in *Lokasenna*.¹⁸ This sibling-marriage was a practice particularly associated with the *Vanir*, but clearly considered unacceptable among *Æsir*, considering its subsequent annulment. Freyr and Freyja, Njörðr's children, would likely have been the offspring of such an ill-favoured union. Annuling this sibling-marriage paved over a problematic element such that Njörðr could later have a socially acceptable marriage to Skaði and keep the downward slant of gods-to-*jötunn* power intact. Such a marriage of siblings is also alluded to in *Lokasenna*, wherein Loki insults Freyja in reference to her laying with her brother.¹⁹ Freyja's status as a foreigner among the *Æsir*, and her equally dubious parentage as far as *Æsir* customs seemed to permit, place her firmly in that

¹⁶ Parkes, Peter. "Fosterage, Kinship and Legend: When Milk Was Thicker than Blood?" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Jul., 2004): 587-615. This article looks at fosterage in a cross-cultural literary scope, specifically in the idea of moral predicaments arising out of fosterage. He asserts that the use of fosterage was in many ways a more intensive manner than marriage with which to forge political allegiances, and that "For dynastic rulers and local lords, it was a valuable mechanism of tributary control..." (p. 606-607). For our purposes, the fosterage of the *Vanir* would have served just this purpose, reflecting society, especially in wake of a mythological war.; Gísli Sigurðsson. *Gaelic influence in Iceland: Historical and Literary Contacts, A Survey of Research*. Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2000. Gísli also spends a little time looking at the idea of supernatural fosterages as they are paralleled in Gaelic sources, comparing sources like Haraldr hárfagri's supernatural fosterage with Cúldub's fosterage to a *síd* (p. 62). He comes to the conclusion that the literature may not be linked, but the social ideas regarding the concept of fosterage may be.

¹⁷ "Völuspá" in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Krítsjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslenzk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014): 291-321.

¹⁸ "Lokasenna", 415.

¹⁹ "Lokasenna", 414.

outsider role – as Loki was of foreign blood and dubious parentage, so is Freyja, and both have steady connections to death. Moreover, the Vanir have a definite connection to fertility themes through Freyr and Freyja;²⁰ fertility themes which historically have a connection with death and the underworld cross-culture (one needs look no further than the Greek Persephone myth, or the Ishtar-Tammuz-Ereshkigal myth of Mesopotamia). Within the Scandinavian purview, there's Freyr's association with barrow-rites,²¹ which some have aligned with the resurrecting-fertility-god theme that one sees so often in pre-Christian mythologies (reference again Ishtar and Persephone). It is unsurprising that, as a fertility goddess, Freyja should be associated with this deathlike imagery, but the *Vanir*'s natural inclination towards death as a liminal people, a people associated with magic, and a people associated with fertility and death is perhaps overshadowed some next to Óðinn's preeminence.

Óðinn aligns himself, in claiming battle-dead, and practicing magic, with forces to which his people are not inclined. He is placing himself on the outer edge of what is acceptable within his own social sphere – of which he is ostensibly also king. He aligns himself with these people of whom he does not otherwise necessarily approve, both *jötnunn* and *vanir*, and he aligns himself with forces which his society does not approve of regarding masculine practice. He takes eagle-form, which is otherwise only natural, it seems, to Freyja, as Loki appears in eagle-form only when borrowing her cloak; Óðinn practices *seiðr* and is accused by Loki of acting as a seeress, and though he is a death god, the *æsir* seem not to have a natural inclination towards death-rites. Óðinn's closest parallels in these things seem to be Loki and Freyja, and they are naturally both racially (as far as such terms can be used in a mythological order of things) 'other' and they all embrace the feminine. Loki fathers a death goddess, and Freyja has all of the markings of a death goddess, with her eagle-form, and her magic, and her relationship with fertility, but Óðinn has hedged himself as a king-god into territory that does not, it seems, necessarily come naturally to him, and become preminent. Indeed, in some way his link with death could be viewed more as an ofshoot of his nature as a battle and strategy god, rather than necessarily being linked with death as a universal force. His sway as a god of such things comes part and parcel with his granting and rescinding of

²⁰ Davidson, *Gods and Myths*, 124.

²¹ Davidson, *Gods and Myths*, 100.

favour in battle, while his valkyries are the figures who have charge of the souls of those very men whose loss of favour has laid low.²² It is the feminine figures who serve as reapers, and who comb the battlefield as the operant agents of death, and it is with them one finds the associated bird of prey motifs, and the links to death in a more visceral form. Óðinn is a king of the dead, but he is not their collector, and the auspices of a death god he has are acquired rather than inherent, received rather than assumed – that role lies with the feminine.

²² Wanner, “God on the Margins”, 324.

Women of Violence, or: Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History

Let us assume for a moment that our thesis is a given – that death was a feminine realm. It is bound to have a fair number of constants – any avatar of or agent of death is bound in some way to be caught up in violence. There is blood to be had, and blood will be given. These agents of the dead and of death will, among their number, necessarily have figures or situations reflecting that violence, or reflecting the dread nature of death. The valkyries are an obvious candidate, given their nature as Óðinn's vultures, picking up the dead in battle. They are likely enough to be portrayed in blood and, indeed, they and their related figures do seem to hold that role fairly well and often, accompanied by important symbolism that reeks of violence as well – the wolf, and the serpent. Dream-women not named valkyries, but very closely related to them, have been known to wave swords about and prophesize impending death or violence, and women have presided over rites of the dead that take bloody turns, that require an element of that same violence, or accompanied by those same symbols of violence. If death is a feminine realm, it requires its measure of blood, and there is no lack of women to hold up that flag.

The collectors of the battle-dead, the 'choosers of the slain', are quite possibly some of the Norse figures most well-known to the general public outside of Þórr. Over the years we've been bombarded by pop images of valkyries in winged helmets, on white horses, spear-carrying women in shining armour. In large part they're portrayed as idealistic warrior-maidens waiting to take those glorious dead away to Valhalla forever, and placed quite at odds with the western world's *danse macabre*-style Grim Reaper, as far as harvesters of souls go. Of course, the medieval scandinavian valkyries never wore horned or feathered helms, though the irony of the wings would be quite apt, and perhaps the image of the yodeling women riding through the clouds is somewhat overstated, but the legacy of the valkyries is a strong one, and it speaks to the strength of the concept. These are women of violence come to collect the souls of the glorious, because make no mistake, though we have later incarnations of these valkyries as protective guardians, they were Óðinn's battle-maidens, and had predecessors bloodier still. They were women of violence, and they wore the title well.

As far as academic work goes, valkyries were and are a perennial favourite, and no wonder – they really are such a striking concept, and one with which so much has been done in the public eye. This extends not only within the modern scope, but also within the old literature. Valkyrie-brides, like the *Völsungasaga* or *Nibelungenlied*'s Brynhildr, became a popular facet of later Norse literature,²³ and seemed, at a certain point, to become conflated with the idea of the *hamingja*, a guardian spirit. They do, however, come from a necessarily bloodier ancestor, as any harvester of the dead naturally would. Possibly associated with Irish war-goddesses like Badb and Mórrigan, the valkyries most heavily associated with the fate of men are dread creatures that haunt dreams as portents, and sew slaughter in battle.²⁴ Donahue mentions that the Old English equivalent of the valkyrie, the *wælcyrge*, seems “to have been applied to female demons²⁵ who were connected to war and viewed with sensations of horror”²⁶ and that, like the Irish war-goddesses, there is an association with much of the imagery already mentioned – the issues of birds of prey and prophecy.²⁷ A great deal of that dream imagery, in fact, can be seen in light of valkyrie behaviours of which we already know.

There is a famous episode of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, wherein Gísli dreams of two women, a ‘better dream woman’ (*draumkona hin betri*) and a ‘worse dream woman’ (*draumkona hin verri*), one of whom showed him a great many lights in a hall, symbolizing the years he had lived, and those he yet had ahead of him, acting as a spirit of good tidings, foretelling good as good comes to those who deserve it if he aids the lame and the deaf and such,²⁸ and the other who wanted to bathe him in blood and gore – to cover him with it entirely, and who came to him equally smeared in blood.²⁹ This worse dream woman comes to him more and more often, and the better dream woman

²³ Damico, Helen. *Beowulf's Wealthew and the Valkyrie Tradition*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984, 87.

²⁴ Krappe, Alexander Haggerty. “The Valkyrie Episode in Njals Saga.” *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 43, No. 7 (Nov 1928): 471-474.

²⁵ Though of course the use of ‘demons’ here is somewhat loaded regarding Christian doctrine, as England had been Christian for quite a while at that time, and so that English Christian context must be taken into account when thinking of these *wælcyrge*.

²⁶ Donahue, Charles. “The Valkyries and the Irish War-Goddesses.” *PMLA*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Mar, 1941): 1-12.

²⁷ Donahue, “War-Goddesses”, 5.

²⁸ Regal, Michael S, trans. “Gisli Sursson’s Saga” in *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, ed. Jane Smiley, Robert Kellogg. (New York: Penguin Books, 2001): 496-557. p. 531. Of course this sort of provisional aiding of the lame and the deaf does follow fairly classic biblical ideas of charity, and so it is with a fairly overt Christian attitude that the *draumkona hin betri* is here presented.

²⁹ Regal, “Gisli Sursson’s Saga”, 534.

less and less as the day of his death approaches and his situation becomes more perilous, given his outlawry, though the dreams are not necessarily described outright. That said, Gísli tells his wife, before he dies, that he has had a dream wherein *draumkona hin verri* has succeeded in bathing him in all of this blood, saying “this woman came to me and tied a blood-stained cap on my head, and before that she bathed my head in blood and poured it all over me, covering me in gore.”³⁰ This ends up being a prophetic dream – the better dream woman had said that he had had as many years ahead of him as there were lights she showed him in her dream, and had showed him a beautiful hall where he would, ostensibly, go after he died. It was the other dream-woman, the woman of blood, who declared before the final dream that she would put to an end everything the better dream woman had foretold, and make his fate a devising of her own, bloody and violent – and so does he die in a bloody, violent way, as his dream prophesied. *Brennu-Njáls saga* has similar dreadful women appear as portents before bloodshed and battle, as part of a vision before a battle in Ireland. A man named Dörruðr, in Caithness, goes out on Good Friday, and looks through a window-slit into a room, wherein there were a group of women (unspecified in number, though twelve had ridden to the dwelling), who had set up a loom for weaving.³¹ This loom, however, was constructed with and for the use of human parts – the warp and weft were of entrails the weights made of men’s heads, the shuttle a sword and the reels made of arrows.³² These dread women sing a prophetic song about the coming battle (the skaldic poem *Darraðarljóð*) before tearing the entrails down, and keeping for themselves what they tear away.³³

These two famous scenes keep that element in common – the women of vision prophesying death through the products of violence. These are not shining angels come to warn or protect, or the gleaming battle-maidens in armour of whom popular culture has espoused as the valkyrie-image. These are the dread figures that vulture over the battlefield to pick at the bodies. In both instances the imagery takes an explicitly feminine turn with their allusions to textile manufacture and management. Turville-Petre mentions that clothing symbolism is among the most common of dream-symbols

³⁰ Regal, “Gisli Sursson’s Saga”, 549.

