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Praise and Censure in the Heroic Poems of the Poetic Edda

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Introduction

In this dissertation, I am discussing the Norse heroism as it is represented in the main characters in the so called heroic poems of the Poetic Edda, as they appear in the *Codex Regius* of the Poetic Edda, GKS 2365 4°, in function of the possible cultural role they had in the Norse society of the Viking and Middle Ages. Even though the poems are not a coherent whole designed by one author, each of them is related to the others through the same mythology and corpus of legends. By heroes and heroism, I mean a loose synonym of main characters and their behaviour, which in the heroic poems turn out to be a stance characterised by a strong individuality, which in turn develops in various expressions, fitting for a role as cultural models. My purpose here is to understand how the main characters or heroes of the heroic poems of the Edda were portrayed, understood and possibly perceived by their Viking Age and Medieval Norse audiences.

Hence, here I am treating praise and glory on hand, and censure on the other, as evidence of judgement applied on characters of the heroic poems and their Eddic heroism, implying discussion and confrontation, between authors/interpreters and their audiences, about social and moral issues, at least during the Viking Age, when earlier versions of the texts under analysis were transmitted orally, and possibly during the Medieval Age, in Scandinavia and Iceland. Praise and censure can assume various textual forms in the Eddic poems, from epithets to full judgements, and those will be my starting point for a deeper analysis, in context.

I am here assuming a stance analogous to that of neotraditionalism in Old Norse scholarship: if Icelandic Medieval sagas are a form of fictionality that should still be understood as meaningful regarding the social constructions of their settings, so the Eddic poems should reflect core cultural matters that were variously developed and re-elaborated since the Migration Age and relevant throughout the Viking Age and beyond. We can avoid falling into pointless speculation by means of careful generalisation and analogy. In particular, praise and glory are attributed to fictional characters, which means there is no direct gain for poets or narrators: praise and censure in the Eddic poems must be based on a moral system, although possibly adapted and formalised for poetic necessities and dramatic tones in performance.

The *Völsunga Saga*, which is a Medieval production that stems from the same tradition and involves the same characters and the same events as the heroic poems of the Edda, obviously constitutes a valuable term of comparison. I am considering these texts as an expression of the culture that produced them, and a relevant one as they possibly reveal core matters of the cultural heritage at their roots.

It is important to notice that various elements or parts of the poems or prose sections within the Edda explicitly stem from a continental (German) tradition, for example about the murder of Sigurðr. This suggests that the southern Germanic tradition about the cycle was present in Scandinavia, even in earlier Viking Age and Medieval times, when these poems reached the form as we know them in the Edda. However, these elements co-existed with more typical versions or re-elaborations, that in time brought to a harmonisation within the cycle, across Scandinavia and Iceland. In other words, independently of their origin, the presence of heterogeneous elements in the Eddic poems shows such a degree of re-elaboration and coherence (even if crucially far from consistent at times, such as the early life of Brynhildr) as to be taken as part of the Norse tradition, productive and in central position within the cultural system.

Snorri Sturluson's texts also consistently refer to Eddic poems, in particular, *Skáldskaparmál* can be useful to compare legendary events found in the heroic poems, and distinguish what should be taken as a generalised narrative element and what is particular to individual poems instead. The fact that the *Snorra Edda* was written before the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda suggests that both texts were referring to a common source.

The *Pidreks Saga af Bern*, instead, is an Old Norse text whose origin from a Norse source is highly debatable at best, and most probably directly derives from an authorial translation from the continental Germanic cycle and set of legends (Guðmundsdóttir 2012, 61). Even if the *Pidreks Saga* was possibly a partial source for the *Völsunga Saga* itself (cf. Meli 1993), in fact its scope is wider than the cycle of the *Völsungar*, and its interference with the Eddic poems is highly improbable, if anything because most of the latter should be considerably older. Hence, considering the *Pidreks Saga* as an influential cultural item since the time of its production, but crucially peripheral, at least for the populations and the historical period under discussion, I am excluding it from the current analysis.

We have more Old Norse sources telling us of characters who could be understood as heroes, especially in prose with sagas, but it would have been impossible to treat such a vast matter in a single dissertation such as the present one. This is why I decided to narrow down my focus to the only Old Norse texts that can be conceived as traditional about the cycle of the *Völsungar*, focusing on the Eddic poems, and using the directly related texts for comparison. Such a scope should still be meaningful, if we consider that the *Völsungar* occupied a central place within the Old Norse *epos*.

My references about the text of the Codex Regius are based on the edition by Kuhn published in 1983 and its glossary, while I am referring to the edition of Finch (1965) for the *Völsunga Saga*.

1. The Sources and their Origins

1.1. The Historical and Cultural Context

Most of the narrative events in the heroic poems are set either in continental Europe or in Scandinavia (not in Iceland), suggesting that those are the places of their origin. Fictional characters are often a narrative elaboration of historical characters of the Migration Age and Early Viking Age, possibly through mediation of historical or pseudo-historical contemporary accounts (Wolf 1991, 69-73). At the time, Iceland was mostly a virgin land, not yet reached by the Norse settlers, while there was no complex writing system in Scandinavia, with the exception of runic inscriptions, which, for their nature, were limited to short texts. All these elements are coherent with the general idea that the lore related to the Eddic poems was transmitted orally and the Old Norse written poems in our possession are a later derivation of the production and transmission of the Migration and Viking Ages (corresponding to Early Middle Ages for Continental Europe).

Iceland was colonised in the period 870-930, by Norse groups who decided to leave their previous homes, around the coasts of the North Sea, from Scotland and the British Isles, but mainly from Norway. Archaeological findings tell us that the first settlers and their first descendants underwent a long period of poverty and simple life, mainly dedicated to a subsistence economy based on farming and grazing for livestock. The situation stabilised by the eleventh century, when the population was healthy, and the Icelanders started to invest in a planning that did not serve mere survival, such as large-scale buildings, loosely (but still poorly) imitating their counterpart in Scandinavia (Vésteinsson 2005, 18). Together with the lack of imminent military threats, it is then not surprising that the social system of the so-called Commonwealth Iceland was very simple, without a central government, and politically independent from other states. At the same time, the sparse community of the Icelanders was rapidly unified under the respect of the law, for conflict between free farmers would still arise, and the lack of mediating authorities could be a problem. The law was arguably a central part of the collective

identity of the early Icelanders (Leonard 2010, 153), starting from the second and third generations of settlers. However, with no central political authority to enforce the law, society was maybe less hierarchical but more liquid, and ethics based on the idea of honour and feuds to solve conflicts were still important factors for social balance and peace amongst individuals and groups, in parallel with negotiation and mediation (Sørensen 2000, 23; Þorláksson 2005, 148), as it is also suggested by the Sagas of the Icelanders (again, assuming any historical and social value through their fictional nature). Feuds were honour-based, implying honour as the social definition of individuals and the group they belong to (and, indirectly, their power within the social system), by virtue of mutual obligations, called *grið* (Þorláksson 2005, 143). Feuds were also recognized by the legal system (Barreiro 2017, 294), also by virtue of the conception of criminal acts as private concerns, to be solved privately (Byock 1988, 70). Oaths, stemming from honour as the word given by a man, were also conceived as social contracts of sorts, and treated on legal basis (Karlsson 2005, 505). This means that the theme of honour, interwoven with kinship, was still relevant for Viking Age and Medieval Iceland. Chieftains (*goðar*) were the social figure with highest rank in early Iceland, and their role was that of protection and representation of the farmers at the periodical meetings, as well as mediators for disputes and conflicts. It is easy to understand how the position of *goðar*, initially not meant to carry political power, quickly generated a web of relations between free farmers and their *goðar*, and these clusters of followers were the major cohesive subgroupings (Byock 1988, 66). From political power derived constant struggle, up to the climax of the conflict of the the so-called Age of the Sturlungar in 1220-62 (Þorláksson 2005, 149). The means by which power was eventually centralised and powerful families struggled and fought for it can also be at least partly reconducted to the honour code, used as the basis to define groups of individuals.

While Iceland kept its political independence for many centuries, up to the end of the Age of the Sturlungar, ties were maintained (and slowly developed) with mainland Scandinavia and the rest of Europe, also through the introduction of Christianity as official religion, during the Althing meeting of 999 or 1000 (Sørensen 2000, 19). With the clerics as cultural authorities, a new writing system was introduced, based on ink and the Latin alphabet. From there, the production of written texts became a flourishing business in Iceland, up to the development of a whole literary system, influential even for

the other Scandinavian countries, and soon to be based on the vernacular, along with the more international Latin of the learned. At the same time, clerics started to act as political, or at least legal authorities in parallel with the *goðar*.

The system of laws was transmitted orally from the very foundation of the Commonwealth (reinforcing the idea of a solid and varied culture, despite the oral medium). Lawspeakers were given the responsibility to learn and transmit the corpus of the laws, and recite them, eventually with the support of other experts. These experts were typically other *goðar*, but clerics increasingly occupied the same role. Crucially, clerics became important in the legal system with the introduction of the writing system, also for the recording and transmission of the corpus of laws. Many codices about the law were produced, often inconsistent with each other, and clerics, the learned, were the highest authority for the exegesis of the texts, hence indirectly in a fundamental position for the administration of the law (Sørensen 2000, 32-34).

At the same time, and quite obviously, clerical authorities were dedicated to a Christianisation of the Icelandic culture, which in turn meant to fight against the old pagan Norse culture and lore, deemed as *forneskja* (Sørensen 2000, 38). However, despite these efforts, Icelandic Norse culture was very tolerant in the face of religion, and any individuals had a considerable amount of freedom in their personal belief, as long as their rituals were kept quietly in a private dimension; even the national choice of Christianity was based on practical terms, more than faith. So, while Christianity became increasingly important and influential in Iceland, the old belief system, and most importantly the old lore was largely dispersed, but partly maintained and transmitted, orally, and then on written medium, up to our Codex Regius.

It is also important to notice that the same tolerance of Christian Iceland towards other, previous belief systems was an attitude also in the past, on reversed positions: the heathen Scandinavia had been in contact with the Christian faith for long, and the freedom of belief even within heathendom was a fertile ground for cultural integrations. This means that even texts deemed as ancient might have been influenced by other cultural and religious systems, chiefly the Christian system.¹

¹ McKinnel (1994) makes a very interesting comparison about the theme of *Ragnarøk* and its survivors, based on the *Vsp* and *Vm* Eddic poems, showing how even core eschatological conceptions were highly variable, within the context of what was later known as *forneskja*, and how Christianity or Christian

While the production of written texts flourished, and the Icelanders increasingly gained the status of lore keepers amongst the Scandinavian countries, poetry was deemed as a very important and reliable authority for the very production of texts, for according to the Icelanders, what was transmitted through poetry was inherently reliable, for the particular nature of the transmission of poetry, via mnemonic techniques and metrical features (Gade 2000, 67). Importance of poetry and ancient lore was later reinforced, with the new interests for genealogy and antiquarianism by the emerging Icelandic aristocracy in continuous internal conflict and attrition with the Norwegian crown (Tulinius 2000, 245).

Genealogy, antiquarianism and poetic sources, considered as reliable as historiography, made the Eddic matter, originated in heathen or transitional cultural ages, once more particularly interesting and productive, despite Christianity, which probably stopped considering the ancient poems and tales as a threat for its hegemony, while many cultural elements were harmonised within the same system. The Eddic texts as we have them in the Codex Regius are the product of this thirteenth century antiquarianism and renewed interest (Kellogg 1991, 91).

1.2. Eddic poetry: Medieval texts from an oral tradition

The sources we possess about Eddic poetry are written, mostly in the form of medieval manuscripts. The main manuscript is GKS 2365 4^o, the so-called *Codex Regius*, written in Old Norse. The Codex has unknown author(s)², and it comprises various poems and fragments kept together by their loose narrative theme and with prose introductions and explanations. Poems vary from religious/mythological to heroic content. It lacks 8 leaves, within a portion dedicated to heroic content about the story of the *Vǫlsungar*. Some of the Eddic poems also appear in the AM 748 I a 4^o manuscript, but only those about mythological content, leaving the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda the only item reporting the heroic poems, the correspondence between the version of the heroic poems

categories (of sin-innocence as opposed to less moral but more practical strength and courage, as the ideal traits for the survival of the Twilight) could have been already behind some ideas expressed in the yet ancient *Vǫluspá*. Even if that was not the case, it suggests that Viking Age heathen-based belief and lore was far from a dogmatic system across the whole of the Norse populations.

² Henceforth called “the compiler” and treated as one male person, in absence of better evidence.

and the physical object reporting them reduced to 1:1. Therefore, the manuscript of the Codex and the poems I am analysing can be held as one and the same entity.

The Codex dates from c.1270, while the Edda of Snorri is thought to have been written c.1220 (Clunies Ross 2016, 796-822). Since the Codex is presumably more recent than the Edda of Snorri, which in turn quotes verses contained in the Codex, particularly from *Völuspá*, Snorri was likely drawing from a common source, both to himself and the Codex, either in oral or more probably already in written form.

Indeed, Eddic poetry is definitely older than the written sources we have, since it originates from a widespread, both in time and space, oral tradition, now largely lost. Moreover, the historical material that became the source for the heroic poems of the Edda is considerably older than the written Edda itself. Many characters come from the Migration Age of the Germanic populations, such as Attila king of the the Huns (Atli), Ermanaric king of the the Goths (Jǫrmunrekr), although severely re-elaborated. At the time, those populations had no other writing system than the inscription of runes on either stones or wooden rune sticks, which can hardly contain the whole poems we find in the Codex. A famous example is the Rök stone, dating c.800, written in the same metre as many Eddic poems as we find them in the Codex, the *fornyrðislag*. *Fornyrðislag* means "old story metre" (Clunies Ross 2016, 685), which suggests that it was conceived as an ancient metre (and mode) to the compilers who refer to it in medieval manuscripts, suggesting its much older origin. This implies once more an ancient oral tradition; certainly older than the written sources we possess. Hence the poems, or at least narrative fragments of them telling specific events, must have been composed first as oral products, subsequently adapted, enriched, revised, and sometimes partly inscribed with runes or represented with carved drawings as the Germanic populations travelled and settled. Literacy through Roman alphabet, written on treated animal skins, gradually replaced runic inscriptions by c.1100 (Clunies Ross 2016, 711). It is unknown when the Eddic material became transmitted narration and then written Eddic poetry, but it is fair to assume that there was a narrative continuum from the historical events that provided a source for it, to the production of the manuscripts, through continuous oral and then written re-elaboration.

We also know of this ancient oral tradition from allusions within literary texts. Indeed, differentiation within the tradition is made explicit in the *Brot af Sigurðarqviðu*

of the Codex itself, where in the prose conclusion, which tells about the death of Sigurðr, the compiler refers that different populations (the Germans) transmit different versions about the death of Sigurðr, reinforcing the idea that the Codex is just a written collection, or rather selection, of some tradition that existed on its own, in a different form, in various versions and likely within a far more extensive legendarium, that reached beyond Scandinavia and older than the Viking Age. Moreover, it is clear from this prose section that the compiler of the Edda is aware of a transnational tradition about the same legendarium that reached and influenced the Scandinavian version in Medieval times (far later than the Migration Age).

Another source for allusions about a common Germanic oral tradition of the Middle Ages is the Old English *Beowulf*. In lines 866b-75a, a retainer is reported to recite stories, with personal variations, about some legendary Sigemund killing a Dragon, to celebrate the victory of Beowulf over Grendel. This implies that the same culture that transmitted the *Beowulf* also acknowledged that oral poems and reciting were quite a common activity, at least in some past of their own society. The same retainer is described as particularly wise and skilful in this activity, which suggests at the same time some knowledge of a repertoire, as well as an ability to improvise. It is unclear whether this model reflects how Eddic poetry was composed, as a mix of improvisation and memorisation or if a fixed *modus operandi* existed at all for oral poets and performers.³ At the same time, the Old English Sigemund evoked by the retainer recalls the Norse Sigmundr, father of Sigurðr, while in the Old Norse tradition, as well as in the Codex Regius, Sigurðr is the Dragonslayer, not his father. This also confirms the idea of a common Germanic tradition, that assumed different forms and internal variations together with the differentiation of the Germanic populations across space and time (Clunies Ross 2016, 538).

To this, we can add what we know of Skalds in medieval Scandinavian societies, who were to narrate and celebrate worthy deeds of famous and influential men, particularly in courts, reciting them in the form of poems. Even though Skalds dedicated their verses to real events, past and present, using mythological and heroic content as narrative tools (especially in the form of kennings) rather than narrative content *per se*, they confirm that orality and oral narration was a widespread activity in medieval

³ see also Harris (1983).

Scandinavia, even in sophisticated forms and styles such as poetry. Snorri Sturluson writes his *Skaldskaparmál* as a compendium for Skalds, as the title suggests, and he does so describing (without an exclusive narrative purpose) the events that are also told in the Edda and even quoting Eddic poetry (Dolfini 2017, 15).

1.3. Transcribed Eddic poetry in the Codex Regius

Trying to date the oral tradition *per se* is arguably an impossible task. However, dating the single poems, that is, discerning the period in which the text first assumed the same form as it is reported in the Codex, is a particularly complicated task, which can hardly be definitely settled, but not impossible. Indeed, there are various methods that can help us in discerning some evidence for dating. For example, register and linguistic criteria can be used comparatively.

The expletive particle *of / um* has a statistical pattern for which it appears more frequently in older poems. But Fidjestøl also proved that, although statistical patterns are consistent, they cannot be the only criterion of evaluation, for diachronic variance exists, particularly in poetry, where form matters more than in prose. Another linguistic criterion is the loss of initial *v-* in words beginning with *vr-*. The change happened in pre-literary Old West Norse, contrarily to what happens in East Norse. This phenomenon, crossed with recurring inconsistent alliterations, gives hints of the origin or at least influence of the written poem. (Thørvaldsen 2016, 2424). If a form requires the *vr- > r-* shift, it likely means that the composition happened in West Norse context after the shift. Again, this alone is too vague and vulnerable to variance, for the simple and proven reason that poetic register existed and it does not go strictly together with the natural development of language. One more linguistic criterion is represented by loanwords, either within the same language and tradition, or cross-language. Either way, each of these criteria is not definitive in discerning the chronology of the Eddic texts, yet together they are valuable to formulate hypothesis in context with a larger elaboration.

The prose parts of the Codex Regius reveal the intention of its compiler(s) to reunite in written form some of the Old Norse mythological and epic tradition. Some

poems more than are in a fragmentary state, where the narrative prose by the compiler plays a main role not only in introducing the story, but also in actually narrating it and adding crucial information in the attempt to maintain coherence within the same poem – not always with a felicitous result. For example, in the *Völundarqviða*, the narrative prose presents Völundr as a son of the king of the Finns, while in the poem he is referred to as related to the Elves, and possibly a supernatural being, showing that the compiler is bending the material to which he had access towards what he knew and/or what he wanted to represent.

Helgaqviða Hjórvardzsonar (HHv) and *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana önnor (HH.II)* are heavily narrated by the compiler in prose. This is due to various reasons, amongst which the intention of the compiler to report arguably as many information as he had available, hence the groups of stanzas linked by the prose; but without repeating himself, hence the brief summaries in prose that link *HH.II* back to *HH*, which are indeed conceived by different versions of the same story by the compiler himself. Not so much for *HHv*, which explains why the compiler chooses to enchain *HHv* and *HH.II* through the idea of reincarnation, both for Sváva/Sigrún and for Helgi Hjórvardsson and Helgi Sigmundsson. The compiler refers to reincarnation as an ancient concept of Norse culture, but it is unclear whether this was also part of his contemporary folklore or just a narrative *escamotage* to link the poems.

Another example of parallel text within the Codex are the *Atlaqviða* and the *Atlamál*, both narrating the same episodes, but with different styles, the first using the *fornyrðislag* (see above), the second following the *málahátt* ('narrative metre'); as well as different sensibility for details (Meli 2005, 278), as I will analyse below.

Either way, the versioning of the Helgi and Atli stories proves that orality and transmission of Eddic poems in general are an extremely complicated matter that pans far in space and time, involving numerous social and cultural variables,⁴ amongst which variations and borrowings are key elements. Such an intricate literary context prevents us from formulating highly detailed hypothesis, but if we consider the culture that transmitted these stories as a whole wherein liquid variation is the rule, we can still assume that the literary and cultural objects under investigation must have had a degree of internal coherence as to enable generalisations over the culture itself.

⁴ see also Harris, 1983, for a textual comparison of the Helgi poems.

Independently of all these consideration, a very precise dating of the Eddic poems is not strictly necessary for this dissertation. It is sufficient to know that the compiler, in c.1270 was consciously writing from a cultural milieu different from that of the poems, while yet being able to synthesise the different points of view in a coherent perspective, also thanks to the moderation and tolerance in these matters that were typical of the Medieval Iceland (Kellogg 1991, 94-95). The poems were certainly older, their stories, rooted in epics, even more, which means that they had a meaningful substance for both their audiences in the Viking and Middle Ages of Scandinavia and the North Atlantic colonies, including Iceland. A glimpse on this meaning in those ages and places is the scope of the current work.

2. A Framework for the analysis of Heroism

In this first part of my dissertation, I am trying to define how the main characters of the so called heroic poems in the Codex Regius can be defined as heroes, what their traits are, and what could have been their perception in the Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavia and Iceland. Given the state of the available Eddic material, the lack of lateral historical documentation and our distance from their context, I am devising a framework, based on sensible postulations, in order to direct and systematise the results of our analysis.

Such a framework can certainly be improved or altered, but at the very least, it is meant to give impulse to a discussion that is often atomised around particular objects of literature, and rightfully so, but i think that matters with important cultural relevance, such as heroism during the Viking Age, needs a systemic approach for its analysis and understanding. Indeed, this dissertation proposes one such approach, to add and complement what has already been found, and suggest a general yet meaningful view over the matter.

A 'hero' is necessarily a main character for narrative importance, but I am here using the label hero as something more specific, as opposed to the broader meaning of the word, as typically understood. The hero must be also the bearer of exceptional individual traits, often a character that is extraordinarily relevant and a fitting target for a certain degree of sympathy and admiration by the audience, his or her relevance breaking the space of the narrative frame and assuming a loosely symbolic value that is variously but widely extended to a whole culture.

This is even more clear and poignant if we contextualise the Eddic texts as the transcription (or snapshots of versions) of oral texts that were meant to be performed or narrated directly in front of an audience – with strong, direct and immediate ties to be postulated, between actors/narrators and the audience.

The aim of the next chapters is analysing the textual features of such heroism, meant to have broad extra-textual effects and references in culture. The textual elements will be our primary (but not exclusive) criterion to distinguish heroic glorious actions and characters from other main characters, and then, through contextualisation at the diegetic level, we will analyse which characters are gloriously heroic, which are not, and why, and, in short, what Eddic heroism means.

2.1. A textual approach for the description of heroes

In the case of the Eddic poems, the extraordinary textual relevance of heroism, glory and censure are defined by authors and poets in some way that clearly emerges from the texts, and this criterion is powerful enough to direct us towards which underlying conceptions of the characters retain a form of glorious heroism and which do not, for not all main characters or heroes are made relevant in the same way.

Using a metaphor to explain this approach to the description and definition of heroism, it is as if, amongst the various main characters distributed on a surface, only a few were selected by the authors to be remarked through continuous strokes around their figures, each stroke corresponding to an element of a heterogeneous narrative mode that we are defining as heroic. The totality of the strokes would create a specific halo around each heroic character, resulting in a distinction between them and the other main characters. However, these halos are not all equal, each being particular in itself for different colouring and the contrast with the related figure. First, we are trying to identify each stroke of the various halos, that is to recollect the textual elements. Then, the analysis of colours and contrasts would correspond to our further contextualisation and analysis of the different kinds of heroism.

In the narrative environment of the Poetic Edda, the elements corresponding to the heroic narrative mode, as expressed by the various authors, can be identified in the widespread usage of epithets, metaphors and hyperboles. These elements portray but also express judgement over the characters, either directly, or indirectly (through the voice of other characters). Crucially, the quantity of epithets and hyperboles is not regularly spread across the poems and for all the main characters, but it shows a higher degree of concentration for some characters, around particular actions or traits. The same goes for censure. This distribution is significant both of the focus of each poem, as well as of the

emphasis that was meant exclusively for these characters, an emphasis that arguably aimed to transcend the status of main character in a story, becoming the representation of cultural values and social issues.

Judgements are inevitably bound to a cultural system, which is what makes them interesting in the scope of this paper, about Norse heroism. Through the particular depiction of heroism as we find it in the Eddic poems, that is, what is censured or celebrated and why, also in comparison with other sources, I aim at defining the traits of the various heroes of the Eddic poems, and their possible role in the cultural system.

Hyperbolic style, vocabulary and events are recurring elements across the Eddic poems, yet meaning is conveyed through them, and the very connotation of a hyperbole suggests that the author is giving particular relevance to the element, trait or event in question. This means that, notwithstanding its exaggeration, hyperbole is a reliable criterion to detect praise or renown through the voice of the poet, which is fundamental in the definition of a hero.⁵ Even if hyperbolic style and content is typical of heroic, epic and mythological literature, beyond the borders of Medieval Norse culture, a particular, glorious relevance through hyperbole is a treatment reserved in our Eddic texts only to certain characters, while others, yet equally important in the stories, are excluded. This means that the expression of heroism was various, and actually reaches extremes of glory and contempt, sometimes for the same characters.

For our purposes, the usage of kennings is relevant only if strictly referred to characters, and not to the elements of a scene. Indeed, as we find them in the Edda (but also elsewhere), we can see how kennings tend to be used to add and increase the overall dramatic effect of the narration, much more than constituting a specific instrument to describe and glorify the characters. Hence the mere presence of kennings is not enough as a textual hint of direct glorification or emphasis.

However, it should also be borne in mind that the narrative focus of each poem and generally of each text, is different, so that who is a main character in one poem could be a secondary character or even an enemy in another. Even more so in different kind of poems or texts, where the focus could be different from heroic glorification, even if the narrative material treated is the same. Indeed, *VS* can be conceived as hyperbolic as

⁵ Hyperbolic style is generally diminished for censure, which typically appears in the form of direct and explicit accusation.

poems, but the celebrative, formal elements expressing magnificence or censure are scarcer or diluted throughout the looser threads of the narrative prose. In particular, prose rarely displays epithets. This means that exceptional relevance and praise are subtler in prose, but still possible to detect.⁶

Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* is written as a compendium, and despite the usage of a narrative frame of sorts (the dialogue between Ægir and Bragi), it is not meant to be a narration proper, but an explanation through narrative means. Snorri systematically employs the summary in *Skáldskaparmál*. Indeed, we see that in the words of Snorri, only the bare facts that are necessary to explain the origin of kennings are narrated, while the whole praising and censuring framework of poems and sagas is avoided entirely, together with many narrative details, once more remarking that the focus of a text may vary independently of its narrative subject. Yet, Snorri's text will be useful for the contextualisation of narrative elements related to glory and praise in the poems.

Finally, the frequency of the textual elements about judgement, important *per se*, will be made meaningful by the contextualisation in each poem and across the poems. From there, I will proceed in reconstructing the underlying level, the generalisation referred to the characters, from where we can obtain a glimpse of the reception level and the cultural role of heroism in all its various expressions, at least during the age of production and circulation of these texts, in the Old Norse and Icelandic culture where such a narrative was relevant.

The textual approach as it is applied here is meant to work together with the synthetic view and the more general contextualisation and comparison of characters, to obtain the most solid results and understanding of heroism as possible, within the narrow set of Eddic poems.

2.2. A synthetic view of characters

In the analysis below, we are inevitably bound to what I would call the representation level, that is the written texts. From there, we can see that the same characters develop with different nuances, depending on the specific text (which in our case assumes the

⁶ These prose-related features are certainly not unique of the *VS*. Indeed, a similar register and its patterns can be found in the very prose sections of the Codex Regius.

form of a poem or even a fragment). However, as we should expect, we will find many elements that show us how the same characters, through different poems (and presumably authors), are overall portrayed in a coherent way. That is, the characters involved in the poems and related sagas were synthesised in some way by the various authors and audiences, synthesis that in their individual minds had to be coherent to some degree, even if the design was hardly fully rationalised with the existing material (either oral or written). We will see for example how Guðrún is always characterised by her cold blood, being alternatively contextualised as self-control or ruthlessness, or how hardiness in Gunnar and Högni is never denied, even in the poems that have their victim, Sigurðr, as protagonist. The conception of the underlying level for the idea of a character is reinforced by the very existence and nature of the Codex, made by the compiler, who collected the varied set of poems as we have them and made a single volume, ordering each poem in a way that can hardly be defined as random: he understood the set as referring to the same wide (oral) corpus of legends, and inherently, he conceived the various stories as a (loosely) coherent whole, even if he was aware of variations, within and without his own collection.

Given the set of available poems, each being overall consistent, but partly contradictory with the others (and the compiler proving to be aware of it), we have no particular reasons to suppose that the compiler applied cuts to parts or poems that he had available from other sources, out of apparent repetitions. In fact, each poem overlaps and refers to the content of each other, and this is both a source of incoherence, as well as a fertile ground for our analysis, for it provides proof of whether a narrative element was widespread, commonly accepted, or peculiar to a more limited set of representations (and conceptions of the audience).

The underlying, abstract conception of a character is what can make a coherent whole out of a various set of narrations and representations, or in other words what makes possible the successful repetition and re-elaboration of stories about the same characters and events. The underlying level is much less exposed to variation, while the actual representation is what can better satisfy localised taste and authorial intentions. By virtue of the nature of heroism as seen above, that is, a relevance that transcends the texts, if some characters could hardly be consistently heroic throughout the various texts where they appear, due to the particular focus of each one, or because of the characters

themselves, then their synthesis is made more complex by unheroic nuances, but they should be conceived as retaining their heroic status at the underlying level (hence, arguably, in the cultural system), if they reached it in some specific frames within the narrative context. In other words, (glorious) heroism is a concept that can filter from the level of the representation and be included in the archetype regarding a certain character. In this view, the different kinds of heroism assume particular relevance for the cultural role of heroism, thanks to the postulated underlying level that can retain the conception of glory and heroism while also being a generalisation in comparison to the actual representations.

Crucially, the underlying level can only be inferred from elements on the representation level, through generalisation. What is unstable or incoherent on the representation level cannot be assumed as part of the underlying level, and it must undergo an abstraction, or a cut, entirely. Instead, what is coherent, can be considered as a general trait. Such a process of generalisation, applied on the representation level, is what gives us a solid conception of the character, via its underlying abstract definition, cleaned of its local particularities. For example, as the case of Brynhildr will show, a character in representation could stretch from a very noble and even renowned past to that of a conflictual individual that can even be represented with metaphorical draconic traits. However, her glorious past is only narrated within the representation itself, cast out of the frame where events are represented, and inconsistently so across the various texts; while her actions within the narrative frame are never described as glorious. This should prompt us to exclude her allegedly glorious past from her archetype, and reduce it to mere background, hence conceiving Brynhildr, as she appears in the Edda, as a remarkable but unheroic character. Possibly, she was conceived as heroic or even somewhat divine in a more distant historical past. Only her nobility and pride, retained from her past endeavours, are represented in the narrative frame, and can and should be assumed in her generalised view. On the other hand, Guðrún sees a steady growth in her representation within the narrative frame, and despite the multiple tragedies within her life, she reaches a glorious, hence heroic status, in her struggle against Atli, and her representation as a warrior is coherent across the sources, to be assumed as part of her archetype. From this, it is clear that the underlying is the most stable level of the conception of a character, but it is not self-sufficient, as it is bound to changes according to the various representations.

However, the representation level can influence a shift in the underlying level only if the pressure is consistent, that is, only if a given representation becomes widespread and commonly accepted.

The most superficial level we can conceive in the multiple strata that define a character, above the underlying and representation levels, is the reception level. The reception of the same character could vary in time and space, even without any modification in the representation. For example, Guðrún could have been conceived as a sort of martyr of loyalty to her family clan, possibly praiseworthy even in her self-destruction, as well as an example and a critique of the dire consequences of the honour code, in a parallel or later view. The reception level is obviously much harder to determine, from our sources confined to the representation level, and since validation of reception is obviously impossible, we should limit ourselves as much as possible in making hypothesis about the reception level. However, and this is a key passage of this dissertation, the anonymous authors and narrators of these texts were at the same time part of the audience of other narrators. This means that the representation level is deeply bound to the reception level, both for the understanding of the texts by the narrators, as well as for the particular impression they aimed to make in their own audiences. Hence, I argue that a notable exception to the rule about the reconstruction of the reception level can be made, for those deep elements that are made solid and generalised by the reconstruction of the underlying level. These elements, recurring by definition, are those elements that were at one time received as such by narrators and repeated further to other audiences in the subsequent realisations and ramifications of the texts, up to our transcribed versions.

Obviously, we are bound to the representation level as the starting point of our analysis, in our case to the various but too few written texts. Theoretically speaking, since we do not know how many other texts, written or oral, could have been produced in Medieval times, our investigation would be deprived of value, for no generalisation should be made from a limited sample. However, the compiler of the Codex Regius is likely to have done his best to recollect whatever materials were available to him, about the myths of the gods and the cycle of the *Völsungar*, in order to reconstruct the stories and poems that were known to him. If these are the texts that survived up to the antiquarian interests of the Thirteenth century, we can consider the material we possess

as a valid sample for a meaningful insight, if not for a comprehensive generalisation. In other words, I am here assuming that the Codex is a compendium of myths and legends, relevant for a given space-time, which arguably corresponds to Iceland and Scandinavia, both during the Viking and the Medieval Ages, although with inherent differences in reception and usage. The fact that the Edda is a Medieval text that corresponds to Viking Age poems is problematic for their understanding and role in the earlier centuries, but the nature of the Codex as essentially an antiquarian text of sorts should lead us towards a reliable understanding of it, crucially, as long as we do not demand it to be of extensive historical value. This is why I am insisting with the synthetic view, which is at the same time the best generalisation we can make, as well as a way of conceiving fictional events and characters that mimics that of their original audiences.

In general, the synthetic view I propose would make a whole of the three interconnected strata, sustained by the underlying level and dynamically evolving through the pressure of the reception and representation levels, and it can be a powerful tool that can help us explain core factors that could have been relevant in culture. The synthesis of each character is an approximation, but it can be conceived as valid and meaningful. The more the context of application is enlarged, the more the synthesis tends to be valid only for deeper, abstract levels. Using a metaphor, the synthesis of a character covers a volume that can go bottom-up in the strata as above (starting from the deeper underlying level), as well as wide in the space-time dimension, and if we stretch the synthetic view on one side, it will shrink on the other axis, the volume tending to stay constant in its value.

The synthetic view can be valuable because it lets us discuss objectively about core matters that are coherent through our sources, either by generalisation or analogy, independently of very precise premises and contextualisation about dating and origin, by virtue of the fact that these are indeed core matters, analysed at their underlying level, much less vulnerable to significant alterations and authorial variations. It is sufficient to say that the outcome of the analysis is a perspective about a system of values that was valid for a generic Norse audience of the (late) Viking and possibly the (early) Medieval Age, when these poems and their themes were sufficiently widespread across the Norse population and part of their common lore about legends and myths.

Once more, I should remark how the synthetic view stems from the idea of a widespread cultural item that was at the same time bound to variation. It cannot be directly

used as a means to reconstruct the Medieval tradition about these tales (which should also include the continental tradition), its purpose being solely the understanding of general cultural matters and objects through particular but relevant texts.

2.3. Differentiation at the reception level

The thirteenth and fourteenth century audience, loosely contemporary with the compiler of the Codex, moved by antiquarian interests, must have attributed a different value to the texts than a hypothetical audience of the Viking Age. However, as we will see better in the next chapters, values at stake have a high potential to be deep human facts. Proof is that the questions of power, kinship and honour were still crucial, at least in Icelandic politics, during the Age of the Sturlungar and possibly later as well.