³¹ Krappe, “The Valkyrie Episode”, 471.

³² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslenzk fornrit XII. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1971, 454.

³³ Krappe, “The Valkyrie Episode”, 471; *Brennu-Njáls saga* 454-458.

of the inanimate kind, with different colours or fashions of clothing indicating different methods of death. For example, in *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún sheds pieces of clothing in different ways, symbolizing the ways that her husbands shall die.³⁴ Finding these dream women, these valkyrie-figures, handling textiles in that manner is a compounding of death imagery that is, in many ways, inextricably linked with the feminine. Gísli's dreadful dream-woman lurks about, trying to bathe him in blood and gore, but it is not until her final act that the proverbial knell is sounded – and that act is the placing of a bloody cap upon his head and, if you will, “dressing” him in that blood. The dream-women of *Njála* lurk over a loom, and their act of prophecy is a twisted kind of haruspicy, as they prophesize over a loom-as-battlefield, constructed of weapons of war, weighted by the very tangible heads of men, and threaded with entrails. They prophecy death using the dead, by reworking them into an object of feminine operation, and it is that feminine object, the loom, taken a dreadful form under the auspices of these dread women, that is the active portent – its construction and subsequent destruction is the process and the end result of the battle, wherein each woman, a valkyrie in her own sense, claims a portion of the entrail-tapestry, and with it, a portion of the slain, just as is her office to claim.

Celtic influence over some of these images of the dread-woman has been discussed, though given the ongoing discussion on the nature and degree of Gaelic contact with Iceland, the idea is still perhaps somewhat suspect. Gísli Sigurðsson's *Gelic Influence in Iceland* seems to support a literary connection with Gaelic roots, regarding saga literature and stories related to the mythology, though he maintains that the mythological framework in both Prose and Poetic Eddas are “no doubt Scandinavian”.³⁵ This literary contact does not preclude the idea of valkyries in some manner being related to the idea of Irish war-goddesses as Donahue has mentioned them. However on the other hand, Donahue finds that perhaps some of the Irish goddesses had Norse influence, given the high level of contact in Ireland with the Norse system of beliefs.³⁶ The possible (though not universally accepted) cross-pollination of religious motifs complicates the issue from the standpoint of one trying to suss out the origin of these death-women, but for our purposes, the idea that this cross-pollination

³⁴ Turville-Petre, G. “Dreams in Icelandic Tradition.” *Folklore* Vol 69, No. 2 (Jun, 1958): 93-111. p. 95.

³⁵ Gísli, *Gaelic Influence*, 119.

³⁶ Donahue, “War-Goddesses”, 5.

rendered two sets of feminine beings presiding over slaughter rather lends more credence to the idea that death and women could go together. With those goddesses, one finds the feminine related to battle and battle-death, and there is that strong association with birds, yet again. Donahue proposes that the goddess Allecto, in an early passage from Irish *Táin Bo Cualnge*, is a gloss for Mórrígan. In this passage, she comes in the form of a bird, and makes what Donahue describes as a rather obscure prophecy, though certainly relating to war and death. He reports that ravens are mentioned at least twice, and then mentioned again in another Mórrígan-prophecy before a different battle.³⁷ This preoccupation with birds and the dead we know can relate back to valkyries and Freyja, and we see it cross over into the sagas again, for example, in another of Gísli's dreams.³⁸

These battle-women come in more forms than just bloody dream women, though, certainly. The idea of the troll-woman follows the same basic guidelines – a dread woman, terrifying to look upon, marauding across battlefields and through the masses of slain. Kelchner says that these trolls “frequently seem to take the part of purposeful agents in formenting [sic] strife or to represent a sort of incarnation of the violence of encounter at arms between opposing forces.”³⁹ This does largely seem to follow the same sort of motif as the bloody incarnation of valkyrie, though under a different name. *Víga-Glúms saga* contains an episode wherein there is to be a fight between the forces of Þórarinn Þórisson and Glúmr Eyjólfsson regarding a lawsuit over a killing. Preceding this fight, Glúmr dreams of two women, carrying a trough, sprinkling blood over “all the district,”⁴⁰ in an action that very much resembles the earlier-discussed dream of an eagle sprinkling blood over King Atli's hall preceding a fight. In *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, the defeat at Stamford Bridge is prefigured by the

³⁷ *Táin Bó Cualnge Rescension I*, ed. Cecile O'Rahilly. University College Cork: CELT, 2011, 30. “Céin bátár didiu in t-slóig oc tochin Maige Breg, forrumai Allechtu colléic, noch is í in Mórrígan sòn i n-deilb eúin co m-boí forsín chorthi h-i Temair Cúalngi & asbert frisín tarb...”; *Táin Bó Cualnge Rescension I*, ed. Cecile O'Rahilly, trans. Cecile O'Rahilly. University College Cork: CELT, 2011, 152. “While the army was going over Mag mBreg Allecto came for a while, that is, the Mórrígan, in the form of a bird which perched on the pillar-stone in Temair Cúailnge and said to the bull...”; Donahue, “War-Goddesses”, 5-6.

³⁸ Regal, “Gísli Sursson's Saga”, 552. “He dreamed that some loon birds, larger than cock ptarmigans... screamed horribly and had been wallowing in blood and gore.”

³⁹ “Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar” in *Heimskringla III*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. Íslenzk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2002): 68-202. p. 176; Kelchner, *Dreams*, 41.

⁴⁰ “Víga-Glúms saga” in *Eyfirðinga saga*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson. Íslenzk fornrit. (Hið íslenzka fornritafélag: Reykjavík, 2001, 3-98.; Kelchner, *Dreams*, 41.

appearance of a giant troll-woman on the Sólundir Isles, with a short sword and a trough in her hands.⁴¹ The troll-woman here, and those women in these other bloody, battle related dreams, were as much battle-women and quite possibly valkyrie figures, as any standing over a prophetic loom, but here they are classed under a different name. Though ‘troll’ in English parlance refers to a folkloric creature of markedly inhuman appearance, separated from the rest of humanity by size, nature and by physiognomy, Ármann Jakobsson says of the Old Norse trolls that “the word *tröll* had originally sometimes been used about ghosts and even magicians. A further exploration of the usage of the mediaeval Icelandic word *troll* reveals that the word refers just as often to ghosts and witches as to the wild ogres Jón Árnason includes in the word.”⁴² Whatever ambiguity the troll has as a concept, whether referring to ghosts, witches or “wild ogres”, our troll-women here are related back to concepts we see again and again with these dream-women, and will continue to see with these supernatural women. They are related back to death and magic, ultimately back to Óðinn and back to Freyja’s iconographical circles. This particular troll-woman, though, of *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, while she carries a trough in one hand – an image repeatedly associated with these death-omens – carries a short-sword in the other, and this is a far cry from either bathing a man in blood and tying a cap on his head, or bending over a gory loom and weaving with viscera like haruspices. Both of those are very feminine actions, as was discussed above – their relationship to textile manufacture and handling marking them as somewhat more feminine acts, even as they are related to the violent battle-deaths of men. It is even a different sort of image compared to the other ‘troll-women’, who went around the district in *Víga-Glúms* saga, sprinkling blood everywhere, like prophetic birds. This particular troll-woman carries with her an overtly martial symbol, and with it is carried a different sort of connotation. This is not merely a figure who oversees the fates of men, who augureys their deaths and then waits for the outcome – this is a figure who is active in the role of a reaper. This is a figure who is sowing death – this is a woman of violence not just in relationship with death, but in demeanor and in iconography. This is a figure who augureys death by *being* death, and she is certainly not alone in this office.

⁴¹ Kelchner, *Dreams*, 41.

⁴² Ármann Jakobsson, “Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Medieval Icelandic Undead.” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 110, No. 3 (July 2011): 281-300. p. 283.

Kelchner goes on to describe more episodes of these troll-women in dreams, each overt in martial connotations and in violence. *Sturlunga saga* contains a dream where another company of men is led by a tall, fierce woman who, in the heat of battle, swings a bloody, tattered cloth that decapitates any whose neck it touches.⁴³ Additionally, there is a dream by another character in *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* regarding the upcoming battle, wherein Þórðr dreams of a “great host... on the shore [of England] led by a troll woman, riding on a wolf.”⁴⁴ This woman feeds her wolf-mount corpses one after the other, and it drips with their blood. Again the overt imagery is martial, this time with these women doing more than just passively holding their swords, but setting them instead as leaders of men, as violent, martial forces to deal with. None of the dreamers picture these commanding figures, looming of death, as men – Óðinn does not come to them in their dreams to prefigure the fate of battle over which his office as a god held sway, but rather it’s these women instead, who figure as violent, bloody battle-deaths. One of the women returns again to the textile theme, brandishing a bloody rag as if it were a sword or a weapon. Femininity and objects of femininity again become weapons of death, here in a more overt way than with the loom. Where the loom was passive femininity, as discussed, observational in nature and metaphorical in construction, femininity as allegory, the bloody rag is swung around by a commander of men, fighting a host of men as part of a battle as if it were a sword, and the results of being touched by such an object is the most unambiguous death possible – death by beheading. Women and these feminine objects continue to hold sway over the dreams of death that these men have, as if the idea is one specially associated with them and the feminine. The Greek *Moirai* wove the fates of men, spinning, cutting and measuring the thread, and just so, Atropos took the thread of men’s fate and cut it with her shears – a woman in a feminine office (weaver/spinner) cutting off life by way of a textile. That motif is consistent with how these dream-women have been going about their sowing of death, and Kelchner admits that in this martial capacity trolls have a connection, “like the *disir and hamingja*,”⁴⁵ to valkyries and thus to figures with special domain over the slain – these very special women, women specifically, who lay claim to the dead as their office.

⁴³ Kelchner, *Dreams*, 41-42.

⁴⁴ “Haralds Saga Sigurðarsonar”, 177.; Kelchner, *Dreams*, 41.

⁴⁵ Kelchner, *Dreams*, 42.

These *dísir*, as mentioned alongside valkyries and *hamingja* in Kelchner's work, are of similar stock. Perhaps one of the most recognizable episodes with *dísir* comes from *Þiðrandi þáttur ok Þórhalls* in *Flateyjarbók*, wherein Þiðrandi sees nine armed women in black and nine women in white ride to battle each other in a field, with the women in black overcoming the others and slaying Þiðrandi. This is interpreted by Þórhall as the *fylgjur* of the family and *dísir* fighting over the change in religion to Christianity.⁴⁶ Here, like valkyries and troll-women, these *dísir* have a bloodier aspect to them, though in a somewhat surprising way. One would expect these *dísir* to be a dream – something to be interpreted as an omen or an allegory while remaining in that realm of dream-meanings, but instead they were real enough to kill Þiðrandi for abandoning the pagan faith. These women came to choose him specifically for that offense. We know that *dísir* had a certain cult of worship, the *dísablót*, for which women were responsible, that took the form of similar harvest-rituals, alongside *álfablót*, and related to the fertility imagery of episodes like *Völsa þáttur*.⁴⁷ And like the valkyries and the troll-women, this death/fertility imagery finds a link with Freyja, as a fertility goddess, in her title *vanadís*.⁴⁸ The two phenomenon are linked, and have always been dominated by feminine goddesses, or had been, until, if it follows as Jochens posits, the cult of female-led fertility goddesses was overtaken by male counterparts, like Freyja and Nerthus to Freyr and Njörðr.⁴⁹ Following this we have another cadre of dread women, who had been associated with fertility goddesses, bringing death to those who attempt to abandon the faith. In this case the prophecy of death prefigures their arrival, and so their function is a fulfilling of an omen, rather than an omen itself, while still performing an allegorical role as violent heathenism vs Christianity.