Moreover, Medieval Iceland was not so deeply different from Viking Age Scandinavia, and certainly shared the same cultural heritage. The antiquarian movement of the thirteenth century had functional reasons in the re-construction of a national and transnational Scandinavian (Germanic) myth, valid both for Iceland and the rest of Scandinavia. Parts of this myth were pledged and re-elaborated in various forms, also for political reasons, to give authority to families and rulers and gain political favours and power in return. All this movement, however culturally distant from the fictional context of the Eddic poems, must have found or perceived analogous meaningfulness in those texts as in the past, or they wouldn't have deemed the historical (or pseudo-historical) reconstruction, including Eddic poetry, as valuable as it appears to have been. They must have found in the narrative of their past some cultural elements that they still shared with their ancestors, significant and valuable because of that.

However, the purpose of this dissertation is to give an insight of the Norse socio-cultural system during the Viking and Medieval Age, as related to the heroic poems of the Edda. The fact that the poems as we have them were written down considerably later should not imply that their core narrative matter had been substantially altered since the date of their composition in their apparent (final) form. Even more importantly, earlier oral transmission implies that the lore, content of the poems, must have had an important cultural value, at least at a certain point in history, very likely during the Viking Age.

At the same time, we should refrain from making any more generalisation about the reception level, than what is made available to us through the texts and collateral

historical, archaeological and literary sources: we are specifically looking at how these texts expressed core cultural matters. Expression by authors and narrators implies knowledge of reception by an audience, but for now and in this dissertation, we are not going any further than the acknowledgement of that very important implication.

2.4. Textual evidence of Judgement

Starting from the surface level, that is from textual evidence, I tracked for each poem the relevance of each character, based mainly on epithets and hyperboles as formalised expressions of judgement over the characters, but I am here considering also explicit censure and praise, as expressed by characters to others, or by the narrator in person. All the main characters in the heroic poems are given such importance and relevance that they can all be safely postulated as having the same level of authority, together with narrators, as far as their judgements are concerned. This means that the praise and censure expressed by main characters should be taken as consistently truthful, their role being explained only through their multifaceted personality and complexity, not by sheer polarisation. Exceptions to this rule will be treated below.

First of all, we can see a general overview of all the main characters, across the poems. Here are excluded all those poems which do not contribute to the results below in any significant way, as I will analyse properly in the next sections. From this overview, generated from data that have already been elaborated, calculating the difference between praise and censure, we can notice how some characters systematically fall below a zero value, which means their relevance is expressed for the most part as censure. The difference is obviously a pondered value, which must be further broken down in its components, and analysed in its complexity and context, but we already have a hint here of how the main characters of the heroic poems should not be treated altogether in the same way. Textual evidence as summed up in this chart, suggests us that characters are interspersed in a system of values where their relevance and meaning is anything but flat.

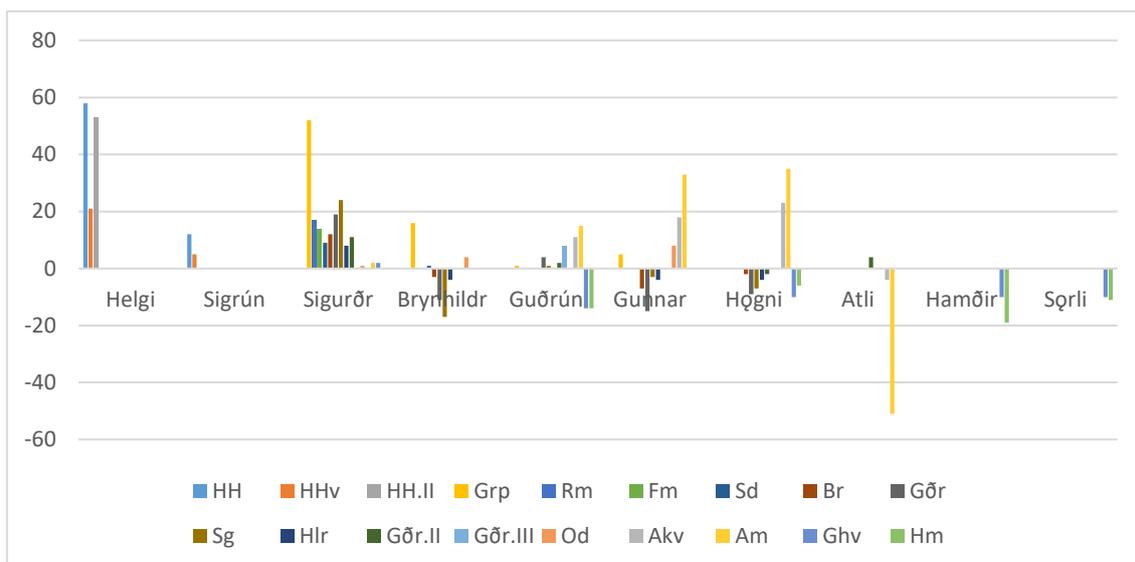


Table 1. This table represents the weighted value of characters in each poem, calculated by difference between praise and censure.

The figures for that and all the subsequent tables come from weighting each occurrence of praise or contempt. In general, I weighted each epithet or short phrase as 1, while any longer occurrence of judgement has been weighed as 2 per full line. This is obviously arbitrary, but I deem it reasonable, for any line would sound longer in performance and would convey a more articulated meaning that should assume more relevance than a shorter occurrence, such as an epithet. In cases where judgement is expressed for a group of characters, the same value is repeated in the recount for each.⁷

Polarisation of judgement is equally an approximation, that is made on the basis of some inherent postulations, such as the fact that epithets or words expressing valour, or splendour for females, should be assumed as positive judgement. However, the approximation is not as arbitrary as it seems, for their quantity and their context makes it impossible to evaluate certain epithets as equally negative or positive judgements. That is, even in this activity based on the surface level of the text, the context, the text as a whole, must be taken into account. For the same rule of approximation, the values in these tables do not distinguish glorification from more general praise, and the same goes for condemnation with general censure. These must be discussed in context.

⁷ An alternative could have been to divide by the number of judged characters. Either way, the number of this kind of collective occurrences is quite low, and it shouldn't alter or distort the general balance of judgement between characters.

Yet, some terms or expressions are more ambivalent, even in context, and I removed from the counter any expression that seemed more a dramatic, tragic, depiction, than a direct judgement. An example is the recounting about the murder of Guðrún of her own children, which is clearly a tragic and negative event, even if it is part of her righteous vengeance against Atli. Indeed, only the direct accusations of these actions have been counted as censure, while their mere narration, even in dramatic tones, have been held as a neutral part of the tragedy. Similarly, about the recurring distinction of Guðrún, when she does not weep as other women do. In that case, I preferred to keep her extraordinary temper out of the count, since that same temper is at the basis of her ruthlessness in other questionable and questioned actions or speech acts. I will discuss all these cases in context, in chapters 3 and 4.

Either way, these figures are not meant to be carved in stone, their usefulness being in expressing the relative presence of each character, compared to the others, and with this first table I proved that there is, indeed, a difference between characters, that needs to be explained.

Finally, in order to better understand all these results, I am arbitrarily grouping poems, around key characters, and briefly discussing them in sequence. Further analysis and contextualisation will be carried on in the next chapter.

2.4.1. The Cycle of Helgi

In this cycle, which comprises three poems, *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana (HH)*, *Helgaqviða Hjörvarðzsonar, (HHv)* and *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana önnor (HH.II)*, the key character is obviously Helgi (in his various forms, or reincarnations). The cycle is quite linear about judgement, with Helgi systematically receiving praise about his valour and leadership. Complexity of characters here is not particularly high, regarding Helgi, but other important characters such as Sigrún and Dagr, which I will discuss in chapter 3, are somewhat more articulated in their roles, as they appear in *HH.II*. Note that Sváva has been assimilated to Sigrún.

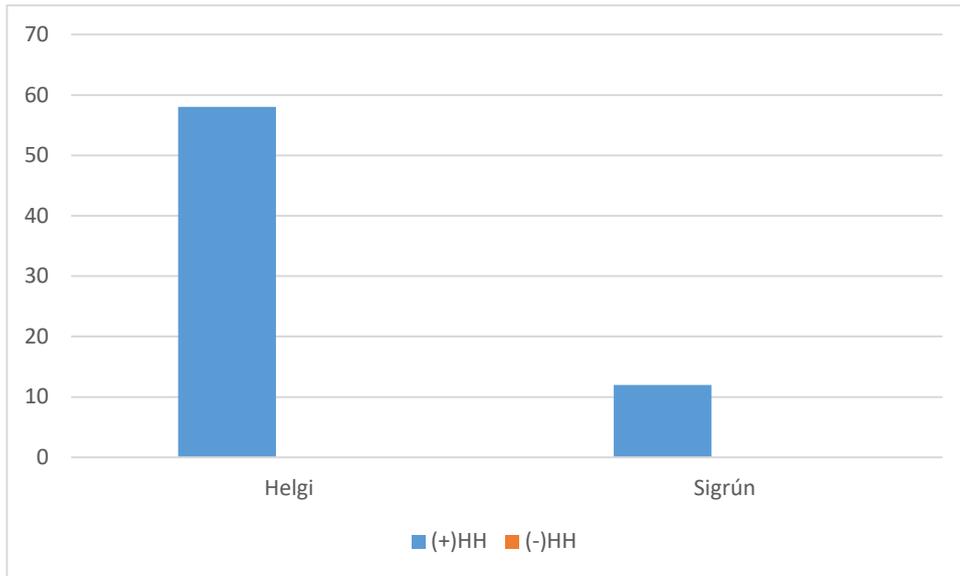


Table 2. Praise and censure in HH, with censure completely absent for the main characters.

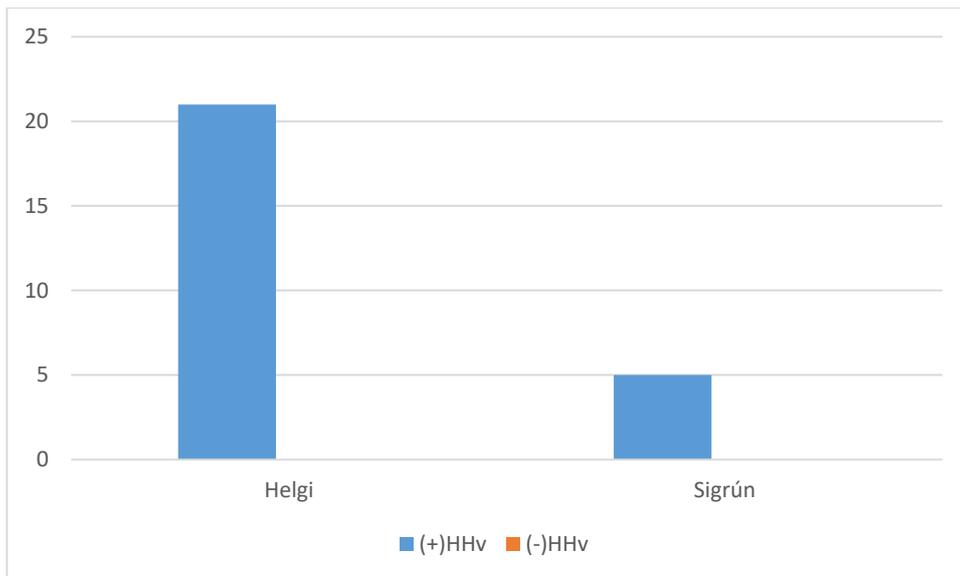


Table 3. Praise and censure in HHv, with similar pattern to HH.

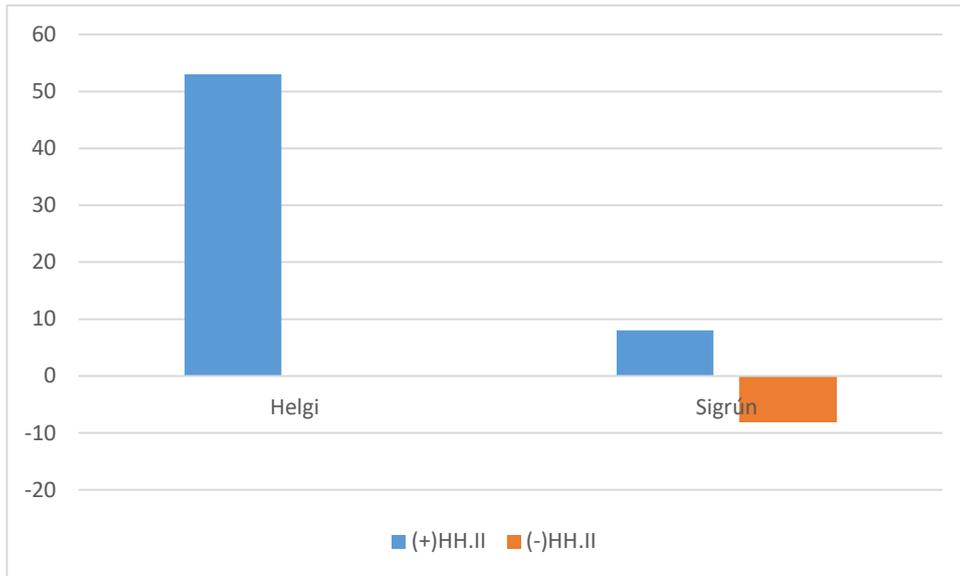


Table 4. In HH.II more complex nuances emerge.

2.4.2. The Cycle of Sigurðr

Similarly to the Cycle of Helgi, the Cycle of Sigurðr is very simple, and systematically attributes praise to its key character. I included in this cycle: *Grípisspá* (*Grp*), *Reginmál* (*Rm*), *Fáfnismál* (*Fm*), *Sigrdrífomál* (*Sd*). The introducing poem, the *Grípisspá*, quite different from the other three, mentions other characters, Brynhildr and Gunnar in particular, acknowledging their nobility, but without censuring anybody (with the possible exception of Grimhildr, but without any emphasis), for their responsibilities in the looming tragedy that is foreshadowed by the wise king. In this highly formalised dialogue, responsibility seems to be consistently redirected to a hostile, inevitable destiny. In particular, the poem often remarks how no responsibility at all should be given to Sigurðr for his deception of Brynhildr.

The other poems of the cycle are almost flat in their praise of Sigurðr, but it is important to notice that within this praise, also glorification is included, and it is arguably meant to convey admiration, other than respect.

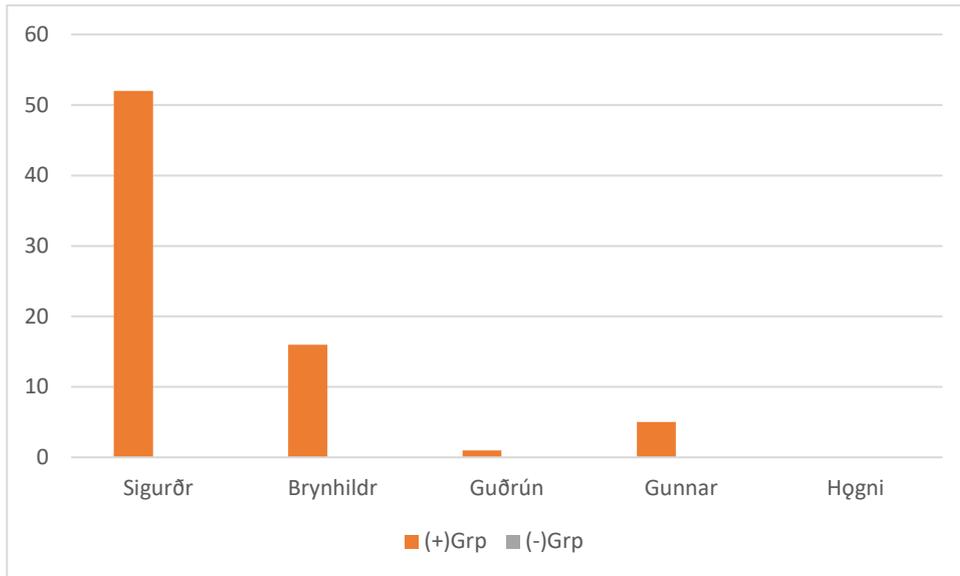


Table 5. Grp displays absence of censure and responsibility for any main character.

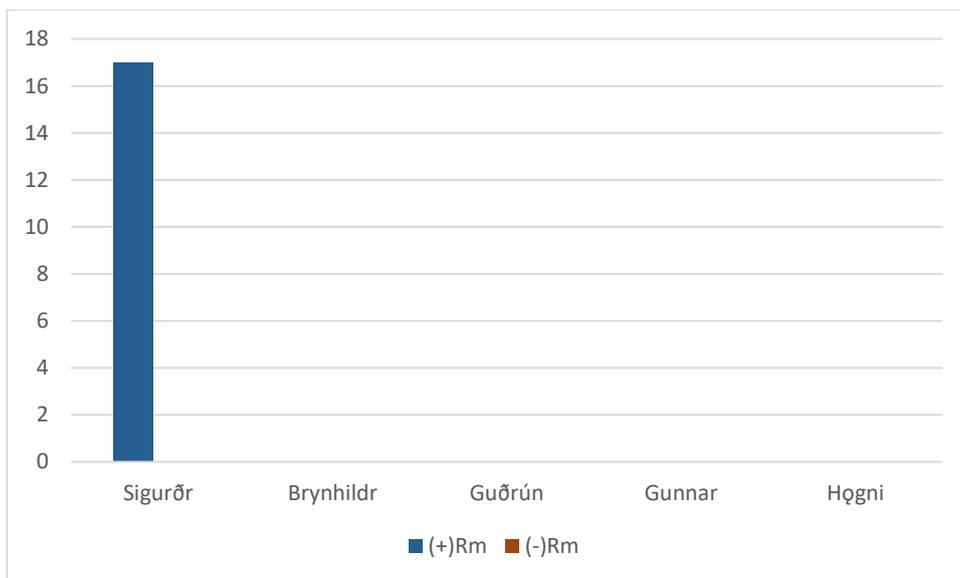


Table 6. Rm is simple in its praise pattern.

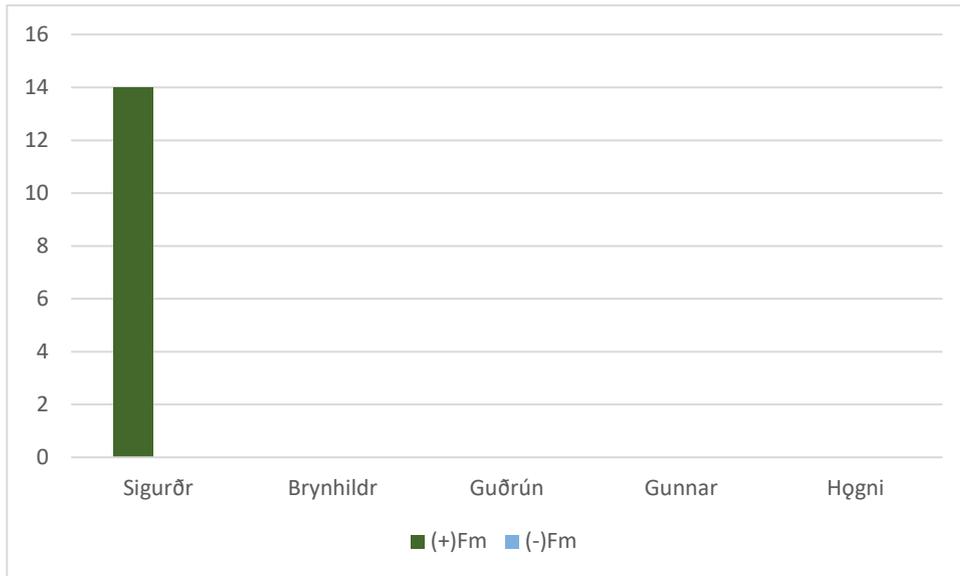


Table 7. Fm is as simple as Rm for its pattern, but arguably more interesting for its meaning, in contrast with the Dragon.

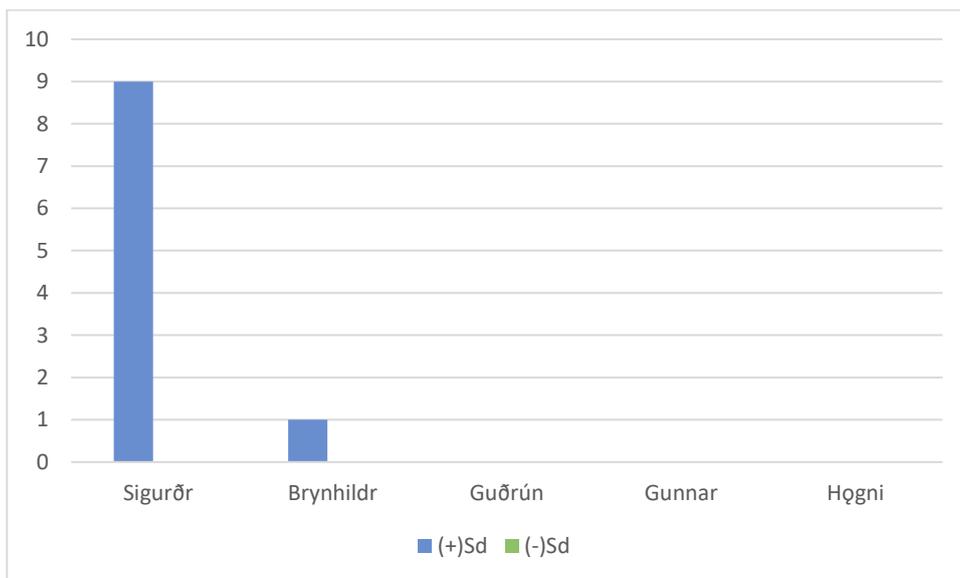


Table 8. Notice that the Valkyrie encountered here has been assimilated to Brynhildr for recount purposes.

2.4.3. The Cycle of Brynhildr

The cycle of Brynhildr comprises several poems: *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* (Br), *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* (Gðr), *Sigurðarkviða in scamma* (Sg), *Helreið Brynhildar* (Hlr), up to the ride of Brynhildr to Hel, where praise is intricately threaded with censure, and characters who are deemed as noble are here also censured as guilty of misdeeds,

deception, oath-breaking. With these poems, the complexity of the characters and their multifaceted traits become apparent.

It is interesting to notice how blame and censure are not equally distributed for the same characters, across the poems. Some poems focus on the responsibility of Brynhildr, whereas others blame Gunnar and his family instead. Guðrún mostly plays a passive role, but in some poems, she already shows a new course in her destiny, where she starts to distinguish herself from an entirely passive lady and wife. Sigurðr continues to receive praise, even when dead, and even if he is the target of the vengeance and fury of Brynhildr, he is almost never deemed as responsible, and at most he shares his responsibility together with other characters.

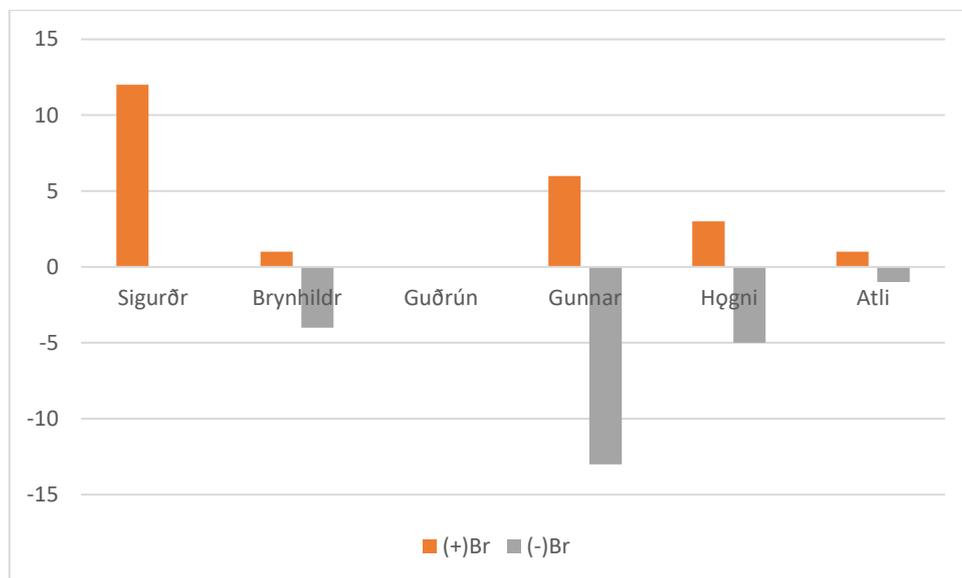


Table 9. In this final fragment of poem, Gunnar appears as the major responsible for the raging tragedy, much more than Brynhildr.

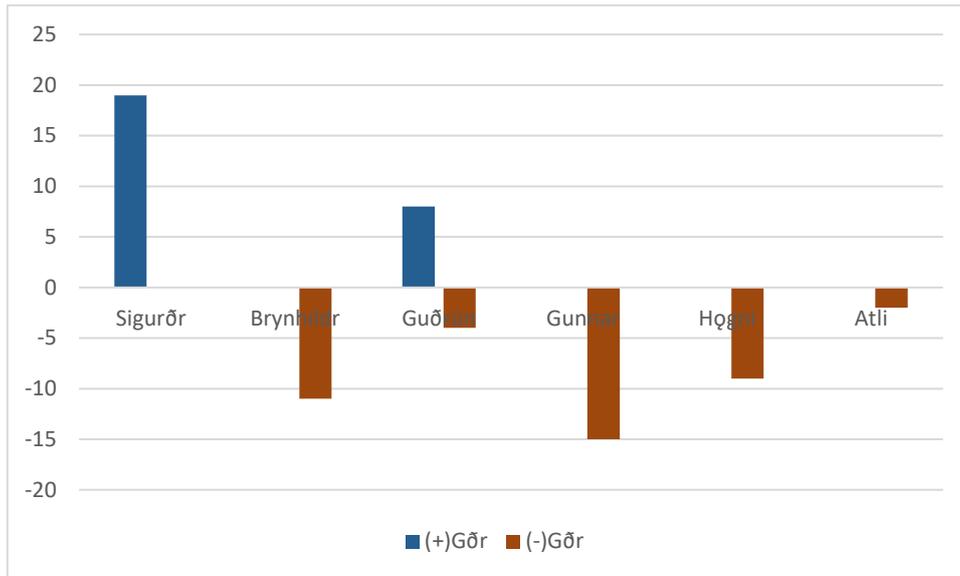


Table 10. In Gǫr instead, many more characters are censured for responsibility.

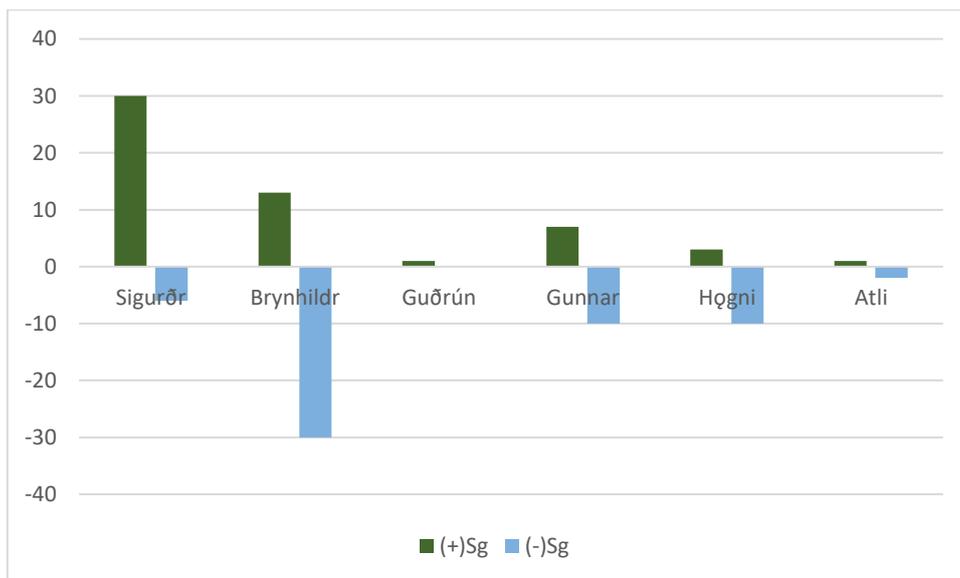


Table 11. Compared with Br, Sg seems to censure Brynhildr much more than the other characters.

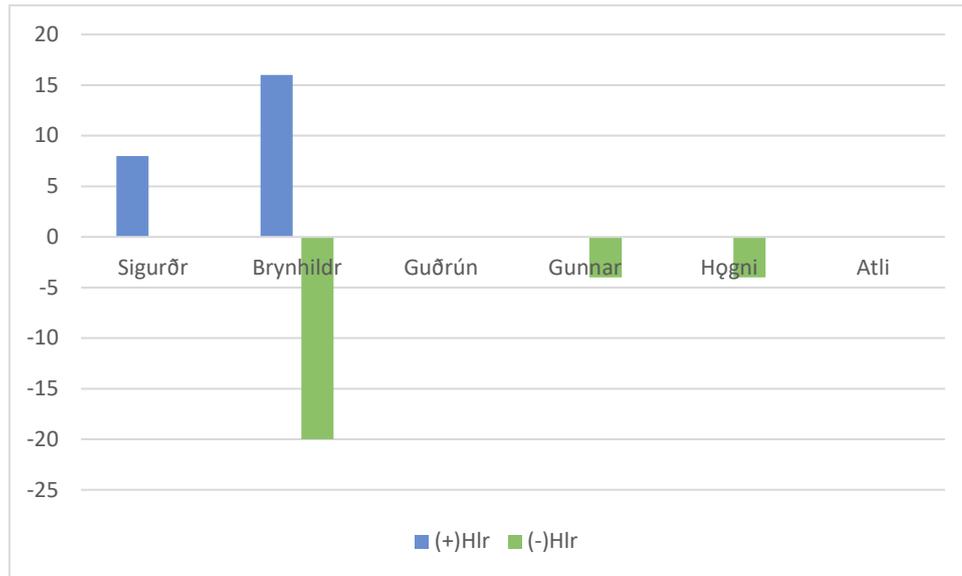


Table 12. This poem, which is meant to briefly recount the life of Brynhildr, seems to show her as equally praiseworthy and questionable, on the surface. However, this poem is an exception, where censure is expressed by a troll or a giant woman, whose authority for judgement, as a monstrosity, should not be deemed as fully valid.

2.4.4. The Cycle of Guðrún

The cycle of Guðrún, which lasts until the end of the Codex, includes many more poems. It could have been further sub-divided, but I opted for a more linear distinction. However, the first 3 poems of this cycle, *Guðrúnarqviða qnnor (Gðr.II)*, *Guðrúnarqviða in þriðia (Gðr.III)*, *Oddrúnargrátr (Od)*, could be conceived as a transition, of events that happen around the second marriage of the key character, with Atli. Yet, most of the surviving main characters are there mentioned, although not in the usual full tone and redundancy as in the other poems. The subsequent poems instead, *Atlaqviða in grænlensca (Akv)*, *Atlamál in grænlensco (Am)*, *Guðrúnarhvot (Ghv)*, *Hamðismál (Hm)* recount of battles and tragedies that are very complex for their pattern of praise and censure, even reaching their apex in glory and tragedy, at the same time, for the same characters.

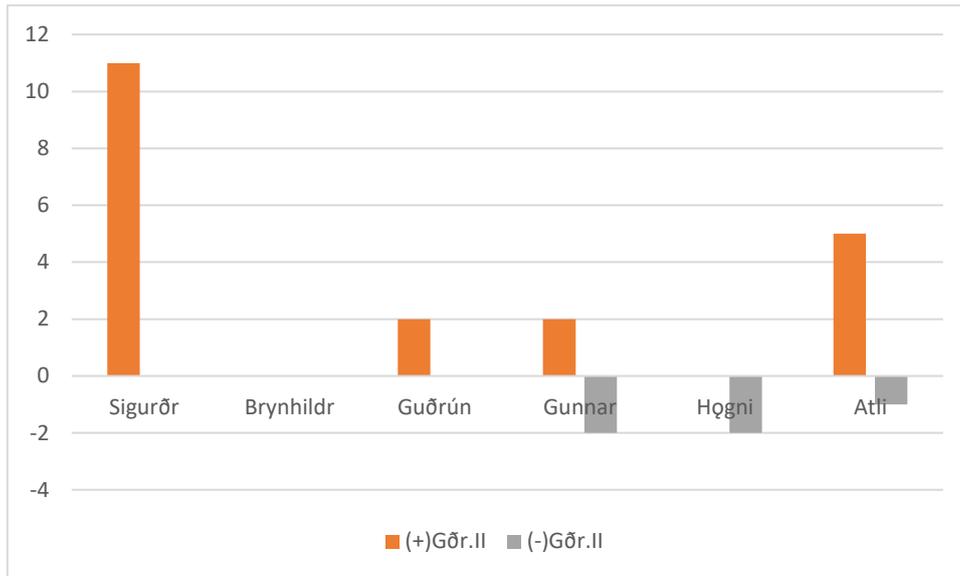


Table 13. The recounting of the marriage to Atli implies censure over male relatives of Guðrún, guilty of the assassination of Sigurðr, while yet recognising their power and nobility.

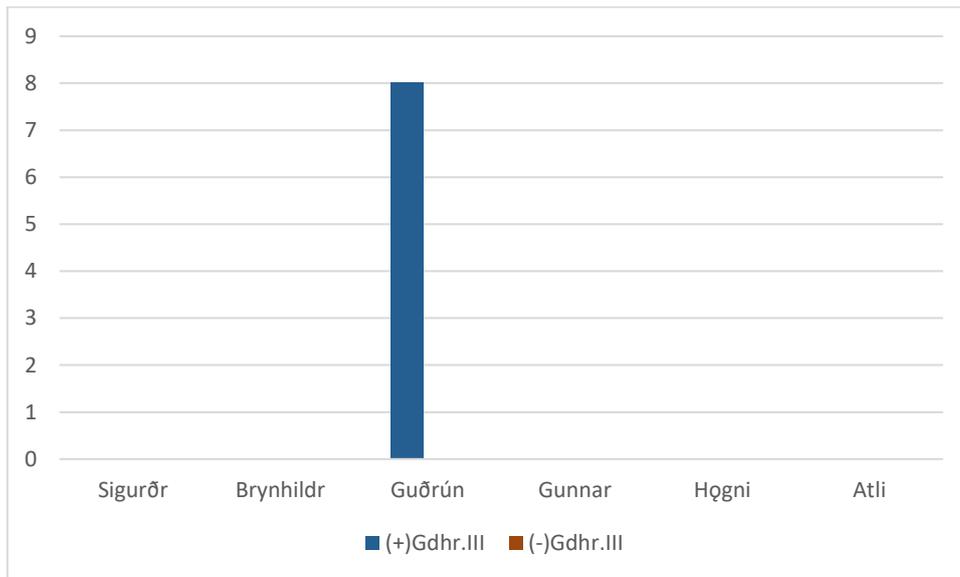


Table 14. In this particular poem, the uncompromising faithfulness of Guðrún is celebrated, contributing to the aura of the overall uncompromising woman.

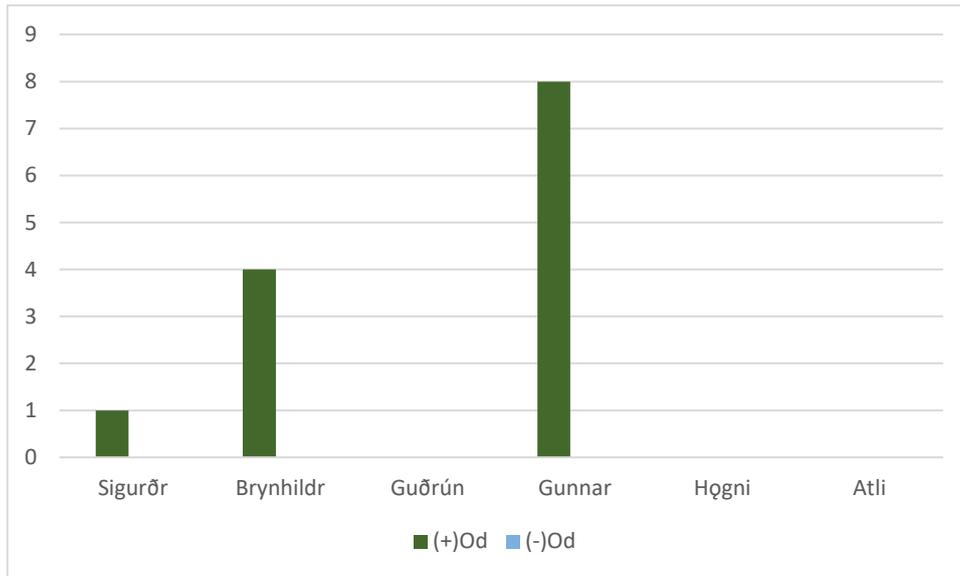


Table 15. The lament of Oddrún offers an alternative perspective of the events, resuming the splendour of Brynhildr, overwhelmed by an unfavourable fate, and introduces the redemption of Gunnar.