The wolf-mount, on the other hand, if we circle back around to the troll-women and the wolves, brings in more important imagery that we have seen before. Loki's three children by Angrboða are all linked to death in some way, be it Hel, literal goddess presiding over the realm of the dead, Fenrir, the wolf loosed at the end of the world, or the Midgard Serpent, destined to be the death of Thor. Fenrir the wolf plays an

⁴⁶ *Flateyjarbók I*, ed. Sigurður Nordal. Reykjavík: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944, 465-468.

⁴⁷ Jochens, *Images*, 45-47.

⁴⁸ *Snorra-Edda*, 125.

⁴⁹ Jochens, *Images*, 47-49.

important role in the proceedings of the doom of the gods, especially regarding Óðinn, as he is prefigured to be Óðinn's killer. Wolves and dogs are frequently associated with death. Mythologically we have Fenrir, already mentioned; Sköll and Hati Hröðvitnisson, destined to devour the sun and the moon;⁵⁰ Garmr, the watchdog of Hel, mentioned howling in *Völuspá*'s refrain regarding the end of the world;⁵¹ Óðinn's wolves Geri and Freki, which are referred to in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* verse 13 as marauding through Logafjöll,⁵² an image not unlike that of the troll-woman feeding her wolf, which is equally mirrored by Óðinn's feeding of the two wolves, mentioned in *Gylfaginning*.⁵³ Óðinn's relationship with wolves is a strange one – on the one hand he has his wolves Geri and Freki, who seem to carry out their duties much like the wolf of the troll-woman, assumedly devouring the corpses of the slain. On the other hand, Óðinn's great adversary is another wolf, against whom all of Óðinn's efforts in assembling the *einherjar* seem to be directed. 'High', in *Gylfaginning*, says of the *einherjar* that though there are many (at that time), and more still to come, "there will seem too few when the wolf comes."⁵⁴ *Grímnismál 23* says "Eight hundred einheriar at a time will go through each door when they go to fight the Wolf."⁵⁵ Óðinn himself will lose his life to a wolf, and, as Kershaw points out, bears several bear-names, but no wolf-names, despite his connection to them.⁵⁶ He is wound up and around wolves and hounds, probably through their association with the battlefield – but he remains unaffiliated as a god with those wolves, and his entire host works towards combatting them. Instead, you have these women of death who ride wolves and are party to the same images of taking body parts, dripping with gore, and marauding battlefields.

The troll-woman, however, is not the only example of a woman related to death riding a wolf. One of the most famous examples is, perhaps, Hyrrokkin, from the well-known episode of Baldr's death in *Gylfaginning*, though she is also mentioned elsewhere. With her, the valkyrie connection Kelchner made regarding these dread women prophecizing death and the wolf-riding troll-woman becomes an interesting

⁵⁰ *Snorra-Edda*, 22.

⁵¹ "Völuspá", *Eddukvæði* (2014), 302.

⁵² "Helgakviða hundingsbana I", 249.

⁵³ *Snorra-Edda*, 51.

⁵⁴ Kershaw, Kris. *The One-eyed God: Odin and the (Indo-)Germanic Männerbünde*. Washington DC: Journal of Indo-European Studies, 2000, 13.

⁵⁵ Kershaw, *One-eyed God*, 13.

⁵⁶ Kershaw, *One-eyed God*, 61.

issue. The proceedings of Baldr's funeral, as it says in the story, are halted by the gods' inability to launch his ship. Instead they call for this woman, Hyrrokkin, a *jötunn* who comes down from *Jötunheim* in the north, riding a wolf, using serpents for reins. Óðinn's *einherjar*, before noted as a force that will one day march to fight Fenrir, attempt to hold the wolf, once it was separated from her, but it proves too much for them. It is Hyrrokkin who manages to launch the ship with the first try, such that the funeral rites can proceed.⁵⁷ Again we have that triad of symbols of death – the wolf, the serpent and the woman (Fenrir, Jörmungandr, Hel) – appearing out of the north, from which the dead are said to come, as one combined and integral force which allows a funeral to continue. We have that triad and we have another instance where this feminine symbol of death, this *jötunn*, takes precedence in power over the funeral proceedings, and Óðinn's men, despite being beholden to a god of death involved with wolves, physically cannot handle the wolf until violent measures are taken, despite the control with which Hyrrokkin commanded it. Hyrrokkin is again alluded to in *Húsdrápa*, where her kenning refers to her as “Hildir of the mountains.”⁵⁸ Hildir is, by nature, a valkyrie name, and while, as Lindow points out, valkyrie names when used in kennings mean little and can stand for any woman, he also makes note of how, given Hyrrokkin's association with the funeral and Baldr's death, the use of the name Hildir specifically in her kenning *fjalla Hildir* has special connotations.⁵⁹ Snorri relates the entire story in *Skaldskaparmál*, appearing in Bragi Boddason's *Ragnarsdrápa* as a telling of the story *Hjaðningavíg*. As it goes, Hildir is the daughter of one King Hogni, and finds herself abducted by another king, Heðinn. Her father chases them down, from Norway to the Orkney Islands and finally they end up on Háey, where Hogni refuses any attempts from either Heðinn or Hildir at reconciliation, draws his sword Dáinsleifr, a magic dwarfen sword that leaves wounds that never heal, and a battle is fought. When the battle is over and the kings have retired for the evening, Hildir goes to the battlefield and revives all the slain, and the battle is rehashed and refought again and again every day until Ragnarök.⁶⁰ By drawing the parallel, the skald has, as Lindow points out,

⁵⁷ *Snorra-Edda*, 72.

⁵⁸ *Snorra-Edda*, 181.; Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, 72.

⁵⁹ Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, 74-75.

⁶⁰ *Snorra-Edda*, 183.; Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, 74-75.; Gísli, *Gaelic Influence*, 42-3. According to Gísli, this “everlasting fight” motif is almost certainly Gaelic in nature, and likely borrowed from Gaelic stories told to Icelanders.

drawn the entire Baldr story into parallel – the lost child, death by a magic weapon, trying to regain the child, and a battle that cannot be resolved until the end times – but *Húsdrápa* has also given Hyrrokkin a name that compounds her relationship with the slain. Beside the wolf-imagery, in Hyrrokkin we have a social other, like Loki or Freyja, who comes from another lineage than the *Æsir* – as a *jötunn* coming out of the north, she is from outside of the accepted community, and she represents a foreign element that should not generally have the type of power she does over the *Æsir* regarding the kind of power roles that seem to govern relationships between *Æsir* and *jötnar*.

In a manner, Hyrrokkin's intervention in the funeral proceedings was necessary. The *Æsir* could not physically continue without her assistance and called for her from the mountains. While it says that Þórr nearly killed her, this is perhaps a natural extension of the animosity between *Æsir* and *jötnar* we have mentioned before, it remains that her survival is based on words of peace from the other gods. While they were only too happy to have Þórr kill the *jötunn* smith building the wall around Asgard, and just fine with the killing of other *jötnar* like Þjazi or Þrymr, the other gods plead Hyrrokkin's case to Þórr and advocate for her life. While there are certainly gender politics at play regarding Hyrrokkin's femininity vs Þórr's attempt on her life (as there were likely gender politics at play regarding Skaði's case, in her descent from the mountains to seek settlement for the murder of her father), especially considering how it would affect Þórr's masculine standing in the community to have killed a woman, as such an act would render him *blauðr*, and therefore endanger the perception of his masculinity among his social peers⁶¹ (though admittedly this is assuming the gods follow social cues from contemporary Norse society, which is an issue we already know is muddied by cases like Óðinn's use of feminine *seiðr*), Hyrrokkin may also have survived the encounter due to her necessity of office, even as the *einherjar* fulfilled their duty and felled her wolf. None of the gods could shift Baldr's ship to continue the funeral, in some sense failing to convert the ship that was Baldr's in life into a death-ship that is the first step on his journey to Hel's realm. It required an outsider, this mountain-Hildir from elsewhere, a name associated with a woman who could raise the dead while still retaining a valkyrie title, to come and move the ship, and by moving it confer upon it the ability to symbolically and actually ferry Baldr elsewhere.

⁶¹ Clover, "Regardless of Sex.", 1-28.

We know from ibn Fadlān’s account that in the funeral of the viking age Rus-Chief on the banks of the Volga there are several prominent female figures. Now, the use of ibn Fadlān’s account is, admittedly, problematic, given that we have to take on faith that the “Rūsiyyah” he met on the Volga were, in fact, related to the Norse Scandinavian culture at all. The use of the term Rus’ is nebulous in Arabic sources, and does not necessarily point to any one ethnic people, so any kind of interpretation involving his account is an assumption that these peoples, the Volga Rus’ and the Scandinavians, though separated by a great distance, are related.⁶² This is not an impossible assumption, though hinges on the belief that his account is descriptively reliable. Given the format of the account and its contents, however, this is perhaps the lesser of two assumptions, barring a few passages that seem to have had a gloss of his Muslim understanding of concepts like Paradise.⁶³ Needless to say, there are likely details that were omitted that would have been of interest to the modern scholar, but in the case of studies of this sort it’s a rather ‘beggars can’t be choosers’ situation. Regarding female figures of prominence in the funeral ritual, of course there is the slave-girl who is symbolically freed and wed to the chief, but more related to the funeral-woman that Hyrrokkin symbolises we have ibn Fadlān’s “Angel of Death”. She is described as a crone, gloomy and corpulent, neither young nor old, and that she is responsible for putting the dead chieftain in order and sewing his garments. Ibn Fadlān comments that it is also she who is responsible for killing the slave-girl who volunteered to die.⁶⁴ This is shown explicitly later when it is this woman who takes the girl into the pavilion and is the operant entity in the girl’s death. She places the rope around the girl’s neck, even if it is two men who pull the ends, and she is the one who stabs the girl – repeatedly – to give her the Odinic double-death (joint strangulation and stabbing).⁶⁵ She is accompanied by her “daughters”, in the form of other slave-girls who look after the woman to be sacrificed in a ritual manner. While men perform offices like the slaying of beasts, the lighting of the ship-fire, and the strangulation of the girl, it is this Angel of Death and her ‘daughters’ who, like the Hyrrokkin figure in Snorri’s work, allow the proceedings to continue by providing a necessary role in the sacrifice of

⁶² Montgomery, James E. “Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah.” *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, vol. 3 (2000): 1-25.