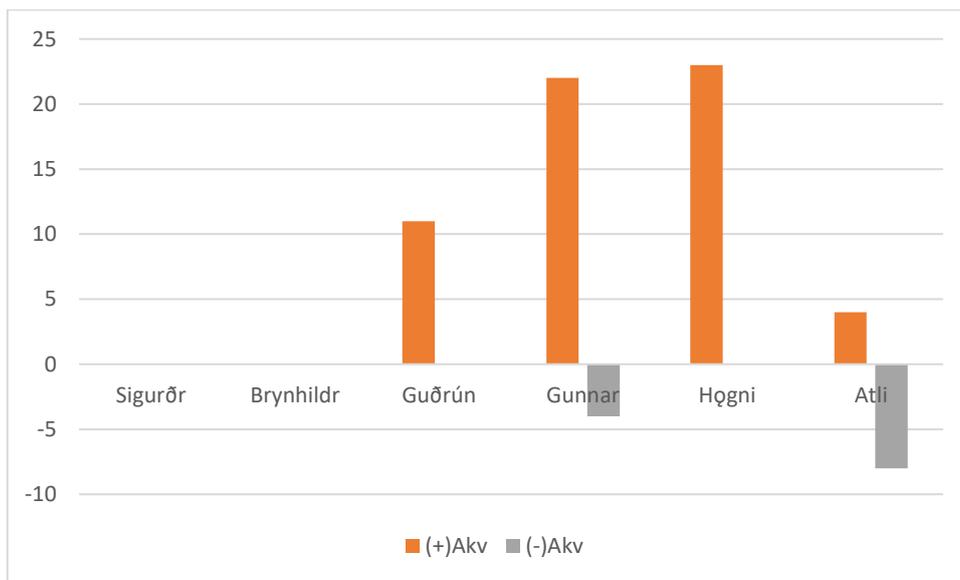


Table 16. Akv, in its narration of the demise of the Niflungar and Atli, finally redeems the Niflungar in their glory, together with their sister.

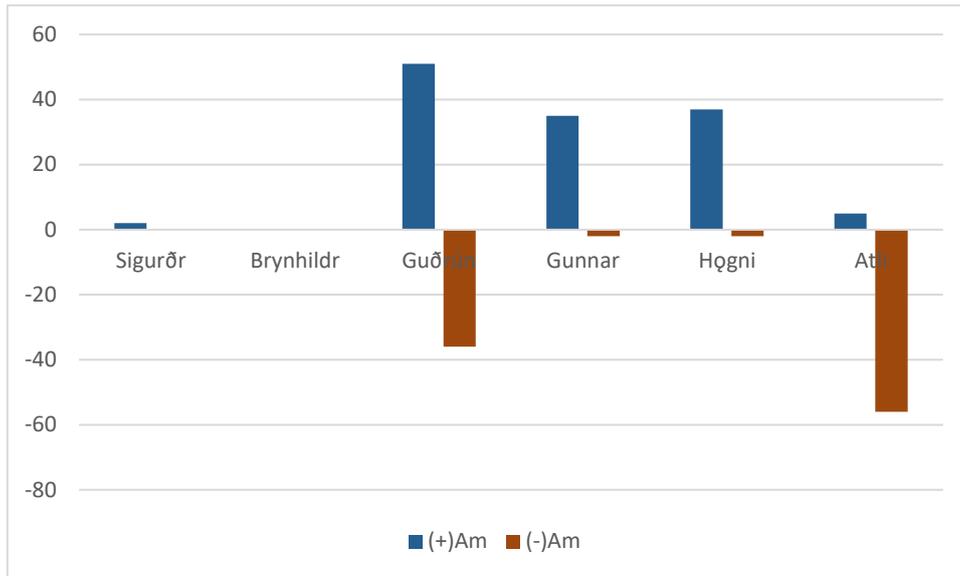


Table 17. Am possibly magnifies the praise found in Am, but also extends in censure, in particular for the reciprocal accusations of Atli and Guðrún, showing how righteous and glorious vengeance can imply atrocities. Here the bright side of Guðrún is juxtaposed with her darker self.

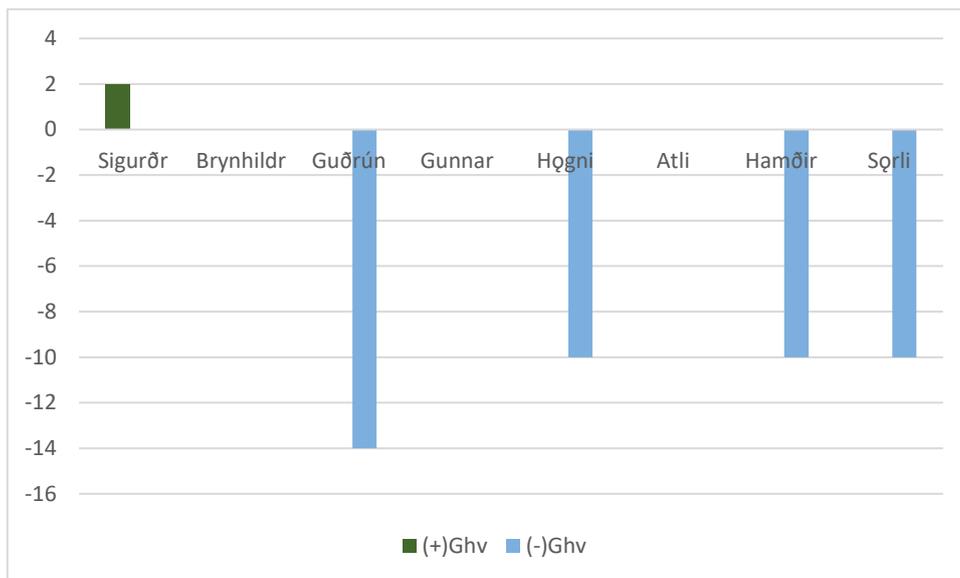


Table 18. The whetting involves reciprocal accusations, and no characters yet alive can find any praise.

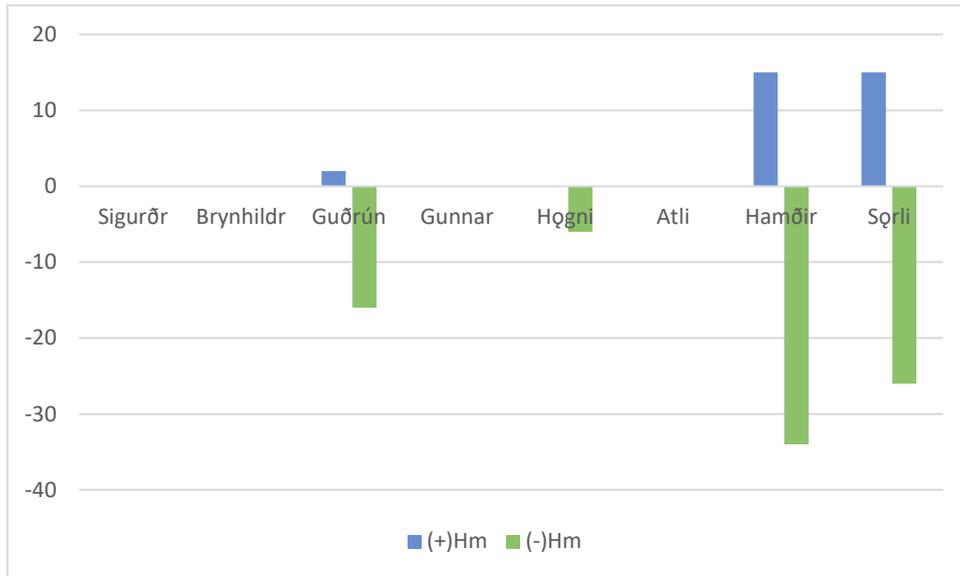


Table 19. The final poem of the Codex is once more a juxtaposition of praise for valour as well as a strong censure of recklessness and ruthlessness in vengeance. It is important to notice that here censure does not negate the value of praise and glorification.

3. Praise and Censure in Context

In this section, I am focusing on the main characters of the so called heroic poems of the Edda, summarising and analysing their actions.⁸ Eddic poems specifically involving the gods are not relevant here for their narrative content, and that also sets the distinction between mythological poems and heroic poems as I apply it here; a notable exception being the *Hávamál*, for it expresses teachings and precepts of the Norse culture that are relevant for our contextualisation and understanding of the heroic ethos.

Compared with the male characters, female main characters can also bear traits related to warfare, even at the highest level, in the case of the Valkyries. However, even Valkyries, while not yet married, never perform in their warring endeavours, which are only referred to, or at best narrated within the frame of the performance, and their warrior traits are lost as soon as they actively enter the narrative events. In other words, none of the female main characters in heroic poems actually perform warrior feats within the frame of the narration – with the notable but late exception of Guðrún. All of them are overall bound within a most distant status from warfare, that of marriage, as wives. This holds true also in the *Völsunga Saga*. Yet, this does not imply that they are secondary characters, rather, that their "default status" is different from that of men, meaning that comparing the characters altogether would result in a diminished role of all women, which is not the case, as I will argue below. The necessity of this distinction will become clearer along my argumentation. This is why I chose to analyse them separately from male characters. The development from that default status is what defines their role in the heroic poems. However, the distinction of role based on gender is apparently a norm in the Edda, but it does not necessarily bind the characters to it.

3.1. Völundr

Völundr is the protagonist of the first poem that can be defined as 'heroic' or first poem of the Codex where there is no deity directly implied, the *Völundarqviða* (*Vkv*). I previously left it out from the textual recounting, but for a good reason. As I will try to demonstrate below, Völundr can hardly be conceived as a hero proper: he is simply the

⁸ All the English translations of the poems as provided in footnotes are found in Larrington (2014).

protagonist of the poem. In the prose introduction, Vǫlundr is presented as the son, one of three, of the king of the Finns. In other words, Vǫlundr should have been imagined as a stranger to the audience of *Vǫlundarqviða*, at least, to that contemporary to the compiler of the prose section. Moreover, in the poem, when facing the Swedish king Niðuðr and his wife, Vǫlundr is called with epithets referring to the Elves (*vísi alfa* and *alfa lióði*), for three times in strophes 10, 13, 32, suggesting even a non-human nature and remarking diffidence against him, in the Swedish king's opinion. The apparent inconsistency can be generalised to the status of Vǫlundr as not a Norseman, fact that constitutes an element of otherness between the (main) character and the audience of the poem.

At the beginning of the poem, Vǫlundr lives a peaceful life in *Útfdalir* with his two brothers, and their corresponding Valkyrie wives, who came and chose the three brothers as their husbands. After seven years, their wives fly away towards their destiny and Vǫlundr is the only one who decides to remain, patiently waiting for his wife to return. He keeps waiting while forging the finest jewels and rings with gold and gems and living a very humble life as a hunter (str. 5, 8, 9). But then, king Niðuðr gets to know of him and his treasure, and decides to seize both. Hence, a distinguishing trait of Vǫlundr is his skill as a blacksmith and a jewel crafter. Also, it is important that it is a notable hoard that plays the main trigger for the story to move on from a static point where nothing else could possibly happen. The hoard is a magnet for action and new characters led by their greed.

It should be noticed that Vǫlundr is not abducted by Niðuðr's warriors after an open fight, but while he is sleeping and after he is tied up (str. 11). In other words, Vǫlundr is ambushed. Normally the soldiers should have been able to defeat him in combat, if anything because of their overwhelming numbers, but they didn't even try. Arguably, this subtly hints that Vǫlundr is also an exceptionally skilful fighter or a frightful foe, other than a great blacksmith. Even if we have no explicit evidence of it, the argument is reinforced by the fact that Vǫlundr, together with his brothers, had been chosen by a Valkyrie as her lover and husband, and Valkyries typically choose only valiant warriors as their lovers or proteges, as it can be seen in the subsequent poems of the Codex. However, the poem persists with no mention or description of the possible valour of Vǫlundr.

In front of Niðuðr, Vǫlundr is accused of having stolen his wealth from the lands of the king, but he has no actual power to contradict the king's accusation, so his hoard is confiscated and the ring that was made for Vǫlundr's wife is given to Niðuðr's daughter, Boðvildr, and the sword he had forged taken by the king. Thereafter the queen appears, defined as wise or initiate, and she describes Vǫlundr's eyes as "gleaming snakes" in strophe 17:

"[...] ámun ero augo ormi þeim inom frána; [...]"⁹

The image is arguably more than a simple description, as Vǫlundr, who is now apparently helpless, is hiding his cunning and power exactly as a snake hides the venom in his fangs. The audience would have likely thought of something sinister preparing in the plot of the poem, possibly figuring the worst for Vǫlundr's enemies. And as we know, that is exactly what happens later.

Vǫlundr's condition is made even worse by the order of cutting the sinews of his legs and relegate him in a remote island with the task of forging jewels for the king. This is made both to prevent him from escaping, and as a precaution against revenge. But then, by chance, Niðuðr's sons are fascinated by Vǫlundr's creations, and Vǫlundr manages to make Niðuðr's sons approach him, secretly, promising some gems to them and then he ruthlessly kills them. Once more, greed for treasures is a key element in the development of the story. If it wasn't for the greed expressed by the king's sons, Vǫlundr's revenge would have never happened in the form that he desired. It is important to notice here that those boys had no direct responsibility for Vǫlundr's condition, in fact they trusted Vǫlundr even if he was a prisoner. But that did not stop Vǫlundr from cutting their heads and crafting jewels out of their skulls, eyes and teeth to send to the king and the rest of his family. In Vǫlundr's revenge, the king's greed and cruelty is paid back with jewels made out of what he had of most precious, that is his sons.

With this episode, the theme of revenge is violently introduced in the narration. It is presumably a planned or desired revenge by Vǫlundr, but unexpected, given his situation and physical condition – if it was not for the queen's allusion to Vǫlundr's eyes. It is not even a feud of families and warriors. It is a revenge that makes lateral victims of

⁹ "his eyes are like those of a shining serpent"

innocent boys who actually didn't even consider Vǫlundr as an enemy, just because they were the king's sons. Hence in *Vǫlundarqviða*, the theme of revenge emerges together with that of resolution and ruthlessness. There is no pity for whosoever crosses the path of the avenger. Moreover, here vengeance is not a mean for retribution (Vǫlundr gains substantially nothing from killing the children), but simply a mean to re-assert the offended honour, one's status amongst its social surroundings. The act is probably excessive even according to the Norse laws about vengeance (McKinnell, p. 23-24), but it is symbolically symmetric with the abuse on Vǫlundr himself.

After that, chance helps Vǫlundr once more, because his revenge is not complete, when the king's daughter, Boðvildr, comes to him because she has broken her ring (previously owned by Vǫlundr's wife) and she does not trust to say that, except to Vǫlundr. And then, with the help of some beer, he seduces her and makes her pregnant. Finally, his revenge is complete, and though he cannot walk on his legs, he suddenly rises aloft, and flies to Niðuðr to reveal his acts and take full satisfaction from the king's despair. Then Vǫlundr flies away, laughing. Vǫlundr's captivity, treasure confiscation and inflicted disability is paid back with vengeance with the destruction (and usurpation) of the king's royal lineage.

Here the supernatural takes over, but it is interesting to notice that Vǫlundr can or decides to fly only after the fulfilment of his vengeance. As if only by hiding his power, he could fully deliver the most fatal blow. On the other hand, coincidence or not, only after vengeance Vǫlundr becomes so light and relieved that he can fly away. Only after such cruel, vengeful actions, Vǫlundr is free of his chains and burdens, both physical and moral.

However, despite his ruthlessness in vengeance, there is no explicit mention of valour nor any hint of glory or praise attributed to the main character, in the text of the *Vǫlundarqviða*, and I argue that there could hardly be any, since Vǫlundr can never undertake any endeavour requiring valour or courage. Indeed, that is narratively necessary for focusing on the core of the poem: vengeance. Vǫlundr made prisoner and lame creates the *casus belli* and increases the dramatic effect of his achievement. Moreover, Vǫlundr is a sort of an outsider by birth, a stranger and quite an exotic one, so that an element of alterity or detachment is added against the fact that one, in the audience, could sufficiently identify or sympathise for him, even if we are made to follow his

perspective of the story. Together with the lack of praise by the narrative authority, directly or indirectly conceded across the narration, we can see how Vǫlundr could hardly be seen as a praiseworthy model: vengeance is the focus of the poem, not the avenger. Therefore, independently of its origin, the story of Vǫlundr as it appears in the Codex would be a demonstration, a warning of the dire consequences that one should expect, as an effect of an excessively overbearing or abusive conduct (not just that of Niðuðr, but also that of the queen and their daughter); a vengeance so brutal, that not even a king could prevent, possibly a lesson to keep in mind. Even if Vǫlundr could be seen as a very fitting model for the archetype of the avenger, unstoppable against adversity and patient towards the favourable time to act, we can hardly think that Vǫlundr, as we have him in this poem, was conceived as the embodiment of any type of heroic character by the Viking or Medieval Norse audience, more like the protagonist of a mythological poem about greed, abusive power and vengeance. This conception is reinforced by the fact that the compiler of the Codex inserted it before the *Alvissmál*, which is definitely a mythological poem.

The fact that Vǫlundr appears only in a poem makes any generalisation simply impossible, but indeed the status of *Vkv* as a mythological or hybrid poem, not a heroic poem proper, would contribute to explain why the character of Vǫlundr, protagonist but not to be considered a hero on par with the subsequent main characters. In fact, Vǫlundr never came to be involved in the Norse cycle of the *Vǫlsungar* (and consequently in the *Vǫlsunga Saga*), as it happened instead with Helgi.