⁶³ Montgomery, “Ibn Fadlan”, 18. Contained in footnote.

⁶⁴ Montgomery, “Ibn Fadlan”, 15.

⁶⁵ Montgomery, “Ibn Fadlan”, 19.

this young woman. Certainly the Angel herself serves a necessary purpose, as she is the person who takes the life of the young woman, despite the presence of men who are entirely capable of murdering her according to the method. This woman confers on the act its ritualistic value, possibly by virtue of her association with the feminine. “Angel of Death” as itself is a fair gloss for a chooser of the slain⁶⁶ – possibly identifying the woman as *valkyrie* incarnate, a physical valkyrie. If this woman was seen as a valkyrie-figure, even only in ritualistic terms, and given Hyrrokkin’s participation in a similar ritual, given valkyrie connotations, feminine participation in funerary rites is, perhaps, not out of the question.

There are the later images of the valkyrie as the protective spirit, which we see reflected in the idea of the valkyrie serving-women in Valhalla and Gísli’s good dream woman, but the figures that remain associated with death, and retain this perhaps earlier, dread version of the valkyrie, have a tendency to be women of violence. These are the bloody women intimate with the visceral and the dying. Gísli’s bad dream-woman, with her bathing of him in gore and blood, *Njála*’s prophetic women weaving on a loom of entrails – even while more passive, these women are associated with the violence of their office. The active dream-women, prophetic of death, suddenly take on implements of war, and begin to command their own hosts and participate in the slaughter, and in doing so they gain a new name, *tröll*, though their function is essentially the same, as they are prophetic of the death either of the dreamer or of the dreamer’s party. The activity and passivity of these women in handling the slaughter does not seem to affect their involvement with death, or the end result – death is foretold whether these women are holding a sword or not, but rather it is their involvement with violence that sets them apart, their willingness and involvement with both slaughter and the aftermath of slaughter that lends them credence to prophecy its coming.

Even beyond that, women with this connection to death, as these early battle-demon type of women seem to have, have a violent overtone in places other than dreams. Hyrrokkin follows the same visual motif as the wolf-riding troll-woman of Þórðr’s dream, with all the violence that riding a wolf, death image that it is, entails.

⁶⁶ Zoëga, *Concise Dictionary*. *Valkyrie*, of course, a compound coming from *valr* m., which Zoëga gives as “the slain” (p. 468), and *kjósa* (*kýs*; *kaus*, *køri* and *keyri*; *kusum* and *kurum*: *kosinn*, *kørin*) v., meaning “to choose” (p. 241). “Angel of Death” is, therefore, a fair gloss for this, considering the role, even in the name, that is assigned to them.

Her wolf is even referenced in *Gylfaginning*, with a particular word, *vargr*, which has a rather more savage tone than *úlfr*, which merely designates the physical animal.⁶⁷ The word *vargr* can also be used for words like an outlaw,⁶⁸ implying a certain amount of violence and liminality inherent to that particular incarnation of the wolf, and yet these women ride them as if they were no less tame than a horse, harnessing that violence and their inherent imagery and channelling it to their own means, and compounding their own death-meaning. Even without Hyrrokkin's use of obvious violence in the funeral proceedings, she is linked back to these women associated with violence by use of a kenning in *Húsdrápa*, associating not only the story with an earlier one, but associating her with the female figure Hildir, who has dominion over death such that she could, in essence, choose *not* to release the slain, and resurrect them.

Women serve in Valhalla, yes, we have been told this, and they serve benign purposes, but they are not excluded from these violent death-roles that, considering the male battle-gods (like Óðinn, Þórr or Týr), one might expect of men. Rather, the fluid nature of Norse gender constructs that Clover examines seems to allow for the women to retain their association with death while actively performing masculine (read: violent or aggressive) actions. The association of objects with a feminine cast to them, like the textiles, reinforces the staunch femininity of the figures using them, while simultaneously being used in violent action. The required facet in these visions seems, overwhelmingly, not to be the violence, but rather the women perpetrating or prophesizing it, as both observers and perpetrators, while they may bear different names (dream-women vs *trolls*), remain very identifiably female.

In the Words of Oppenheimer: “Now I am become Death”

Valkyries have been done to death, if one will pardon the pun, but they are somewhat inescapable in the understanding of women and the relationship with the dead – this is a reality. But while important and somewhat malleable in form and function depending on when and where they are appearing (whether in poetry or saga,

⁶⁷ *Snorra-Edda*, 72.

⁶⁸ Zoëga, Geir T. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 2004. p.472 *vargr* (-s, -ar), m. (1) wolf (*troll-kona sat á vargi*); (2) thief, robber, miscreant; *eyða vörgum*, to destroy miscreants; (3) outlaw (*Eyvindr hafði vegit í véum, ok var hann v. orðinn*). [Notice that the example given for the definition “wolf” includes the example of the troll-woman, as mentioned before.]

in mythology or modern media), the valkyrie-figure is not the only feminine figure of death that should be addressed. To solely focus on the valkyrie would be to gloss over other important aspects of folkloric or mythological understandings of death as it relates to women, as it appears in the context of the literature. There are collectors of the dead, and women who prophecy death, which we have seen, and there is an association of the social ‘other’ with death, which could perhaps partly account for women’s prominence with the role, but there remains a certain class of women who wear death in a different way. There are those women who do not hold death as an office, but become, in a sense, embodiments of the force of it, or who channel it directly rather than necessarily serving as a sort of psychopomp, as the valkyries do in choosing the ‘worthy’ souls to go to either Óðinn or Freyja’s halls, half and half. This is not to say that these women are wearing “Death” as one thinks of it in a rather medieval *danse macabre* sense, as a reaper cutting us down and wielding the power of death, but rather that these women are taking unto themselves aspects of death which tackle certain concepts that death deals with, rather than the force that cuts men down, necessarily. These figures as Death are not necessarily violent or related to violent imagery, though for obvious reasons violence can certainly be a major player or at least an underpinning to some of these women. Rather, some of these women are entirely receptive to their roles either taking on death or, in fact, beating death away, because death is by its very nature a binary force – one cannot have death without life, and, conversely, one cannot either have life without death. They are an inextricably linked binary, and one need look no farther than, as aforementioned, the Persephone myth, or Ishtar’s descent. Fertility gods doubling as death gods is a concept that is certainly not new, nor one to which the Norse were immune. Freyja as a fertility goddess owns a hall that collects half of the slain, and her brother Freyr has particular associations with barrow-rites despite also being a fertility god, himself.⁶⁹ We saw before that the figure Hildir is associated with death even as her role in the story is to refuse to let soldiers die. In essence, her role regarding death was ensured by her ability to keep people alive. In another sense, women are associated with death, becoming a figure of it, by recognizing it and memorializing it,

⁶⁹ “Ynglinga saga” in *Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. Íslensk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941), 9-83, p.24. Here we see him being buried after death, and to his mound they bring all the taxes of the land and push them through holes – one for gold, one for silver, one for copper.; Davidson, *Gods and Myths*, 100.

rather than being a cause of it. The roles of death are as manifold as the kind of women who wield it, and these women all use it in differing and important ways, but all take it into themselves and, in essence, become the power they embody in that moment.

Perhaps the fairest and most obvious place to start would here be Loki's daughter by Angrboða, the goddess Hel. She has, of course, been discussed before in light of her role as a social other, given the unacceptable elements of her father's *jötunn* lineage, and as part of the triad of death-images that Loki seems to have produced, that we see echoed in Hyrrokkin's appearance out of *jötunheim* – the wolf, the serpent and the woman. Hel herself shares her name with the realm over which she is mistress, cognate with the Old English word from which modern Hell derives, though devoid of the bulk of Judaeo-Christian overtones of infernal torture and eternal punishment that became associated with the idea of an underworld in later literature and, consequently, modern parlance.⁷⁰ In this, she follows a tradition of such underworld-gods, as Hades is eponymous ruler of Hades, and Ereshkigal, sometimes called Irkalla, the eponymous ruler of the land Irkalla – so is Hel ruler of Hel. Consequently this makes certain kennings, for example someone going 'to Hel', hard to place regarding whether it refers to the goddess or to the place or whether, indeed, there is a difference. That said, the fact that such a place would be associated with a *feminine* god, if at all, is perhaps telling of inborn associations.

⁷⁰ Bell, L. Michael. "“Hel Our Queen”: An Old Norse Analogue to an Old English Female Hell." *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Apr, 1983): 263-268. A notable exception to this, which Bell notes as being strangely absent from basic texts on Hel like Ellis's and Jan de Vries' works, is from *Bartholomeus saga postola*, which survives in five manuscripts, and then five copies of those manuscripts, the former from the period between 1220-1375, and the latter from 1600-1800. Falling into lacunae in all but two of those manuscripts is a line wherein a devil that had been hiding inside a pagan idol, was made to confess by Bartholomew, and says, in a quoted passage that Jesus Christ made war on "Hel drottning vara" [Hel our queen]. This particular Hel is never mentioned again, and appears only in this manuscript, and appears to be a queen of a Christian conception of Hel (though perhaps using the English 'Hell' is here more appropriate, given the circumstances), rather than the more pagan ideas of the sort of dreary, damp, vaguely unpleasant place that we find elsewhere. However it seems that the use of the name Hel is less an identification with the goddess with whom we are familiar, and more a gloss for a figure from the likely source of *Bartholomeus saga*, the *Acta Sanctorum*, part of Bartholomew's *Acta Fabulosa*, as the passage from which *hel drottning vara* likely originated is *mortem, quae regina nostra est*. Bell notes that a figure named *Mors* is present as an ambivalent ally of Nicodemus, of enough prevelance that the editor of that gospel infrequently capitalizes. The Norse gloss here to Hel is interesting, could be telling regarding how the old faith was handled after the Christianization period, and is certainly worth noting for reasons of breadth of knowledge, and how the idea of Hel changed with the new faith, but is otherwise somewhat unhelpful, given her mutated nature as a gloss for a Latin figure, for the given purpose of this essay.