3.2. Helgi

Helgi is the protagonist of more than a poem, and although the Codex Regius has been compiled to be overall coherent, there are important variations about the story of Helgi and character itself, in the different Helgi poems, to the point where the two different expressions of Helgi can hardly be conceived as the same characters. Moreover, the poems are actually composed of poetic fragments, groups of stanzas that are put together by the compiler of the Codex Regius, who decided for the three Helgi poems to add consistent narrative prose in between the fragments. The narrative prose here plays an important role in adding information about the characters and the story itself. Even if events differ substantially in each poem, we can try and synthesise the various expressions

of the various expressions of the character under a homogeneous set of traits (see §1.2 for the question of the lore related to Helgi in comparison with what is reported in the Codex Regius). The compiler also indirectly invites us in doing so, by conceiving the two different Helgi as one the reincarnation of the other, while two of the three poems actually refer to the same Helgi, but with different particulars and events. It is unclear whether the idea of reincarnation was an invention of the compiler, or if it was already part of the legend since long time.

Unlike Vǫlundr, who is an Elf, or at least a character with strong ties with the Elves and the supernatural world, Helgi, the chosen one by the Valkyrie Sváva/Sigrún, is a human being. As I will try to demonstrate, he is an epitome of valour, courage and even leadership, the clear paragon of a warrior and a king. Yet vengeance plays a major role also for Helgi.

In the first Helgi poem, *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana in fyrri (HH)*, Helgi is the son of Sigmundr and Borghildr, his first wife. This is also the version adopted in the *Vǫlsunga Saga*, where he is accounted as half-brother of Sigurðr, the youngest son of Sigmundr. Helgi's bright destiny as a great ruler, indeed, the best ruler, is announced at the very beginning of the poem (str. 2), as woven by the Norns.

Nótt varð í bæ, nornir qvómo,
þær er qðlingi aldr um scópo;
þann báðo fylki frægstan verða
oc buðlunga beztan þiccia.¹⁰

Recalling that Eddic poetry originates from a tradition of oral narration and performance, we can see here that Helgi's destiny serves as an introduction for the story, a prolepsis typical of epic poetry, possibly in order to capture the attention of the audience. This is a recurring phenomenon in the Codex, where often necessity of narration is interwoven with the destiny of the character being sealed since his or her birth, and the action of the Norns coincides with that of the narrator by means of prolepsis.

¹⁰ Night fell on the estate, then came norns,
Those who shaped fate for the prince;
They said the war-leader should be most famous
And that he'd appear the best of princes.

Still young, Helgi is ready for battle and a leader of armies. His charisma and leadership are apparent to the warriors in str. 7 of *HH*, where Helgi is also publicly gifted from his father Sigmundr an augural symbol.

Drótt þótti sá döglingr vera,
qváðo með gumnom góð ár komin;
siálfr gecc vísi ór vígþrimo
ungom fœra ítrlauc grami.¹¹

Moreover, str. 9 describes Helgi as a generous and just prince, giver of gold to whom deserved it and beloved by his subjects (reminding of the figure of the *rex justus*). This is the process through which a ruler or a chieftain could obtain followers and reliable obedience. We can notice that Helgi is repeatedly defined by his leadership, his status as noble ruler.

Þá nam at vaxa fyr vina briósti
álmr ítrborinn, ynðis lióma;
hann galt oc gaf gull verðungo,
sparði eigi hilmir hodd blóðrekinn.¹²

In *HH*, details are not given for reasons about Helgi moving war against Hundingr and killing him, but we are told he is successful in his first military challenge (str. 10). In the process, he attracts the vengeful intentions of the sons of the fallen king, after having refused to pay for the wergild. Armies meet, and Helgi vanquishes also Hundingr's sons, defeating anybody who could oppose him. From the skies, flashes and lights appears, and maidens appear, riding their horse, spear at hand, wearing their armours, as to celebrate the glory in battle achieved by Helgi (str. 15). The text does not specify it, but they are

¹¹ To the men it seemed that he was a prince,
They said to one another that good years had come;
The noble leader himself came from the tumult of battle
To bring a splendid leek to the young lord.

¹² Then began to grow in the bosom of his friends,
The splendidly-born elm in radiant delight;
He paid out and gave gold to the retinue,
The prince did not spare blood-stained treasure.

presumably Valkyries. So Helgi invites them to go with him after that battle, but Sigrún, (interestingly presenting both human and properly Valkyrie traits) answers that she is promised to Hoðbroddr, of whom she has a very low opinion, causing a conflict. So Helgi decides to declare war to Hoðbroddr son of Granmarr, in order to have Sigrún for himself, and once more he gathers and leads his armies to battle, by promising gifts to whomever would answer his call, reinforcing the idea of the generous leader. His paramount leadership is defined with the noun *allvaldr* (almighty) in str. 21, suggesting that his authority was renowned and recognised already across a vast area, amongst various peoples. This time, the military expedition moves by ship, and remarkable stanzas with a number of kennings is reserved to the harsh travel against the sea, where the brave men of Helgi are helped by Sigrún herself (str. 26-32). When they finally land, a long flyting (or *senna*) occurs between Sinfiotli, Helgi's half-brother by Sigmundr, and Guðmundr, son of Granmarr, where they repeatedly taunt each other, until they are stopped by Helgi, who remarks that princes should speak the truth (str. 33-46). Then Hoðbroddr gathers his army, with Hogni, father of Sigrún and his family. Helgi fights, always in the first line, his courage never faltering (str. 53).

Svipr einn var þat, er saman qvómo
 fǫlvir oddar at Frecasteini;
 ey var Helgi, Hundings bani,
 fyrstr í fólki, þar er firar bǫrðuz,
 æstr á ímo, alltrauðr flugar;
 sá hafði hilmir hart móðacarn.¹³

The battle is valiantly won by Helgi and his army, and the hero can finally enjoy his best reward, the Valkyrie Sigrún, who can finally stay with him.

As the title given to the poem says, in *Helgaqviða Hjörvarðzsonar (HHv)* the protagonist is Helgi once more, but here he is not the son of Sigmundr, hence he is not

¹³ There was only the flickering – as they came together -
 Of pale spear-points at Frekastein;
 Always was Helgi, slayer of Hunding,
 Foremost in the host, where men were fighting,
 Eager in the battle, extremely averse to flight;
 That prince had a hard acorn of a heart.

directly a Vǫlsung. In this poem, the compiler intervenes heavily with narrative prose, and indeed the text is presented as a patchwork of various episodes. The first sequence is about Atli, here son of Iðmundr, jarl of king Hjørvarðr (so that he can hardly be considered the same character as Atli the Hun), who is sent to ask the hand of Sigrlinn, the beautiful daughter of king Svafnir. On his way, Atli hears and understands birds talking about Hjørvarðr, his wives, and Sigrlinn. Atli makes a pact with one of the birds, in order to gain more information. However, he fails in his task. Hjørvarðr decides to go in person, but he finds the lands of Svafnir besieged by Hroðmarr who also wanted the hand of Sigrlinn. Eventually, Atli finds Sigrlinn in an abandoned house and finally the king can marry her. Their son is a lonely boy, he has yet no name and he does not speak much, yet when he was on a hill, he is reached by a group of Valkyries and one of them speaks to him and gives him the name of Helgi. She also senses that Helgi is a young man of valour, and brave, but he will not gain lordship until he decides to express himself, as in str. 6.

"Síð mundu, Helgi, hringom ráða,
 rícr rógapaldr, né Røðulsvøllum
 - ørn gól árla -, ef þú æ þegir,
 þóttu harðan hug, hilmir, gialdir."¹⁴

Once more we can see how the traits of valour, courage and nobility are introduced to define the character of Helgi and the compiler follows the same semantics as the poem, when Helgi is described in a prose section as *allmikill hermaðr* (almighty warrior). The compiler tells us that this Valkyrie is the same who will later protect and love Helgi, Sváva. She directs him to find an enchanted weapon, with which he later defeats Hroðmarr, avenging his grandfather. After many battles, briefly summed up in prose, we are told of another episode in a fjord, between Atli and Hrimgerðr, a giantess. Similarly to what happened in *HH*, between Sinfiotli and Guðmundr, this is a dialogue where each one taunts the other, a *senna* with no real impact in the events of the poem. Finally, Helgi

¹⁴ "It'll be a long time, Helgi, before you dispose of rings,
 Apple-tree of strife, or rule over Rodulsvoll
 -An eagle shrieked early – if you are always silent,
 Even if helmeted prince, you have a stern temperament."

travels at the court of king Eylimi, father of Sváva, and he is allowed to marry her. Thereafter, two parallel fatal events happen. Heðinn, half-brother of Helgi, swears he will have Sváva as his wife, while Helgi has an omen of death for himself. Helgi dies, defeated by Alfr, son of that Hroðmarr who was previously defeated and killed by Helgi himself. A fatal element, inevitable and tragic, is introduced to put an end to the life of the character. Notably, inevitability is built upon the honour of the character, rather than an intricate thread of unfavourable events: Helgi faces a challenge which he cannot, for his honour, refuse. This is remarked by Heðinn, in str. 34.

"[...] þér er sœmra sverð at rióða
enn frið gefa fiádom þínom."¹⁵

Such a statement can only be accounted for if we consider honour, and Helgi's honour seems to be very demanding, presumably heightened by his social status and power, to the point of being forbidden from refusing a deadly duel. Helgi calls for Sváva and he tells her to marry Heðinn, who in turn swears to avenge his half-brother. In the sequence, the term *ítrborinn* (highborn) is used in str. 37 to define Helgi, as it already happened in *HH*, str. 9. Moreover, we find in str. 39, echoed in the last line of the last strophe, str. 43, the usage of the term *buðlungr* (prince), and the best under the sun:

"[...] buðlungr, sá er var baztr und sólo; [...]"
"[...] þess er buðlungr var beztr und sólo. [...]"¹⁶

However tragic his death, his glory is remarked till the end of the poem, suggesting how the achievements of Helgi should survive far beyond his earthly existence. The narration is concluded by the compiler, who reports that Helgi and Sváva are said to be reborn (presumably to make room for the next Helgi poem, and make a continuum with it, instead of a parallel development).

In the third Helgi poem, *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana ǫnnor (HH.II)*, Helgi is once more the son of Sigmundr and Borghildr. This poem is conceived by the compiler himself

¹⁵ "[...] It would be more fitting to bloody your sword on me
Than to grant peace to your enemies."

¹⁶ "[...] he was best of princes under the sun. [...]"

as an alternate version of *HH*, since he mentions events in parts of his narrative prose as already narrated in another poem, hence not requiring any further development. However, there are in this poem new sequences. The compiler introduces this Helgi as named after Helgi Hjorvarðsson, reinforcing the idea of the reincarnating or at least recurring hero. The prose introduction explains of open hostility between the family of Sigmundr and that of Hundigr, both kings in their lands. A first episode recounts of a solo mission of a young Helgi as a spy in Hundigr's lands and how he is hunted by his men. He is hidden by a woman, Hagall, who covers Helgi as a maiden, a slave at the mill. The strength of the disguised Helgi is apparent, and it attracts the suspicion of his enemies. Hagall explains the extraordinary strength of this maiden at the mill by the fact that she is the daughter of a noble king, as narrated in str. 4:

"Þat er lítil vá, þótt lúðr þrumi,
er mæx konungs mǫndul hrœrir;
hon scævaði scýiom efri
oc vega þorði sem víkingar,
áðr hana Helgi hǫpto gorði;
systir er hon þeira Sigars oc Hǫgna,
því hefir ǫtul augo Ylfinga man."¹⁷

The episode is trivial and quite hilarious, but it is interesting to notice how, in her naivety, the old Hagall makes a whole of the concept of the noble birth and the physical might, as if one would derive from the other, nobility explaining strength. As we have already seen, the blending of the two concepts is particularly common in the Helgi poems and reflected in the semantics of adjectives and epithets.

It is the prose then that explains in very few words that Helgi travelled a lot and killed Hundigr, and then the daughter of king Hǫgni, Sigrún, who is also Sváva reborn,

¹⁷ "It's not so distressing that the frame should be juddering,
As the king's daughter turns the handle;
She sped above the clouds
And dared to fight like vikings do,
Before Helgi captured her;
She's Sigar and Hogni's sister,
That's why the Ylfing girl has terrifying eyes."

rides to Helgi and his army, and announces that she is aware of the valour of Helgi and of his endeavours. She refers to him using the terms *fólcs oddviti* (leader of armies, str. 12) and *doglingr* (prince, str. 13). Then Helgi proceeds in defeating the sons of Hundingr, after which he meets the Valkyrie once more. As in *HH*, Sigrún reveals to be promised to Hoðbroddr, son of Granmarr, with the permission of her father, Hogni. She rides to Helgi, she kisses him and her love for him is returned. She refers to him her situation, and he promises to intervene. In this sequence, various terms are used, by the poet and through the voice of Sigrún, to refer to Helgi. We find *sicling* (prince, str. 14), *konung*, (king, str. 14), *hilmir* (ruler, str. 14), *iofurr* (prince, str. 16), *fylkir* (commander, str. 16). All these terms, loosely synonyms, in a few strophes, convey and reinforce the idea of Helgi as a king, ruler and commander of armies. Helgi fearlessly decides to fight against the family of Sigrún (str. 18), to prevent her marriage with Hoðbroddr and gain her as his wife instead. This time, Helgi and his armies travel by the sea and the dialogue between Sinfiotli and Guðmundr, as seen in *HH*, is referred to by the compiler, but not reported fully (see above). The battle is won by Helgi and his army, and Hoðbroddr is killed as well as Sigrún's family, which was allied against Helgi by virtue of the promises interchanged. All these lords are defined by Helgi as *ricmenni* (those who hold the power, str. 28), including himself. The tragedy is great for Sigrún, but inevitable given her purposes, and Helgi soothes her in str. 29:

"Huggastu, Sigrún! Hildir hefir þú oss verið;
vinnat scioldungar scopom. [...]"¹⁸

Destiny (*scop*) is sovereign, even above lords and rulers, none can escape their fate. This conception, spread across all of the Eddic poems, reinforces the limits of human beings (and gods alike), even the brightest hero. After the battle, only the youngest brother of Sigrún is yet alive, Dagr. But Dagr, with the favour of Óðinn, avenges his family and kills Helgi. More praiseworthy words and phrases for Helgi are uttered in the dramatic dialogue between Dagr and his sister, Helgi's widow. Dagr recognises Helgi's leadership

¹⁸ "Be comforted Sigrun! You've been our battle-goddess; The prince could not struggle against fate. [...]"

and valour in str. 30, echoing the ending verse of *HHv* and adding praise to him as a mighty one above the warriors:

"[...] buðlungr, sá er var beztr í heimi
oc hildingom á hálsi stóð."¹⁹

Sigrún then compares Helgi with friends and enemies as a wolf against the frightened goats, with warriors as an ash tree against the thorns or a majestic stag against the other beasts (str. 37, 38):

"[...] Svá hafði Helgi hrœdda gorva
fiáandr sína alla oc frœndr þeira,
sem fyr úlfi óðar rynni
geitr af fialli, geisca fullar.

Svá bar Helgi af hildingom
sem ítrscapaðr ascr af þyrni,
eða sá dýrkálfr, döggo slunginn,
er øfri ferr ǫllom dýrom
oc horn glóa við himin síálfan."²⁰

However hyperbolic these words, the glorious heroic aura around the character of Helgi is clear, assuming its connotation both within and without the narrated context. The compiler refers that Helgi in *Valhöll* is invited to rule with him, and str. 39 describes Helgi

¹⁹ "[...] the lord who was the best in the world
And who stood on the necks of chieftains."

²⁰ "[...] Helgi so terrified
All his enemies and their kin,
Just as panicking goats run before the wolf
Down from the mountain filled with fear.

So Helgi surpassed the soldiers
Like bright-growing ash beside the thorn-bush
and the young stag, drenched in dew,
Who towers above all other animals
And whose horns glow right up to the sky."

who is giving orders to (the previously deceased) Hundingr. This is presented as an ultimate post mortem retribution of sorts, the pinnacle of the life of the hero.

Yet, we are then told that the spirit of Helgi is restless. He returns to the mound at night and a servant sees him. She tells Sigrún of the eerie meeting, referring to Helgi as *fólcs iaðarr* (protector of the people) and *doglingr* (prince), in str. 42. The image of Helgi as a revenant is particularly stark, with Helgi riding towards his mound, followed by the spirits of his soldiers, the scene evoked through numerous kennings and images of blood, cold and darkness. Helgi returns in the same manner and explains to his widow that his restlessness is because his death has been caused by her. Sigrún was indeed responsible for the conflict with her own family, and indirectly through Dagr, for Helgi's death. In the dialogue, Sigrún once more refers to Helgi with the terms *konungr* (king, str. 44), *vísi* (leader, str. 44), *gramr* (prince, str. 45, 50), *fylkir* (commander, str. 47). After a while, Sigrún reportedly dies of anguish, following Helgi in his tomb. Once more both Helgi and Sigrún are said to be reborn by the compiler, who mentions the lay of Kara, unfortunately not reported in the Codex.

The *Völsunga Saga* largely draws from *HH*, and we gain little to no additional information on the character of Helgi. Again, Helgi is defined by the terms we have already seen, in particular he, gains from the victory against Hoðbroddr, *frægr* and *agætr*, fame and renown, perfectly coherent with the image defined above. After the triumph, the saga shifts to its main narrative thread, that related to Sigurðr and the descendants of Giúki, leaving the perspective over Helgi as narrated in the poems virtually unchanged.

As we can see, the first action in each Helgi poem is an act of revenge, which is for Helgi a sort of initiation. Helgi is defined as noble, valorous and brave in the poems, hence we can say that, at least for the audience for which these poems were first narrated, the power of achieving revenge was crucial for a warrior-hero character. Not only that, but the whole story is basically moved on by a chain of revenge and feuds between families. Feuds that are raised in importance by valour in battle and courage, which Helgi proves by always being in the first line, glory that can be recognised and honoured by others, and validated by Valkyries. Greed and hoards are not taken much into consideration in the cycle of Helgi, not as key elements for the story. We can see how valour and courage in battle are a nexus for praise by the poets, and, by extension, for a glorious conception of the character, by the audience.