Her origin can be found in *Gylfaginning*, where it is said, of course, that she is daughter of Loki and Angrboða, as is to be expected, that she had two brothers, Fenrir and Jörmungandr, but it is then said that the gods learned by way of prophecy that these three siblings would cause a great deal of misfortune for them. It was decided because of this, and because of their lineage (with special attention paid to how dangerous their father’s bloodline is, as opposed to just the mother), that they should not be raised any longer in Jotunheim as they had been until that point. Instead, Óðinn has them collected, and they are then all of them separated off – Jörmungandr is thrown to the sea to become the Midgard Serpent, Fenrir is raised “at home”,⁷¹ and Hel he cast into Niflheim. It says that he gave her power over nine realms, and that her office would be to lodge and care for all that were sent to her – those who died of sickness and those dead of old age, essentially amounting to those who Óðinn did not have the valkyries go to collect as *einherjar*.⁷² This power given to her over the nine realms, however, extended even so far as Óðinn’s own son Baldr, as Hoðr is sent to Hel to go and try to retrieve him, as she has collected him and sat him in her hall (on the high seat, no less).⁷³ As death, she strikes a bargain for the release of Baldr, but as that bargain cannot be met (with the tears of everything on the earth, both alive and dead) Baldr remains with her, and her dominion over him is entire, reasoning why *Skáldskaparmál* lists a kenning for Baldr as “*Heljarsinni*”.⁷⁴

To Hel is the most detail given, besides Fenrir, of the three children Óðinn casts out, and the most care taken to name and describe all parts of her realm, each relating to death as it exists in her sphere of influence. Her dish is Hunger, her knife is Famine, her bed is *Kör*, a bed of sickness, and the hangings are *Blikjandaböl*, which translates as ‘gleaming misfortune’. Before her door is her threshold called *Fallandaforað*, from *falla*, to fall, and *forað*, which Zoëga lists as a “dangerous place or situation, abyss, pit”.⁷⁵ Her hall itself, *Éljúðnir*, refers to being cold and rain-damp. Each of her attributes in this underworld lends itself as an extension to her wholesale identification as and personification of ordinary death – not battle-death or glorious, heroic ends, but the kind

⁷¹ *Snorra-Edda*, 43.

⁷² *Snorra-Edda*, 43.

⁷³ *Snorra-Edda*, 73.

⁷⁴ *Snorra-Edda*, 108.

⁷⁵ Zoëga, *Concise Dictionary*, 143. *forað*, m. (1) dangerous place or situation, abyss, pit; (2) ogre, monster (*þú ert et mesta f.*).

of everyday, ordinary death that afflicts all who die outside of Odinic constraints of acceptability. She dines at a table with hunger and famine, and sleeps with sickness and misfortune, steps over a perilous fall whenever she enters her hall. Hel rules the world of the inglorious dead, and was given office over all nine worlds of Norse cosmology, and her investiture in this office was so complete that she dines with death and sleeps with death, steps over death as she enters her home – it surrounds her and she embodies it to such a degree that she is described as “*blá hálf en hálf með hörundar lit*”⁷⁶ – half-black and half flesh-coloured. Black, here, perhaps refers in the same way it does during passages describing corpses, to the cast flesh gets when it starts to decompose. Ibn Fadlan describes the exhumed chieftain as black in colour,⁷⁷ and in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the body of a murdered herdsman is described as *kolblár*,⁷⁸ coal-black. After a run-in with a *draugr*, Þórir is likewise described as *kolblár* immediately preceding sickness and death as a result of his contact with that *draugr*.⁷⁹ We know from *Gylfaginning* that the dead are supposed to have a different colour to them, as Móðguðr can recognize Hermóðr by his colouring as a member of the living, along with his heaviness of step.⁸⁰ It seems a common colour-identification for corpses or those to be soon-dead. It’s possible that Hel herself is so much involved with death she has a death-cast on her skin in the form of that half-black colouration.

Of course Hel, as we know, is not the only keeper of the dead. That office is shared across quite a few different gods all of whom, with the exception of Óðinn, are female. Freyja is probably the next most important of the keepers of the dead, claiming half of the slain, who go to her realm Fólkvangr.⁸¹ On this land she has her hall called Sessrúmnir, though this is attested in Snorri’s work, in *Gylfaginning* and later in *Skáldskaparmál* as part of one of Freyja’s kennings.⁸² The state of the slain once Freyja claims her half is somewhat mysterious, and there seems to be no clear answer exactly what it is they do, as little time is devoted to its description when set next to Óðinn’s painted portrait of Valhalla, wide and many-doored as it is, but it remains that she is

⁷⁶ *Snorra-Edda*, 43.

⁷⁷ Montgomery, “Ibn Fadlan”, 16.

⁷⁸ “Eyrbyggja saga” in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslensk fornrit IV. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1985): 3-184, p. 93. *var hann allr kolblár og lamit i hvert bein*. [all coal-black and lame [broken] in every bone]

⁷⁹ “Eyrbyggja”, 146. *ok var víða orðinn kolblár* [was coal-black]

⁸⁰ *Snorra-Edda*, 73.

⁸¹ *Snorra-Edda*, 39.

⁸² *Snorra-Edda*, 125.

claimant to a portion, which may in some manner relate back to her special relationship with the valkyries,⁸³ though Snorri seems rather disinclined to give us detail about Freyja's possible martial roles. Here she takes on a role in some manner like Hel – she is death as she guards the dead, though admittedly under different auspices and in a different capacity than Hel's claim.

Two of the lesser death-keepers, on the rung below even Freyja in terms of anecdotal mentions, are Gefjun and Rán. It is said of Gefjun that she “is a maiden [a virgin], and she is served by all those who die as maidens [virgins]”⁸⁴ Of Rán, there is a mention of her net in *Skáldskaparmál*, in the scene that sets up *Lokasenna*, “Þá urðu æsir þessir varir, at Rán átti net þat, er hon veiddi í menn alla, þá er á sæ kómu.”⁸⁵ In catching men that go to sea in her net, it is a poetic allusion to drowning. Otherwise the line seems somewhat throwaway. Her very name, Rán, means ‘plunder’, and suggests a somewhat violent imagery.⁸⁶ Likewise, there are inferences one can make using the poetry stanzas given. In a stanza from *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* in the Poetic Edda, there is a kenning for drowning that was phrased as giving men “to Rán”⁸⁷ in much the same way as sending someone ‘to Hel’ would be a poetic device for a killing. It is possible, if not explicit, that Rán had some connection to the dead in the same way as Gefjun. Assuming this of Rán, it is with these women, as we see with Óðinn and Freyja, that we find the allotment of *specific* kinds of dead, as if the dead are sorted by means of their end into the hands of these keepers – glorious battle-dead to Freyja and Óðinn, drowned to Rán, virgins to Gefjun and the remainder of sick and elderly to Hel. Their assumption of duties as keepers of the dead, even anecdotally, aligns the office almost exclusively with women. Even the person who stands watch at the Gjallarbrú like some sort of border-control for the dead is a woman. It is she, this Móðguðr, who tells Hermóðr of his nature versus the nature of the dead, respecting colouring and heaviness, as was mentioned, but also who tells him of Baldr's journey past her, and directs him to

⁸³ Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 72.

⁸⁴ *Snorra-Edda*, 46.

⁸⁵ *Snorra-Edda*, 141.

⁸⁶ Burrows, Hannah. “Enigma Variations: *Hervarar saga*'s Wave-Riddles and Supernatural Women in Old Norse Poetic Tradition.” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 112, No. 2 (April 2013): 194-216, p. 201.

⁸⁷ “*Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*” in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kriksjónsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslensk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014): 259-259, p. 263.

the Hel-road, which he seeks.⁸⁸ She guards the dead as her office, in an almost valkyrie-role inasmuch as they function as protectors and caretakers. Here, that protection and caretaking is for these sick and elderly dead by way of guarding, in much the way the Valhalla valkyries are caretakers in their own way for the *einherjar*, if servicing different needs. Women collect the dead, women portend death, they care for the dead and women keep the dead. In all respects except Óðinn's, it seems like an almost exclusively feminine role to keep.

As there are keepers of the dead, there are also those who take death unto themselves in the context of life – those who serve the binary purpose of beating death off. These women are those to whom death is a thing that can be staved away, and in being able to have control of its non-presence, in some manner have dominion over it. A fair example might be made of Gullveig,⁸⁹ the terribly mysterious Vanir figure who appears in verse 21 of *Völuspá*:

*Þat man hon fólkvíg
fyrst í heimi,
er Gullveigu
geirum studdu
ok í höll Hárs
hana brenndu;
þryssvar brenndu
þryssvar borna,
opt, ósjaldan,
þó hon enn lifir.⁹⁰*

Here she is said to be studded with spears (associated with Óðinn), and then in Hár's (Óðinn's) hall burned. Thrice burned, it says, and Gullveig is reborn each time. Who exactly Gullveig is in the grand scheme remains somewhat mysterious, but her deaths and subsequent resurrections are a rather dramatic facet of the larger sequence of

⁸⁸ *Snorra-Edda*, 73.

⁸⁹ The name Gullveig is of unclear meaning, as a compound comprised of *gull* which is 'gold', and *veig*, for which Zoëga only provides "(1) *strong beverage, drink* (hann skal drekka dýrar veigar); (2) *pith, strength* (fór þat líð aprtr, er honum, þótti minni veig í)." (page 479). Gísli Sigurðsson suggests a reading that refers to gold-thirst in his article "Völuspá as the Product of an Oral Tradition: What does that Entail?" (p. 54) and in the 1998 edition of *Eddukvæði* he edited (p. 8), "Völuspá" in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson. (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1998): 3-20.

⁹⁰ "Völuspá", *Eddukvæði* (2014), 296.

events that *Völuspá* chronicles. It seems, at least, that when she resurrects, she takes on a new name. The very next stanza follows a powerful *völva* they call *Heiðr*, as if as an extension of thought from *Gullveig*'s resurrection. There are different ways one can interpret this. One interpretation follows that these are merely different names used in different realms of society, *Gullveig* for the gods, *Heiðr* among men.⁹¹ Perhaps a different interpretation could be that a body dies and she is reborn and renamed. She does not resurrect and is not thrice restored to life – she is *þrysvar borna*. She is thrice born. This would not be an isolated case of rebirth in the Norse theatre, but certainly one of the more dramatic. The resurrection would be especially interesting, following an interpretation of that kind, as *Gullveig* has been previously associated with *Freyja*,⁹² whom we know was associated with valkyries and the dead, and the fact that valkyries are, themselves, linked with ideas of rebirth, if not resurrection.⁹³ Ellis mentions a few cases of rebirth scenarios, as there is certainly precedent for the idea of rebirth in Norse society, and she enumerates this in an entire subchapter devoted to the phenomenon. One of the episodes she mentions is from *Ólafs saga helga* in *Flateyjarbók* wherein a man is instructed by Ólafr Geirstaðaálfr to break into his howe and retrieve items that he is to give to Ásta, wife of Harald the Greenlander, as gifts for her unborn son, who is to be named Ólafr and was, of course, the eponymous St. Ólaf who would be King of Norway. The episode continues when he's grown and he passes the howe of Ólafr Geirstaðaálfr and one of his men asks whether he had been buried there, against which Ólafr pits a rather determined argument.⁹⁴ Slightly more relevant for us, however, is how valkyries seem to be a common feature of these stories of rebirth. Ellis mentions that a prose note at the end of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* says lovers *Helgi* and *Sváva*, a valkyrie, were reborn, and another at the end of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* mentioning that the same *Helgi* and *Sigrún*, the same valkyrie, were reborn, whereafter he was called *Helgi Haddingjaskati*, and she was *Kára Hálfðanardóttir*, “as is related in

⁹¹ “*Völuspá*”, *Eddukvæði* (1998), 54.

⁹² Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 72.

⁹³ Chadwick, N. K. “Norse Ghosts (A Study in the Draugr and the Haugbúi).” *Folklore*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Jun, 1946): 50-65, p. 58.

⁹⁴ *Flateyjarbók II*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Reykjavík: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1945, 74-78.; Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 138-139; Gíslí, *Gaelic Influence*, 54. He parallels this with an Irish story in which “King Mongan of Antrim is accused by a warrior of the Fenians who appears from the dead, of being Finn macCumhaill reborn. Mongan tries to ignore the accusation but the saga-writer makes clear that this was in fact the case.”

Káru ljóð; and she was a Valkyrie.”⁹⁵ Thrice born. We have likewise already seen the story of Hildir wherein a valkyrie circumvents death by having the soldiers of her father and her abductor resurrect eternally, just as the *einherjar*, those chosen by valkyries, seem to do in Valhalla. These valkyries do seem to be linked with continuing life as much as they are choosers of the slain, and idea that they could be linked with rebirth is perhaps not totally unfounded. Chadwick even notes that the changing of the valkyrie’s name in the Helgi cycle seems to be par for the course in such cases of rebirth, as one sees Helgi retain his name in each lifetime of the Helgi-poems, while Sváva’s name changes with each birth, even though she is a valkyrie each time, and it is explicitly said to be her, reborn – Sváva to Sigrún to Kára.⁹⁶

That issue of death and rebirth can then be applied to the idea of the *hamingja*, which was introduced in passing earlier – the guardian spirit attending to a family line, often in the form of a woman. The concept of the *hamingja* is largely wrought up in the concept of luck or fortune, and exists well into the Christian period in at least that form, if lacking the spirit-woman associations when applied to Christians or Christian conceptions.⁹⁷ That luck concept can be applied as equally to bishops as to kings, and a monarch granting his forces his *hamingja* seems to be somewhat akin to a monarch giving favour or a blessing – it is part of the same semidivine association that a monarch has as it relates to the power they can confer onto their people. As the concept appears in its form as a woman, however, we have a description that sounds largely like the appearance of certain dream-women we have seen before, associated with the valkyrie. Also occasionally (and confusingly) called a *fylgjukona* or even *kynfylgja*,⁹⁸ as *fylgja* are mostly-separate entities attached to one figure rather than a family line, the *hamingja* can appear in a vision or a dream to give warnings, prophecies, and the implication is that she provides protection, given some depictions of her in the same sort of armour and sword-bearing that we find in more malevolent dream-women, though certainly aligned more *with* the dreamer in this case than against. The images we are given of these women include the notion of great size as great power – just as we had a giant-

⁹⁵ “Helgakviða hundingsbana II”, *Eddukvæði*, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson. (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1998):192-207. p. 206.; Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 139.

⁹⁶ Chadwick, “Norse Ghosts”, 58.

⁹⁷ Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 133. She mentions a case in which it is said of Bishop Jón that men would profit by his *hamingja*, for example.

⁹⁸ Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 130-131.

troll woman, so do we have giant *hamingja*-women.⁹⁹ These women are dressed in armour, carrying on the martial theme we had earlier seen in the troll-women. So, too, do these *hamingja* prophecy death or appear in relation to it, as in *Víga-Glúms saga*, wherein the woman Glúmr sees in his dream is interpreted as indication that his grandfather Vigfúss had passed.¹⁰⁰ Their martial quality, however, and the overarching concern for things regarding death seems to divorce them from the idea of women like Gísli's good dream-woman, who was opposed to the worse dream-woman in terms of association with nonviolent death. Instead, she is more concerned with luck and fortune and valour, more aligned with the dreadful dream-women, these valkyrie figures, in imagery and in purpose. Subsequent to the death of the bearer, these women pass on to their descendants, sometimes even passing directly to descendants bearing the same name as the deceased, in much the same way that reborn valkyries seem to hitch onto certain people or 'souls', for lack of a better term, as we see with Helgi/Helgi and the reborn valkyrie Sváva/Sigrún/Kára.¹⁰¹ Ellis mentions a link between the guardian *hamingja* with the more benevolent iteration of valkyries,¹⁰² but in terms of imagery, these *hamingja*, with their size and their martial tilt, line up with these violent dream-women and those valkyrie leanings as well.

Following the vein of rebirth into that of extended life, we have the issue of Iðunn, who safeguards for the gods their long life by providing them with apples that keep for them their youth.¹⁰³ In an episode of *Skáldskaparmál*, Loki is coerced by *jötunn* Þjazi in an eagle form (again, an outsider figure in the form of a bird), the same Þjazi that is father to Skaði, to secure for him Iðunn, after which Iðunn is tricked and abducted. Deprivation from her youth-keeping attributes ages the gods,¹⁰⁴ and makes them rather desperate about it all, forcing Loki to borrow Freyja's feathered cloak once again (still a rather curious crutch for a figure who could transform Iðunn into a nut with no apparent effort or aid) to retrieve her.¹⁰⁵ It seems fairly clear that Iðunn's disappearance constituted a legitimate cause for concern to the *Æsir*, and while their

⁹⁹ Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 130-131. One woman is described as being tall as she walks over the waves as if they were land (Also mentioned in Davidson's article "The Sword at the Wedding", pg 10), and another as so giant her shoulders touched the mountains on either side of her.

¹⁰⁰ "Víga-Glúms saga", 30.; Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 131.

¹⁰¹ Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 132.

¹⁰² Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 134.

¹⁰³ *Snorra-Edda*, 40.

¹⁰⁴ *Snorra-Edda*, 87.

¹⁰⁵ *Snorra-Edda*, 87.

fate is ultimately tied to Ragnarøk, and therefore somewhat inviolate until the end times, their rapid aging does seem to have been something of a threat. In that way, Iðunn, another feminine presence, staves off death from the gods themselves. We know that the gods, though those of whom we hear in *Völuspá* are some sort of inviolate as their fates are already written, are susceptible to death and dying. When Óðinn cast Hel into Niflheim, he gave her power over nine worlds. One hardly needs to presume that these are the nine worlds of Norse cosmology, which would naturally include the realm of the gods. We know gods can go to her, and we can use Baldr as the case in point to this example. We know that Hel can claim the gods' dead the same as if they were any other mortal, as we find Baldr sitting at the high-seat in Hel's hall. Jochens calls this phenomenon of Baldr permanently going to Hel's home a sort of reversal of the usual procedure involved in marriage of the gods (bringing *jötunn* women back to the realm of the gods), which is equal parts what she calls a "collapse of the mythic world"¹⁰⁶ and an indication of the power she has been given to claim these dead – a power which Baldr's own father is said to have given her, and a power that he cannot, himself circumvent, though his wife, importantly, came very close. This is what makes Iðunn, as a woman, so important. Iðunn, in her way, is circumventing Hel's power in its capacity to claim *sótt dauðir menn og ellidauðir* – those dead of sickness and old age.¹⁰⁷ In doing so, Iðunn finds a loophole in Hel's power over the gods, and exploits it – harnessing death to the gods' benefit by keeping it away, keeping those gods young and healthy and allaying the danger of death by old age. Iðunn's disappearance allows death to flourish among the gods again, making her necessary to the continued function of these figures as a society. She takes this power into herself as a counterpoint to Hel, and as that counterpoint, is as effective over death as Hel herself, in Hel's ability to release souls as we see her conditionally agree to in Baldr's case. Iðunn herself, given the symbolism of apples and of this youth-keeping, which fails without her presence, could, perhaps, link her to fertility gods, as it seems rather in keeping, in terms of symbolism, with the well-known fertility/decay descent-type myths as one sees with Persephone or Ishtar, as previously mentioned.

¹⁰⁶ Jochens, *Images*, 65.

¹⁰⁷ *Snorra-Edda*, 43.

Women like Iðunn took on aspects of death by refusing to allow death to touch them or those in their charge. They took power over death in a personal way, and in very specific ways, not just as officers of a certain role, but as named individuals with identified purposes. In that way they are different from the preeminent valkyries, while still retaining certain links to the concept. While ‘valkyrie’ is a wide-ranging, broad-meaning term that encompasses ideas from the dread spirits and troll-women collecting corpses to the fair-handed *hamingja* and the servants of Valhalla, it is a term for a collection of powers and mythological motifs and, essentially, a term for an office, rather than a named individual exerting this death-power. In that manner these women accomplish something that valkyries, as a group, could not – that individual meshing of personal and conceptual that is taking on the auspices of death. For the closest that one does indeed come to that, one has to step somewhat outside the eddic and mythological and back into the realm of someone like ibn Fadlān. His Angel of Death functions, as was mentioned, in many ways as a living valkyrie. In doing so she performs the very same function that differentiates women like Hel, Rán, Gefjun, Gullveig and Iðunn from the wide-banding moniker ‘valkyrie’ as a symbol of office – she takes that conceptual power and exerts it on a personal level. She performs the action, she allows the funeral proceedings to occur, as a necessary aspect, and she provides both for the corpse (the already-dead) and the slave-girl sacrifice (the doomed-to-die) while simultaneously servicing the needs of the living – those who require the funeral to take place. She is as much taking this idea of death unto herself and serving as its conduit as any of the ‘proper’, mythological goddesses do in eddas prose or poetic. Hyrrokkin does much the same thing, with the added symbolism of her wolf-and-serpent steed. In bringing that tripartite imagery with her, she calls back the story of Hel and her siblings. It was mentioned before how Hel is perhaps the most *complete* channelling of the phenomenon of death within the pantheon, and Hyrrokkin, in calling back to that imagery, aligns herself with Hel in the triad of Loki’s children. She aligns herself with death and then, just as the Angel of Death did for the Rus’, she takes on the office of the dead by putting the proceedings in a situation where the funeral can continue and Baldr can take his journey to Hel, as without her that would have been impossible. In that office she was a stand-in for Hel, as the Angel of Death was in some respects a living valkyrie, the both of them taking death into themselves and using it to an end.

The human aspect of these mythological concepts can also extend to those women in sagas who bear witness to the deaths of others. Chadwick, in her article, speaks at length on the phenomenon of poetic death-chants. She believes that it is probable that these death-chants formed some sort of appeal by a dying hero to figures like Óðinn to gain entrance into Valhalla.¹⁰⁸ This would follow, as Óðinn is himself a god of poetry in addition to his attributes as a god of battle and of death – a dramatic appeal to the poetic god in one’s final moments, recounting one’s accomplishments and worthiness in metre would not, perhaps, be inappropriate. There are plenty of these death-chant examples, overarchingly from men, but with the notable heroic woman reciting her own, as both Brynhildr and Guðrún do, summarizing their deeds and justifying their right to die.¹⁰⁹ Of interest, however, it seems that in the earlier class of these death-chants, which Chadwick notes are of a somewhat more lyrical and emotional cast than the later cataloguing of deeds and accomplishments as a sort of recapitulation of the reciter’s heroic worth,¹¹⁰ have a certain category wherein these chants are witnessed – and recorded – by female relatives. He mentions the case of Hallmundr, a friend to Grettir in *Grettissaga*, wherein he enters a cave covered in blood, and when his daughter asks him why, he bids her listen to his death-chant, which chronicles what happened to him, and asks her to inscribe that chant on a rod. Through the telling, which was named *Hallmundarkviða*, he weakens, and once finished, he perishes, whereupon the poem, as it was inscribed by his daughter, is acquired by Grímr, the man who killed him. Chadwick includes other examples, including Egil, during his period of starvation following the death of his son, reciting to his daughter the poem *Sonatorrek*, which she inscribes on wood.¹¹¹ While the inscribing does in itself seem to have been the more important of the gestures, regarding the recording and transmission of the poem itself, I don’t think the fact that it is the daughters in these cases recording their father’s death-lays is insignificant. The presence of these daughters, bearing witness to and recording these poems as testament to their fathers’ lives and heroism, and most importantly, their

¹⁰⁸ Chadwick, N. K. “Norse Ghosts II (Continued).” *Folklore*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Sep, 1946): 106-127, p. 115. Chadwick classes, among these lyrical death-chants, Hjalmar’s death-song (found in *Örvar-Odds saga*), comparing it with a later example of the same kind of death-chant, in the form of Ragnarr Loðbrok’s *Krákumál*, which Chadwick says must be later due to its construction and in its character as a chronicle of Ragnarr’s deeds.