Moreover, Helgi, avenger and warrior, is also a great leader, as in each poem it is repeatedly mentioned, as we have seen, how he can command and gather large armies from different locations, his noble and fair leadership being widely recognised. The term *buðlungr* (prince) alone is repeated at least 10 times across all the three poems, together with many other synonyms that semantically span from political power, to military leadership. This is not secondary for the glory for which he is renowned in the legends. Indeed, the semantics of powerful leadership and physical might are often blended when attributed to Helgi, possibly suggesting how one is the immediate product or consequence of the other. Once more, this trait particularly differs with the *Völundr* model, where leadership is completely irrelevant for the story. At the same time, the name itself, Helgi, suggests the idea of holiness, divinity that can easily be associated with rulers in non-dogmatic religions and societies as it must have been that of the pre-Christian Scandinavia²¹, further reinforcing the syncretism between the roles of hero and king. It should be noted that Helgi being first and foremost a leader and a king marks also the difference with all the other characters appearing in the poems, for only in the Helgi cycle the epic dimension is maintained almost fully. Indeed, in the Helgi cycle, his battles occupy a very important place, with full armies being hinted in the descriptions. Even if main characters are particularly focused, the collective dimension in warfare, which belies whole tribes and populations and kingdoms, is not a secondary element. Not so much for all the other main characters and heroes, even those who are typically recognised as the signature characters of the whole macro-cycle, whose battles in fact are reduced to clashes between bands of champions, heroic but increasingly localised out of a collective epic dimension (ie. the conflict between Gunnar and Atli, further localised from *Akv* to *Am*).

A third theme, is the protection and the love of a Valkyrie. Helgi, after his first military challenge is chosen by a Valkyrie, Sváva or Sigrún, who then both loves and protects him. Love of a woman/Valkyrie is as important for Helgi and the narration as the theme of vengeance, and actually the two are interwoven. In the third poem, their love has a much darker element, since it is the cause of a feud and a tragedy that culminates in

²¹ All these elements correlate to the discussion of *The ideology of the ruler in pre-Christian Scandinavia* (Schjødt 2010) and related articles. The ruler or king being a representative of the Otherworld, by virtue of his numinosity, is all the more a role that fits glorious heroism, conceived as an exceptional expression of human individuality and leadership.

the death of Helgi first, and Sigrún of anguish, subsequently, but this in no way obscures the figure of Helgi and his past achievements.

Finally, a tragic fate is what seals the events of the character, concluding his life and endeavours in both *HHv* and *HH.II*. This element actually makes the heroism of Helgi even more poignant, as the character must ultimately bow to death and the fatal decree of the Norns, no matter how great the man himself. A tragic death is what keeps great human beings, or heroes, separate from divinities; their glorious aura limited, but their humanity magnified. As I will demonstrate below, the element of tragedy is as important as glory towards the magnitude of a heroic character, and Helgi makes no exception. However, the character (and heroism) of Helgi is mostly defined by his endeavours while yet alive, rather than by his tragic death, or, in other words, his death does not assume any glorious connotations (dramatic at most), contrarily to the case of other characters.

For all these reasons, I argue that Helgi is a fully glorious hero, and he represents the heroic archetype of the king. It is interesting to notice that in such an archetype, the king is marked as a valiant warrior and commander, a just prince, but never as a wise and diplomatic leader in his relations with other lords, from without his leadership. The heroic king cannot accept to deal with peers, only with enemies or subjects.

3.3. Gold, Power, Sociality: the Dragon as the Outcast

Gold, in the form of the hoard of Andvari, is the prime mover of the whole cycle of the *Völsungar*. Later on, as the events develop, we see that the hoard assumes a subtle role in the plot, but always remarkably present, together with the theme of power. However, gold concurs to the theme of honour as well, as I will try to demonstrate below.

First of all, the hoard of Andvari is defined as an entity when it becomes a *wergild*, that is the compensation for the broken honour of the family of Hreiðmarr: the hoard assumes its symbolic value as tied to honour, and crucially to a fatal curse altogether. Generally speaking, gold in great quantity is a possession with honourable potential, for it allows the sharing of it and the creation of social bonds with other men and women. Understandably, gold was an important source of power (it is still today!), to the point where the curse of Andvari could actually be redundant with greed itself. Social bonds made through gold are hierarchical in nature, for the giver of gold (often in the poetic form of rings) are deemed as higher in the social rank, those who can command the

receivers of the share. So much so that, as we have seen, a good prince is that who justly shares gold and hoard, as in the case of Helgi, but Gunnar also receives the epithet of gold-giver, presumably as a loose synonym for king. In other words, gold (and more broadly wealth) has the potential to be translated into (social) power over other individuals, and it becomes itself a symbol of power. With such a hierarchical power, that of a lord over his subjects, favour in exchange of obedience, comes also honour, for again, being a prince or a lord or a commander in general is a social position that can be a source of honour, the role finding full meaning and explanation in the renown eventually attributed to the person in charge. In this sense, gold, as currency for material goods and social bonds at the same time, can be a source of honour; gold giving the chance to increase one's power and honour. We can see this mechanism as valid for the formation of hierarchy and social ranks in any society, including that of the Norse in the Viking and Medieval Age.

Crucially, that is true only if the hoard, the gold or wealth, is actually shared. Power is in the sharing. Those who do not use or share their gold do not create any social bonds. They waste their power and they are to be deemed as social aberrations, outcasts, monstrosities. The path is short from there to the Dragon Fáfnir, whose greed is not a practical lust of power, but a blind desire of purposeless possession, up to the breaking of the law for it, in killing his own father Hreiðmarr, legitimate owner of the hoard of Andvari, and refusing to share with his brother Reginn, at that point legitimate heir with him. The behaviour of the Dragon would be a narrative explanation of the obsession normally called hoarding and greed, brought to their extreme, and seen from a social point of view. Fáfnir breaks the law twice, in killing his own father and in deciding to keep the whole hoard for himself, without any further sharing with the other heirs. He shuns society in a self-exile, allegedly to avoid sharing the gold and protect it from anybody who could try and steal it. There, he transforms into a monstrosity, a Dragon. His obsession for the hoard is expressed with the allegory of poison snorted, as in *Fm*, str. 18

"Eitri ec fnæsta, er ec á arfi lá
miclom míns fǫður."²²

²² "Poison I snorted, when I lay upon
The might inheritance of my father."

Interestingly enough, the same image is substantially given for Brynhildr, symbolically, when she sees the injuries on the body of Sigurðr, in *Ghdr*, str. 27

[...] eitri fnæsti,
er hon sár um leit á Sigurði.²³

The contextual analogy between the two draconic images suggests that the Dragon can be used as a symbol for lust for possession and obsession in general. No further explanation is given for the transformation of Fáfnir, for Dwarves or Dark Elves as Fáfnir could shapeshift into other forms, but the Dragon is arguably the shape chosen to better protect the hoard against intruders, the object of the obsession with poison. The idea of isolation from society is reinforced in *Fm*, when it is explained that Fáfnir wore the Helm of Terror (*Ægishiálmr*), against other men, arguably to scare and repel them, situation which made the Dragon think to be the mightiest, but without being properly tried. Sigurðr remarks that no such helm could be a valid defence where a real fight is involved, and Fáfnir would have known that if he had confronted against many men, once more accusing the Dragon of having shunned society, and implying that this was the cause of his demise, and as in str. 16-17.

"[...]
Ægishiálm bar ec um alda sonom,
meðan ec um meniom lág;
einn rammari hugðomc qlom vera,
fannca ec marga mogo."²⁴

"Ægishiálmr bergr einugi,
hvars scoló vreiðir vega;

²³ [...] She snorted out poison,
When she looked at the wounds upon Sigurd.

²⁴ Here Larrington translates *mogo* (nom. *mogr*) as *equals*, whereas it also means *youths*. The latter is important, if we are to fully understand the Dragonslayer as the celebration of courage and youth, as in Jakobsson (2010).

þá þat finnr, er með fleirom kǫmr,
at engi er einna hvatastr."²⁵

Hence, the Dragon, as we find it used in the Edda, could be the shape and the symbol of monstrosity for those who refuse the system of society, which is maintained overall by the principles of honour and power,²⁶ also by the just sharing of gold. In this sense, the obsessive and avaricious Dragon is the outcast and the enemy of the society of the human beings (Evans 1985), and as such, source of an overwhelming power or strength and most importantly, source of terror. As an outcast, symbol of greed and obsession, the Dragon is the symbol of fear, terror, who can be defeated only by a fearless hero. (Jakobsson 2010).

As a threat and an enemy of society and by extension of mankind, the Dragon becomes the ideal opponent for a hero to defeat, a source of renown by the fictional community of the story (which in turn is the projection of the audience of the poem), as it is the case of Sigurðr.

3.4. Sigurðr

The next main character in the Codex involves a whole set of poems, together with other characters such as Gunnar, Högni, Guðrún and Brynhildr. In the Codex Regius, Sigurðr is first mentioned in *Fra Dauða Sinfiotla*, a full prose section after *HH.II*, where

²⁵ "[...]

The helm of terror I wore among the sons of men,
While I lay upon the neck-rings;
More powerful than all I thought myself to be,
I didn't encounter many equals."

"The helm of terror protects no one,
Where furious men have to fight;
A man finds out when he comes among a multitude;
That no one is bravest of all."

²⁶ and it should be noted that this was true both in Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavian societies. Either laws and rules were enforced by a political power, such as a king and his hierarchy as in Norway, or by a looser system of honour as the definition of an individual and its perception by the rest of the society, intermediated by law, as in Commonwealth Iceland (Sørensen 2000, 23).

it is narrated of the death of Sinfíotli, son of Sigmundur. So is reported, in the very end of the section:

Sigmundur oc allir synir hans vóro langt um fram alla menn aðra um afl oc vóxt oc hug oc alla atgervi. Sigurðr var þó allra framarstr, oc hann kalla allir menn í fornfræðom um alla menn fram oc gofgastan herkonunga.²⁷

After this, we have the *Grípisspá*, which is a dialogue between Sigurðr and his uncle Grípir, who is said to be very wise, to the point of being able to foretell the future. So, the destiny of Sigurðr is summed up in the dialogue, while the hero is not afraid to hear what is coming for him and he accepts whatsoever the Norns had prepared for him. This acceptance of destiny, however tragic, is both necessary for the narration, to create pathos for its audience, since the dialogue, unnaturally made of subsequent questions and short answers, rather than a summary, is maintained in its rhythm exactly by the curiosity of Sigurðr and the manifest reticence of Grípir in telling him tragic events; and functional to the figure of the hero, who is proven to be utterly brave, even against the fate that cannot be controlled. The brightest human being is also deeply bound to an earthly existence, perfectly and consciously bound to the mechanisms and laws of Miðgardr, the World of Men. The rituality of the dialogue is also reflected in the renown that the two characters concede to each other, making epithets exceptionally frequent here, so much so that their meaning is in a way diminished, ritualised itself, also because the epithets as spoken by the characters are often self-referential. Yet, adjectives and epithets referred to Sigurðr here are insightful in order to understand the generalised conception of the character. Remarkably, terms and strophes used for Sigurðr in this poem are similar or even equal to those used for Helgi.

We find *ítarligr* (lordly, glorious, str. 4), *ítr* (excellent, noble, str. 7, 23), *hilmir* (prince, str. 5, 14), *ráðspakir* (wise, str. 6), *fylkir* (prince, str. 9, 16, 34), *þengill* (prince, king, str. 25, 41), *gramr* (warrior, king, str. 13, 32, 33, 37, 47, 52), *ríkr* (mighty, str. 17), *konungr* (king, str. 17), *þólingr* (noble captain, prince, str. 23), *naddéls boði* (announcer of shower of arrows, kenning in str. 23), *hers oddviti* (leader of armies, str. 41, 52).

²⁷ Sigmund and all his sons surpassed all men in strength and size and courage and all accomplishments. Sigurd, however, was the most remarkable of all, and in the old traditions everyone says he was the greatest of all men and the most redoubtable of war-leaders.

Similarly, various strophes are entirely dedicated to praise and hyperboles. Strophe 7 recites the common formula, shared with Helgi, for which Sigurðr will be the best man under the sun, highest of kings, generous, brave, noble.

"Þú munt maðr vera mæztr und sólo
oc hæstr borinn hveriom iofri,
giofull af gulli, enn glöggr flugar,
ítr álitu oc í orðom spacr."²⁸

Echoed by strophe 52, which repeats and reinforces the highest glory of Sigurðr, and particularly remarking that this glory in the prince's life ('á grams ævi', which is an important factor in defining the kind of heroism exemplified by the Dragonslayer, as I will explain better in the next chapter).

"[...] Því scal hugga þic, hers oddviti,
sú mun gipt lagit á grams ævi:
munat mætri maðr á mold koma,
und sólar siot, enn þú, Sigurðr, þiccir."²⁹

The *spá* is concluded with a strophe that remarks how nobody can win against destiny ('munat scöpom vinna', str. 53), an idea that is as subtle as important across all the poems, as we have already seen for Helgi, and as I will discuss more in detail below.

Grípisspá is also the only place in the Codex Regius, where we can find information regarding the double marriage of him with Guðrún and of Gunnar with Brynhildr (the other source being the *Völsunga Saga*). Grípir reveals that, despite Sigurðr swearing love and loyalty to Brynhildr, he will be a guest at the court of Giúki, and queen Grimhildr will deceive him in marrying her daughter, Guðrún, and forget anything about

²⁸ "You will be the most glorious man under the sun
And raised up the highest of all princes,
Generous with gold, and reluctant to retreat,
Striking to look at and wise in your words."

²⁹ "[...] This shall console you, leaders of the army,
This luck's laid down in the prince's life:
No mightier man will walk on the earth,
Under the sun's dwelling, than you, Sigurd, seem to be."

Brynhildr. In exchange for the hand of Guðrún, Sigurðr will help Gunnar in conquering Brynhildr, winning a series of challenges for him, while having switched their aspects, through sorcery. The two couples will marry together, but eventually Brynhildr will uncover the mischievous plot and think herself betrayed, planning the tragic ruin for Sigurðr and the sons of Guðrún - and for herself. Indeed, the intricate plot of treachery is so important that Sigurðr is worried of his future honour as a traitor and strophes 23 and 41 are dedicated to explanation and reassuring by the wise king, who confirms that notwithstanding the intrigues, no infamy will happen during the prince's life.

Indeed, in the subsequent poems we can see the growth of the young Sigurðr as a character, both as a vigorous (*hvatr*), and subsequently as a wise man.³⁰ The next poem, *Reginnsmál*, is once more a mixture of poetic fragments and narrative prose. The story starts from the very issue of Óðinn, Loki and Hœnir, with the dwarf Hroðmarr and the cursed hoard of Andvari. The prose narration is mixed with stanzas having the characters acting. This section serves the compiler's purpose to link the story of the hoard of Andvari with the cycle of Sigurðr, because the story is put in the words of Reginn himself, son of the dwarf Hroðmarr and brother of Fáfnir, who killed their father and kept the cursed hoard for himself, refusing to share with Reginn. The events being narrated, serve the purpose of casting the prologue of the cycle of Sigurðr in an ancient, mythical past, that is then made a whole with the epic narrative through the character/narrator of Reginn. The dwarf recognises the valour and courage in the young Sigurðr (with multiple praise words), foretelling his glorious future, and becomes his foster father in str. 13-14.

"Kominn er hingat konr Sigmundar,
seggr inn snarráði, til sala várra;
móð hefir meira enn maðr gamall,
oc er mér fangs vón at frecom úlfi.

Ec mun fœða fólcdiarfan gram;

³⁰ According to the medieval model, he acquires *fortitudo* and *sapientia*, respectively (Haimerl 2013, 32). *Sapientia*, in particular, is a trait that he acquires in subsequent stages, even by trial and error, starting with the education with Reginn, through the dialogue with Fáfnir, up to the initiation about Runic lore by Sigrdrífa.

nú er Yngva konr með oss kominn;
síá mun ræsir ríctr und sólo,
þrymr um þll lōnd ørlōgsímo."³¹

Reginn forges for him the extraordinary sword, Gramr. After this, Sigurðr intends first to avenge his grandfather Eylimi, killed by the sons of Hundigr. He leads an expedition, by the sea, but they are caught in a storm. A man on a cliff asks to be taken on board, and Sigurðr accepts. As the stranger gets on the ship, the storm subsides and Sigurðr understands that the wanderer is much more than he seems to be. Then Sigurðr is instructed by Hnikarr, the wanderer, about omens of battle. The battle against Hundigr's sons is won and Sigurðr achieves his revenge. Once more we can see that the first action of a hero is fulfilling an old revenge on behalf of his family. In the last two lines of str. 26, Reginn celebrates once more his fosterling:

"[...] qngr er fremri, sá er fold ryði,
hilmis arfi, oc Hugin gladdi."³²

In *Fáfnismál*, the prose introduction leads us to the battleground. Reginn had followed his pupil there, but then withdrew and hid, out of sight. Sigurðr has dugged a trench in the ground, where Fáfnir would pass, and he finally stabs the dragon with his sword, from below. The preparation and the fight are concisely explained in prose by the compiler. The poem proper begins after the dragon has been stabbed to death. Fáfnir, after his ancient, selfish choice to keep the whole hoard of Andvari, had undergone a transformation into a venom-spitting dragon and wore the not better specified Helm of Terror as further defence, making his presence terrifying. So much so that only a hero in his youth could be brave enough to defeat such an aberrant monstrosity, and the heroic

³¹ "Sigmund's offspring has come here,
The decisive man, o our halls;
More courage he has than a mature man,
I expect winnings from a ravening wolf.

I must nurture the battle-brave prince;
Now Yngvi's offspring has come to us;
He will be the most powerful prince under the sun,
His fate-strands extend through all lands."

³² "[...] No one's more successful than the heir of the king,
Who reddened the earth and gave joy to the raven!"

Sigurðr can be seen as a glorification of youth as the age of expression of the vital vigour (Jakobsson 2010, 45).