¹⁰⁹ Chadwick, “Norse Ghosts II”, 115.

¹¹⁰ Chadwick, “Norse Ghosts II”, 113.

¹¹¹ Chadwick, “Norse Ghosts II”, 112.

deaths (in Egil's case, the very death his daughter then rescues him from), becomes interesting when viewed in the light of what the poems were, perhaps, meant to do, as appeals to Óðinn as a poetic god of heroes for entrance to Valhalla. By witnessing and recording these poems, they are in essence lending their fathers' deaths a certain amount of weight, as without witnesses, these strophes recited before death would be somewhat futile, as composed oral poetry is performative by nature. A poet without an audience to record (orally, of course) and repeat these poems is hardly a poet at all. These witnesses could, by any right, be anyone – Hallmundr could have recited his death-lay to Grímr and had a witness, but instead he chose to gift it to his daughter, and have her write the runes, so it may be prudent to ask why, in this Odinic ritual of appeal, the daughters were chosen as recording forces. This is not the case in other death-songs, as in, for example, Beowulf's speech before his death,¹¹² where audiences or other men are those listening, but these audiences do not carve runes, where both of these daughters make a point to – so why? There is no clear answer, but one could suggest that perhaps they were being made to stand-in as just that – intermediaries in at least a ritual capacity between their fathers and Óðinn, witnessing the heroic composition and inscribing this poetry into runes (which are in themselves considered somewhat magical, especially related to Óðinn). In being intermediaries for the death-lay, however, and being women relating to that idea of the heroic death in an odinic sense, one could possibly relate them to the Angel of Death that the Rus' employed, in a ritual sense, given the symbolic weight attached to them that heavily relies on a connection with death and to the dying, and the power to the mythological that such a connection implies, even if Óðinn may have been able to get the point without their intermediary help – in a ritual sense, the girls and their rune-carving seem to play some role.

The dead themselves can link to these aspects of death and endurance, as we find the case of a seeress being woken from the dead, as the dead seem to inherently possess or have access to special knowledge even without preexisting connections to magic or prophecy, in order to speak on events that have happened, or will happen in the future. Most famously would likely be the conversation with the *völva* that is initiated by Óðinn in *Baldurs draumar*. Certainly, as Gunnell says, the dead (those that are subject to inhumation rather than cremation, anyway) do seem to be regarded more as sleeping

¹¹² *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, trans. Seamus Heaney, London: Faber and Faber, 2007.

than the kind of dead which we think of, which is in a sense the *permanent* absence of humanity and life.¹¹³ This would account for the *völva* of *Baldrs draumar*'s somewhat grouchy attempts to wave Óðinn away to get back to her rest. He wrests her back to speaking by force of the magic with which he raised her, however, which is also certainly not without precedent. We know that waking the dead in order to do one's bidding is a deep-rooted tradition in Norse circles, with folktales regarding barrow-dwellers and fetches stretching from depictions of the pagan period right up through to the modern period, wherein there are tales of wizards raising the dead to steal alcohol or heckle their neighbours, after a process had been undertaken to set the dead under a spell.¹¹⁴ Ellis mentions an episode of *Grógaldr* where Svipdagr raises his dead mother to teach him charms to keep him safe on a dangerous journey.¹¹⁵ We even have an instance in *Hyndluljóð* wherein Freyja raises Hyndla (a wolf-rider who she calls "sister"¹¹⁶) and extracts from her knowledge in much the same pattern as Óðinn and the *völva* in *Baldrs draumar*, with an equally bitter and grouchy revenant.¹¹⁷

The specific raising of the seeress in Hel's land, however, as Óðinn is said to ride not to any howe or grave in his world, but to one specifically in Hel's domain and her area of influence,¹¹⁸ does raise some eyebrows considering why a *völva* would be buried there specifically, but in some ways it just layers on the symbolism regarding this woman's relationship with the dead. She is in a sense a little more than 'mostly dead' – she's dead in a world of the dead. If the dead of the regular world are supposed to be privy to wise knowledge, then the dead within the realm of the dead must be privy to knowledge beyond even that – and a *völva* as a dead woman in the land of the dead is wisdom and knowledge upon wisdom and knowledge. This dead woman here, who already holds the very feminine office of seeress (an office Óðinn would be and has been mocked for being related to, despite his very obvious reference as a god of magic earlier in *Baldrs draumar*), has the doubled-over benefit of her knowledge as a member of the dead, and that knowledge is put to use by Óðinn who, as a member of the living,

¹¹³ Gunnell, "Waking the Dead", 239.

¹¹⁴ Gunnell, "Waking the Dead". This article in its whole is an enlightening look at the phenomenon of raising the dead, especially with reference to the explicitly Christian rites and more modern understandings and applications of these raised corpses.

¹¹⁵ Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 154.

¹¹⁶ "Hyndluljóð" in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson. (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1998):395-406.

¹¹⁷ Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 155.

¹¹⁸ "Baldrsdraumar", 446.

cannot access that, and requires the intermediary that this *völva* provides in reference to his request for knowledge of his son Baldr's unsettling dreams. Her being dead in addition to her preexisting office of *völva* is perhaps her most important attribute.

These women do not perhaps have the same cut-and-dry relationship with death that do the women who arrive in dreams and portents, but they do put those powers to certain use in other ways. We have in their cadre women who are as close to literal death as one can come – those women who keep the dead and tend them, though they may be divided among them according to manner of death. We have women who spurn death entirely, or circumvent it as the binary force with which death coexists, either in the manner of refusing to let people die, or in the manner of rebirth – constantly being reborn in new forms, as valkyries do. Then we have those women of death who have a relationship with death like that of a profession – becoming that conduit for it in order to let the dead pass, and to give the living their funeral, or to bear witness to and serve as intermediary to appeals of the dying to Óðinn. In counterpoint to them we have the dead themselves, who have the most special place as holders of specialized and secret knowledge that can be shared through their raising. Women are prominent in all these stories, and they use death as if it were a tool – all of its power and all of its inherent strengths and weaknesses harnessed by these women to their purpose. These women become Death, and in doing so, they are as powerful as they need to be.

Conclusion: Full Circle

There is no one profession in which women have not been involved at some point in history, and the same holds true for mythological constructs – there will always, always be women somewhere, but sometimes our view of them is skewed, or limited by what is available, or what we see most often. We know, though, that there was far more power given to Norse women than there was for their sisters on the Continent – a system that they could exploit more readily and more easily, even if it was a system in which they were still born on the side with less inherent power.¹¹⁹

The issue of magic and death, however, is where these women get to shine. Women have always had a certain mythological affinity to aspects of the universe and society – childbirth and marriage are perennial favourites, as are the earth and fertility. Death and magic hold a fair amount of sway in the woman’s world, however, and why wouldn’t they? Mythology is shaped around society both as a means to understand and to justify, to find our place within it and to tell others why they are where they are. Women were linked to childbirth as a biological function – so were they linked to the creation of life. Life and death being what they are, the two can in many cases naturally come together – what is more binary than life and death, or especially death in childbed? The mother becomes both a life-giver and a vessel for death, an allegory for fertility of spring and the barren winter both. In a society where a significant percentage of women would die in childbed, while simultaneously holding the keys to life, why wouldn’t there be an association? Death and women are natural bedfellows, it seems, in the world of premodern medicine. Magic, too, can be seen in the light of the society in which they lived – magic, in essence is the attempt to alter the world around oneself through extra-social means, that is to say, playing by rules outside of the social order. With women forced to meander around the loopholes in the system as it exists already, to gain power by exploiting the system, why not have women involved in a supernatural force that does just that – exploits the system by circumventing it. These phenomenon and women are tied up in the roles that they play for society, and their relationships are necessary, and important.

¹¹⁹ Clover, “Regardless of Sex”.

We have natural outsiders who wield magic and who are intimately associated with death down into their blood, as we have in Freyja who, as a *Vanir*, exists as a race apart from the *Æsir* social structure even as she is free to intermingle. She transforms into a hawk, can give that hawk-form to others, she mingles with the valkyries and chooses the slain, and she does so while being an outsider both in a racial sense, and in the sense of her gender. Women are on the periphery by way of the same system that limits their power, and while they can exploit that system and be powerful in their own right or in individual actions, they remain constrained by the very thing that defines them. Óðinn, in taking on an aspect of the feminine, makes himself an outsider and allows for that imagery to take hold and be effective. In his magic he is feminine, and it is through his magic that he can identify with certain aspects of the dead by way of his eagle-form and his association with these valkyries who seem so predisposed to the kind of magic associated with death. It is possible that it is because of his alignment with the feminine that he has a position as a death god at all, and that it is through his position as a god of battle and a god of magic that he is associated with death. Going to him after death is achieved either through battle, through poetry or through sacrifice led by a valkyrie-figure – but the dead do not come to him on their own.

The two phenomena of magic and death as it relates to the feminine, however, can come together in the form of prophecy, where we find women as figures in dreams – unmistakably feminine, wielding implements of the feminine as symbols of death and impending doom of which men dream, either in a passive sense, as a loom or a bloody cap, or even just as a prophetic presence, or in the active sense, as a field commander or taking part in a prophetic battle. These women are valkyries in every sense but an explicit one – they are not named valkyries, but they function as if they were. They prophesize death and they mark the dreamer as someone who will die or take part in that death. They are women of power who keep to, in large part, the early ideas of the valkyries – these battle-demons that were so like the Celtic war-goddesses: violent and bloody. These figures who ride wolves – wolves that in their naming as *vargr* rather than *úlfr*, align themselves with outlaws, figures legally placed outside of society, outside of the place where mortal law applied – and in Hyrrokkin’s case literally appear as the sort of triad of death that is Hel and her siblings, as if coming to a funeral dressed as a box set of creatures that will claim the lives of Óðinn’s blood. It is their femininity

that stands out as an overarching unifier. None of these figures that ride wolves or prophesize death or come to set a funeral into motion are male – none of them *could* be male, in a social *hvatr* sense. All of the imagery that is necessary for them is feminine – to adopt it is to feminize oneself (an inopportune thing to do, given social boundaries), as Óðinn has done, and to place oneself in social contempt.

Then there are those women who have power over death, as an office, or as an extension of themselves. Hel was born for this role, and Óðinn gave her the role when he cast her into Niflheim. In doing so, he gave her power over nine worlds and made her, truly, one of the most powerful forces in Norse cosmology, because her reach extends even to them – to the very Æsir who gave her her role to begin with. To her go those dead that died sickly or old – and only Iðunn with her youth-keeping apples seems to keep that power at bay, and in that way Iðunn is as much a part of the system of death as Hel is, as the opposite face of the coin. Hel has her fellows, of course, in keeping the dead, each with a specific class of people they take. Freyja, of course, takes half the slain, Gefjun the virgins, Rán the drowned men. Of all of these gods who keep the dead, who tend the dead and claim the dead, all are women except for Óðinn, who sends valkyries to claim the slain for him. It seems that the keepers of the dead are, as well as the claimants of the dead, a feminine office, and it is with the feminine intermediary that Óðinn is able to claim his dead for himself, and they are those same feminine intermediaries who then tend the dead in his hall. In other terms it seems that while Óðinn has the executive role, the actual operational functionality regarding death lies with the feminine, and either he must feminize himself (through magic) or he must go through feminine intermediaries in order to access that operational side of death. In some cases those intermediaries are the *völvur* on which he calls for specialized knowledge, raising them from the dead that they could harness that knowledge which the dead possess – but rather than just anyone he chooses these women – these seeresses that held that very feminine office in life, that he is himself mocked for, in order to get at knowledge which is hidden from him. In other cases, those intermediaries are his valkyries themselves. These valkyries as intermediaries are so connected to death that it is implied that when they die they are continuously reborn, as Brynhildr must burn herself in order to stop that cycle – the valkyries' connection to death is natural and effortless, and it seems to be so often used for Odinic purposes, both in the classical

valkyrie choosing-the-slain sense, or in a slightly more nontraditional sense of the witness to the poetic lays. Poetic composition being oral and therefore performative, death-chants require a performance, and if they are meant to justify a hero's entrance into Valhalla by appealing to Óðinn's poet-god nature, then an audience is required. By listening and recording, the daughter-figures become their fathers' valkyries by witnessing their fathers' performances and recording them such that others can learn and spread them – after all, Óðinn says himself in *Hávamál*:

*Deyr fé
deyja frændr
deyr sjálfr et sama;
ek veit einn,
at aldri deyr:
dómr um dauðan hvern.*¹²⁰

The subject of death is an impossibly large one, and even narrowing it down to the idea of women's involvement in it, I have barely scratched the surface. One could fill volumes on the subject and still not be finished, and women's studies by itself is an entire specialized field of study beyond the scope of a thesis of this length. That said, the hope is that in some small way the idea that women can and do have a special relationship with death as it stood in the Norse cosmology has been presented in what light it can. It seems largely the feminine holds power over death in a large (if not exclusive) and natural way, that the masculine has to alter itself to achieve. This is not to say that men and the masculine are not involved – clearly they are and Óðinn is proof at the very least of that, no less with Freyr and his attachment to barrow rites and fertility himself¹²¹ – but they are somewhat outnumbered and outclassed by the volume and the strength with which the feminine presents itself in alignment with these concepts.

¹²⁰ “Hávamál” in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Krísjásson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslensk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014): 322-355, p. 337.

¹²¹ Davidson, *Gods and Myths*, 100.

Works Cited and Further Reading

1. Almqvist, Bo. "The Death Forebodings of Saint Óláfr, King of Norway, and Rögnvaldr Brúason, Earl of Orkney" in *Viking Ale*. Aberystwyth: Boethius Press, 1991.
2. Almqvist, Bo. "The Fish of Life and the Salmon of Life" in *Viking Ale*. Aberystwyth: Boethius Press, 1991.
3. Ármann Jakobsson, "Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Medieval Icelandic Undead." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 110, No. 3 (July 2011): 281-300.
4. Bell, L. Michael. "'Hel Our Queen': An Old Norse Analogue to an Old English Female Hell." *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Apr, 1983): 263-268.
5. Borovsky, Zoe. "Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature." *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 112, No. 443 (Winter, 1999): 6-39.
6. Burrows, Hannah. "Enigma Variations: *Hervarar saga*'s Wave-Riddles and Supernatural Women in Old Norse Poetic Tradition." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 112, No. 2 (April 2013): 194-216.
7. Chadwick, N. K. "Norse Ghosts (A Study in the Draugr and the Haugbúi)." *Folklore*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Jun, 1946): 50-65.
8. Chadwick, N. K. "Norse Ghosts II (Continued)." *Folklore*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Sep, 1946): 106-127.

9. Clover, Carol J. "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe." *Representations*, No. 44 (Autumn 1993): 1-28.
10. Damico, Helen. *Beowulf's Wealtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984.
11. Davidson, H.R. Ellis. *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*. London: Penguin Books, 1990.
12. Davidson, H.R. Ellis. "The Sword at the Wedding." *Folklore*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (Mar, 1960): 1-18.
13. Donahue, Charles. "The Valkyries and the Irish War-Goddesses." *PMLA*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Mar, 1941): 1-12.
14. Ellis, Hilda Roderick. *The road to Hel: a study of the conception of the dead in Old Norse literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943.
15. Gardiner, Eileen, ed. *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante*. New York: Italica Press, 1989.
16. Gísli Sigurðsson. *Gaelic influence in Iceland: Historical and Literary Contacts, A Survey of Research*. Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2000.
17. Gísli Sigurðsson. "Völuspá as the Product of an Oral Tradition: What does that Entail?" *The Nordic Apocalypse: Approaches to Völuspá and Nordic Days of Judgement*. ed. Terry Gunnell and Annette Lassen. Brepols, 2013, 45-62.
18. Gunnell, Terry. "Waking the Dead: Folk Legends Concerning Magicians and Walking Corpses in Iceland." in *News from Other Worlds: Studies in Nordic Folklore, Mythology and Culture*, ed. Merrill Kaplan and Timothy R. Tangherlini. (Berkeley: North Pinehurst Press, 2012): 235-266.

19. Hagen, S. N. "On. Nornir 'Fates'." *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 39, No. 8 (Dec, 1924): 466-469
20. Houston, Susan Hilary. "Ghost Riders in the Sky." *Western Folklore*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Jul, 1964): 153-162.
21. Jesch, Judith. *Women in the Viking Age*. Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1991.
22. Jochens, Jenny. *Old Norse Images of Women*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.
23. Jochens, Jenny. "The Western Voyages: Women and Vikings," in *Approaches to Vinland: A conference on the written and archaeological sources for the Norse settlements in the North-Atlantic region and exploration of America*, ed. Andrew Wawn and Þórunn Sigurðardóttir. (Reykjavík: Sigurður Nordal Institute, 2001): 78-87
24. Kaplan, Merrill. "Once More on the Mistletoe." in *News from Other Worlds: Studies in Nordic Folklore, Mythology and Culture*, ed. Merrill Kaplan and Timothy R. Tangherlini. (Berkeley: North Pinehurst Press, 2012): 36-60.
25. Kelchner, Georgia Dunham. *Dreams in Old Norse literature and their affinities in folklore: with an appendix containing the Icelandic texts and translations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935.
26. Kershaw, Kris. *The One-eyed God: Odin and the (Indo-)Germanic Männerbünde*. Washington DC: Journal of Indo-European Studies, 2000.
27. Krappe, Alexander Haggerty. "The Valkyrie Episode in Njals Saga." *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 43, No. 7 (Nov 1928): 471-474.

28. Lindow, John. *Murder and Vengeance Among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology*. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1997.
29. Lindow, John. *Norse Mythology: A guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
30. Mitchell, Stephen A. *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2011.
31. Montgomery, James E. "Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah." *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, vol. 3 (2000): 1-25.
32. Mortensen, Karl. *A Handbook of Norse Mythology*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc, 2003.
33. Motz, Lotte. "Giants in Folklore and Mythology: A New Approach." *Folklore*, Vol. 93, No. 1 (1982): 70-84.
34. Parkes, Peter. "Fosterage, Kinship and Legend: When Milk Was Thicker than Blood?" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Jul., 2004): 587-615.
35. Regal, Michael S, trans. "Gisli Sursson's Saga" in *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, ed. Jane Smiley, Robert Kellogg. (New York: Penguin Books, 2001): 496-557.
36. Schjødt, Jens Peter. "Óðinn, Þórr and Freyr: Functions and Relations." in *News from Other Worlds: Studies in Nordic Folklore, Mythology and Culture*, ed. Merrill Kaplan and Timothy R. Tangherlini. (Berkeley: North Pinehurst Press, 2012): 61-91.

37. Stone, Alby. "Bran, Odin, and the Fisher King: Norse Tradition and the Grail Legends." *Folklore*, Vol. 100, No. 1 (1989): 25-38.
38. Turville-Petre, G. "Dreams in Icelandic Tradition." *Folklore* Vol 69, No. 2 (Jun, 1958): 93-111.
39. Wanner, Kevin J. "God on the Margins: Dislocation and Transience in the Myths of Óðinn." *History of Religions*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (May 2007): 316-350.
40. Zoëga, Geir T. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 2004.

Primary Sources

1. "Baldrsdraumar" in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristsjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslenzk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014): 446-448.
2. *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, trans. Seamus Heaney, London: Faber and Faber, 2007.
3. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslenzk fornrit XII. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1971.
4. "Eyrbyggja saga" in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslenzk fornrit IV. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1985): 3-184.
5. "Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar" in *Heimskringla III*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. Íslenzk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002): 68-202.

6. “Hávamál” in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Kriksjónsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslenzk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2014): 322-355.
7. “Helgakviða Hundingsbana I” in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kriksjónsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslenzk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2014): 247-258.
8. “Helgakviða Hundingsbana II” in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson. (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1998): 192-207
9. “Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar” in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kriksjónsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslenzk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2014): 259-259.
10. “Hyndluljóð” in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson. (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1998): 395-406.
11. “Lokasenna” in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Kriksjónsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslenzk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2014): 408-421.
12. *Snorra-Edda*, ed. Heimir Pálsson. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2010.
13. *Táin Bó Cúalnge Rescention I*, ed. Cecile O’Rahilly. University College Cork: CELT, 2011.
14. *Táin Bó Cúalnge Rescention I*, ed. Cecile O’Rahilly, trans. Cecile O’Rahilly. University College Cork: CELT, 2011.
15. “Víga-Glúms saga” in *Eyfirdinga saga*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson. Íslenzk fornrit. (Hið íslenzka fornritafélag: Reykjavík, 2001): 3-98.

16. “Völuspá” in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson. (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1998): 3-20.
17. “Völuspá” in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Kriksjónsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslensk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014): 291-321.
18. “Ynglinga saga” in *Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. Íslensk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941): 9-83.
19. *Flateyjarbók I*, ed. Sigurður Nordal. Reykjavík: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944, 465-468.
20. *Flateyjarbók II*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Reykjavík: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1945
21. “Þrymskviða” in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Kriksjónsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslensk fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014): 422-427.