There is a dialogue between the dying dragon and the young hero. Interestingly enough, Fáfnir tries to belittle Sigurðr, saying that with Sigmundr dead, he is bound to somebody else's rule, that he is not free, and that the treasure is cursed and will lead to death whoever possesses it. Sigurðr answers that he is free and not afraid of the curse, for every man must die, reinforcing Sigurðr's particular trait of acceptance of his own doomed destiny, despite being the greatest and mightiest of heroes.

It is also interesting to notice how the position of Sigurðr is remarked here as that of a hero who is not free, not sovereign. He is bound to other's authority, and it will be so even in the other poems, where he becomes an ally of Gunnar. Contrarily to Helgi, who is arguably the heroic epitome of the king in the Eddic tradition, Sigurðr is a "bound" hero, referred to both as commander, while being a subject to some higher authority. This position makes Sigurðr even more interesting, because he can be discussed through narration, from different points of view: that of commander, high in hierarchy, and that of subject, low in hierarchy, and his conduct according to honour and loyalty can be defined with greater depth: indeed, Sigurðr proves to be flawlessly loyal in any situation, to the point of (partly unconsciously) deceiving Brynhildr, which is exactly what triggers the social tragedy that will bring to his demise.

Fáfnir also says that Reginn is going to betray Sigurðr, but the youth does not trust his words. Finally, the dragon speaks of his greed and pride in taking alone the hoard and protecting it, while thinking to be the mightiest, with his venom and his Helm of Terror (an artefact capable of frightening whoever would look at it). But he never met anybody as valiant and resolute as Sigurðr, who wisely explains to Fáfnir that nobody can define themselves the mightiest with no confrontation with the others. Actually, here we should mention that, despite the courage of Sigurðr in deciding to face a dragon, his clash with the monster has very little of valiant, since it is basically an ambush. It is Sigurðr's clever strategy that availed him his triumph. After Fáfnir's death, Reginn reappears, taking pride in the glorious deed for having forged its instrument (the sword Gramr), while Sigurðr defends his position, for which a bold heart as his can achieve any task in any situation. After such discussion, Reginn carves Fáfnir's heart and tells Sigurðr to cook it while he sleeps. Sigurðr accidentally tastes the blood of the dragon from the cooked heart, and he

finds he can hear and understand the birds talking to each other, discovering Reginn's treacherous plan to kill him and take the whole cursed treasure for himself. After that, Sigurðr kills also Reginn and drinks the blood of both brothers. Thereafter the birds tell him to travel south to the court of Giúki, where a noble princess lives, while another bird foretells of a battle-maid, along the way. The prose concludes the poem referring that Sigurðr carried Fáfñir's rich hoard with him and he wore the Helm of Terror and a golden chainmail.

With these two poems, the courage and valour of Sigurðr are definitely proven and celebrated in their highest forms, up to the death of a dragon (even though not in a properly fair fight). It is also important how in these poems the courage of a vigorous (*hvatr*) man is more important than equipment and even of raw strength, as repeatedly stated by the young hero, in contrast with the opinion of Reginn, capable of overthrowing an apparently overwhelming foe, such as Fáfñir erroneously thought to be (Haimerl 2013, 42-43). Together with the prowess in battle comes another key factor, such as we have already seen previously in a heroic poem: a hoard, which is bound to cause terrible tragedies by virtue of its powerful curse. But such a curse is little more than the uttermost greed and selfishness, as I will show later in this chapter. The hoard is a key feature in *Vkv* and here in the series of Sigurðr and the Niflungar. However, it is remarkable that the Helgi cycle as it is presented here in the Codex presents no hoard or treasure, relevant to the story.

The role of Sigurðr as Dragonslayer and the outcomes of the event are meaningful of the role of the character. Indeed, if we take the Dragon as a symbol of a mighty, vicious enemy of the society, Sigurðr, his slayer, is the protector of the reality of men, with its social rules, and emerges as such as generous, in contrast with the avaricious Dragon. If we assume ambiguity in the figure of the hero (Evans 1985, 107), we can see indeed that the might of the hero has sinister recoils that attribute him the same power of being a threat as the Dragon has. The Helm of Terror, owned by the Dragon, and then explicitly taken by Sigurðr as part of the hoard (according to the compiler), could be a further symbol of this association with the hero, further confirmed by an assertion of Brynhildr in *Br*, str.8-9:

Þá qvað þat Brynhildr, Buðla dóttir:
"Vel scolot nióta vápna oc landa;
einn myndi Sigurðr ǫllo ráða,
ef hann lengr litlo lífi heldi.

Væria þat sœmt, at hann svá réði
Giúca arfi oc Gota mengi,
er hann fimm sono at fólcræði,
gunnar fúsa, getna hafði."³³

However, this menace of Sigurðr stays as potential, and is never expressed. Indeed, Sigurðr never exert his power against anyone else, within the social group he lives in. Furthermore, despite his relevance and might, he is always loyal to Gunnar and his family, and constantly responds as an honourable subject would. The double dimension of Sigurðr as a leader, an outstanding warrior and a subject, projects him further in that role of the antagonist of the Dragon, the epitome of the man within a clan, an ambiguous threat by means of his unparalleled power, but never actualised, which is possibly what distinguishes the hero from the Dragon.³⁴

Sigrdrífomál (Sd) describes the encounter between Sigurðr and Sigrdrífa, (a Valkyrie who is identified with Brynhildr in the subsequent poems). He finds her spellbound into slumber, chained within her armour and surrounded by a wall of flames. Sigurðr crosses the flames riding Grani and cuts away the armour from the battle-maid, and she wakes up from her magical slumber. As a reward, Sigrdrífa instructs the young hero about runes of power and wisdom and how to apply them, in a series of descriptive stanzas deprived of their narrative power. In the process, Sigurðr swears loyalty to the

³³ Then said Brynhild, Budli's daughter:
"Well may you enjoy the weapons and lands!
Sigurd alone would have had control of all,
If a little longer he'd kept his life.

It wouldn't have been fitting that he should have ruled
Over the inheritance if Giuki and all the hosts of Goths,
When he had fathered five sons,
Eager in battle, to rule the people."

³⁴ and possibly an expression of Christological traits in Sigurðr.

Valkyrie, even knowing that such an allegiance is ill-fated, for he was not made to be a coward (str. 21).

"Munca ec flœia, þótt mic feigan vitir,
emca ec með bleyði borinn;
ástráð þín ec vil qll hafa,
svá lengi sem ec lifi."³⁵

Once more we are pointed out how Sigurðr bravely accepts his destiny, whatever that is, and even eagerly run towards it, with no hesitation.

After *Sigrdrífomál* (actually before its end), the Codex Regius has an interruption of 8 missing leaves, arguably containing more details about how Sigurðr married Guðrún and how Gunnar, Guðrún's brother, managed to conquer Brynhildr with sorcery and Sigurðr's help. We can only have a hint of this in *Grípisspá*. After the lost leaves in the Codex, the narration resumes at the aftermath of Sigurðr's murder. He appears again in the *Sigurðarqviða in scamma*, where the scene of his murder is described. It is an ambush by Guthormr, which leaves Sigurðr unbeaten in a real fight. Moreover, the agonising Sigurðr is able to kill the vile Guthormr, achieving revenge by himself. However tragic, the death of Sigurðr does not diminish his valour and his achievements. On the other hand, despite tragedy permeating all these poems, much beyond the character of Sigurðr, a matter of taste and arguably a necessity of dramatic performance to be effective, a conception of the existence itself as tragic, more than a trait of heroism, the concretion of it with the heroism of Sigurðr is inextricable, already in Medieval times. Then, the heroism of Sigurðr, initiated by his slaying of the Dragon, and his demise provoked by the curse of the hoard that is inevitably attached to the dragonslaying, is inevitably self-destructive, necessarily so (Evans 1985, 107). However, the distinction between necessarily self-destructing heroism and heroism in self-destruction is crucially important in the very definition and understanding of a hero, as I will argue in the next chapters.

³⁵ " I will not flee, even if you know I am doomed
I was not born a coward;
Your loving advice I want in its entirety,
As long as I live."

For the purposes of our synthetic view, and compared with Helgi, at the underlying level we can conceive Sigurðr as the epitome of the champion, consistently brave and valorous, superior to any other warrior and commander, but at the same time, and equally importantly, he is consistently loyal to his superiors.

The main male characters of the post-Sigurðr poems are Atli, Gunnar and Hǫgni, Hamðir and Sǫrli (sons of Guðrún and king Jonakr). Despite the tragic death of Sigurðr and the unfortunate events that led to it, he is a successful character in his own way. We can define Sigurðr as a bright hero. His spirit and his adventures always improve his heroic aura, the glory of the legendary prince. We could say that since *Voldundarqviða*, in the Codex Regius, we assist to a sort of *crescendo*, where the main character or the hero, is increasingly bright in his path to glory. Helgi and Sigurðr all achieve and have success in most of their endeavours. This is not necessarily an intentional feature of the manuscript, but interestingly enough, after Sigurðr, we face a change and arguably a decline of the heroic figures, for despite their valour and their courage, they are never successful, decadent characters in their own way and self-destructive. Yet, some of them can reach glory.

3.4. Atli

I am here considering Atli exclusively as the Hunnish warlord, keeping him distinct from the Atli who is Helgi's lieutenant, since starkly distinct they are in their role and actions, to the point that one can hardly conceive them as the same character at all.

The son and heir of Buðli is certainly a ruthless character, but there is no particular valour or courage in him as he appears in the poems, his main attribute being his leadership of the most fearful army of the time, the Huns. He is ruthless in allowing the marriage of Brynhildr, allegedly charmed by Sigurðr's hoard, as referred by Brynhildr in *Gðr*, as he is ruthless in accepting Guðrún as wife, as compensation for the lost sister, as he is ruthless when he organises the ambush against Gunnar and Hǫgni, both for their treasure (again the cursed hoard) and to vindicate Oddrún, his second sister, becoming the shameless lover of Gunnar, as it is narrated in the *Oddrúnargrátr*. The ambush and the slaughter of the Niflungar is brutal, but it is of no avail in order to gain the treasure, which rests abandoned in the waters of the river Rhine, as Gunnar reveals in the *Atlaqviða in grænlenzca* (str. 27). In *Am* Atli is referred to as *rǫsgr* (vigorous, brave, str. 54, 90),

but the textual renown he gains across the poems is considerably inferior to that of the other characters. Atli shares the same term with the Niflungar (specifically, *rǫscr* is used by Högni in str.60, to define his own undertaking after the battle). While he is presented as a grim, mighty warrior in ch. 26 of the *VS*:

Atli var grimmr mikill ok svartr ok þó tíguligr inn mesti hermaðr.

However, these elements are not as recurring as for the other characters, and the hyperbolic style is scarcely applied to Atli, even though Atli plays a key role after the demise of the son of Sigmundur. The words we find here possibly hint of a past or parallel tradition where Atli's role was different or are anyway functional in depicting his magnitude as a character, arguably meant to define his power as an enemy, contributing to the dramatic, tragic undertakings of the Niflungar and their sister³⁶. The few relevance words attributed to Atli are also greatly counterbalanced by his role as overbearing king, dishonourable, because of greed and lust for power, against his loyal allies. In both *Akv* and *Am* Atli is explicitly accused for his betrayal, from a point of view which can be assimilated as very close to that of the main focus of the poem (which is definitely not Atli, despite the title), first by Guðrún who uses curses to accuse him in *Akv*, str. 30.

"Svá gangi þér, Atli, sem þú við Gunnar áttir
eiða opt um svarða oc ár of nefnda,
at sól inni suðrhǫllo oc at Sigtýs bergi,
hǫlqvi hvílbeðiar oc at hringi Ullar."³⁷

While that is a curse based on honour, which Atli is correctly accused of not upholding, the narrator himself in *Am* gives a very practical explanation, for which Atli damaged himself in betraying his allies, str. 1-2.

³⁶ See also §4 below for the role of tragedy in the expression of heroism and glory.

³⁷ "May it so befall you, Atli, as you swore to Gunnar,
Oaths you often gave and pledged early:
By the sun curving to the south and Victory-god's mountain,
By the marriage-bed horse and by Ull's ring."

Frétt hefir ǫld ófo, þá er endr um gorðo
seggir samkundo, sú var nýtt fæstom;
œxto einmæli, yggst var þeim síðan,
oc iþ sama sonom Giúca, er vóro sannráðnir.

Scop œxto scioldunga - scyldoat feigir -,
illa réz Atla, átti hann þó hyggio;
feldi stoð stóra, stríddi sér harðla,
af bragði boð sendi, at qvæmi brát mágar.³⁸

There is also no glory for the Huns as a group, since they heavily outnumber their hosts who are even unprepared for the ambush, even though 'Hunnish' is used at times as an epithet or referred to as an ethnic group to designate might, as in *Ghv* (see also below).

For all these reasons, the role of Atli can be conceived as that of the archetypical villain, commander of an overwhelming horde and ruthless leader, the overarching enemy against which the other (heroic) characters must always withstand and confront, so powerful as to gain his own (limited) share of praise and renown, but also so greedy for power as to attract much censure, contempt and even punishment.

3.5. The Niflungar: Gunnar and Högni

Gunnar and Högni are often overshadowed by the figure of Sigurðr, also because they fail to be honourable, in betraying their mightiest ally, bound to them by marriage and blood-oaths. Similarly to Atli, they are explicitly accused of this. In *Br*, accusations are reported by women, first Guðrún in str. 11, who curses Gunnar and threatens the necessity of vengeance.

³⁸ People have heard of the enmity which happened once,
When men met in counsel together, of benefit to very few;
They talked privately together, terror came of it afterward,
For them and for the sons of Giuki, who were utterly betrayed.

They brought the princes' fate to culmination – they should not have been doomed –
Atli was ill-advised, even though he had cunning;
He brought down a great buttress, injured himself terribly,
A hasty message he sent that his in-laws should come quickly.

"Mioc mælir þú miclar firnar;
gramir hafi Gunnar, gøtvað Sigurðar!
heiptgiarns hugar hefnt scal verða."³⁹

And then by Brynhildr, who reveals her deception, in declaring Sigurðr loyal, while Gunnar is the only oath-breaker, and because of this, she foreshadows the demise of the Niflungar, as in str. 16, implying the importance of honour as a trait that grants a lineage and prosperity, and the lack failure to uphold one's honour implies a condemnation that goes beyond the jurisdiction of law.

"[...] enn þú, gramr, riðir, glaums andvani,
fiotri fatlaðr í fiánda lið.

Svá mun ǫll yðor ætt Niflunga
afli gengin: eroð eiðrofa."⁴⁰

The ruin of the whole lineage as consequence of betrayal of the word given is spoken out also in other poems, again by Guðrún in *Gðr*, str. 21, implying that the theme is common at least in literature and narration, and suggesting the deep value of honour, as something that pre-dates the rule of law.

"[...] Svá ér um lýða landi eyðit,
sem ér um unnoð eiða svarða;
mana þú, Gunnarr, gullz um nióta,

³⁹ "Many abominable words you've said;
May fiends take Gunnar, Sigurd's gravedigger!
Thoughts bent on wickedness shall be revenged."

⁴⁰ "[...] And you, lord, were riding, bereft of happiness,
With chains you were fettered among a troop of foes.
So from all of you of the Niflung line
Your strength will pass away: you are oath-breakers!"

þeir muno þér baugar at bana verða,
er þú Sigurði svarðir eiða. [...]"⁴¹

That is, the Niflungar are censured across various poems and by various characters, for their deception of Brynhildr first and their betrayal of Sigurðr next. However, they also manage to prove themselves brave and valorous, Högni in defeating several enemies and withstanding the carving out of his heart while yet alive, Gunnar in bravely proving his skills in playing his lyre, enchanting the serpents of the pit through his music when made unable to do anything else. These events happen during their demise against the Huns of Atli, and avails the brothers praise and glory, explicitly granted by the poets/narrators of the *Atlaqviða* (*Akv*) and the *Atlamál* (*Am*): the Niflungar are complex characters and have a duplicitous valence.

In *Akv*, the word *fræcn* (brave, intrepid) is repeatedly used both by the poet and by the characters, as an epithet referred to the brothers (str. 13, 19, 20, 23, 25, 31), while compounds made with *harð* (str. 13, 38) are used with a similar connotation to define their hardness and resolution. Once more, it should be remarked that epithets are often products of cultural and narrative sedimentation in time, about how a character is understood and symbolised, instead of a proper description or judgement, yet they do convey the meaning they hold, and in this case, we can see how they find full expression in the narrative events. Moreover, Gunnar is reportedly acting as a king should, when he communicates to the court his decision to accept Atli's invitation (str. 9-10).

qvaddi þá Gunnarr, sem konungr scyldi,
mærr, í mioðranni, af móði stórom:

"Rístu nú, Fiornir, láttu á flet vaða
greppa gullscálir með gumna hǫndom! [...]"⁴²

⁴¹ "So your people and land will be laid waste,
On your account, for the oaths you swore;
Gunnar, you won't get good of the gold,
The rings will be the death of you,
for you swore oaths to Sigurd."

⁴² Gunnar then said, as a king ought to,
Splendid in his mead-hall, with great spirit:

The fitting behaviour of Gunnar could be understood either as formally fitting, that is a king speaking with regal posture (*mærr*) in front of his guests, or because of the decision to accept the invitation of an ally.

Indeed, no clear explanation is given both in *Akv* and in *Am* for Gunnar accepting the invitation, and we are left to assume that he was somehow bound to duty in accepting the invitation of a powerful king who was also his brother-in-law and ally. In the *VS*, the decision is taken after Gunnar gets very drunk and he is promised power while Atli is reportedly old and weak. Importantly, inevitable destiny is taken into account (ch. 35).

Nú var bæði at Gunnarr var mjök drukkinn, en boðit mikit ríki, mátti ok eigi við sköpum vinna,⁴³

However, Gunnar and Högni are aware of the hidden dangers of such a decision, for the invitation sounds dubious to them for various reasons (str. 6-11) and later Guðrún remarks that they should have at least prepared themselves for battle, and in that case, even if falling in an ambush, they'd have been victorious, as the daughter of Giúki tells Gunnar in strophe 16, expressing the climax of the subplot of the *Niflungar*, once they arrive in Atli's domains:

"[...] Betr hefðir þú, bróðir, at þú í brynio færir,
sem hiálmom aringreypom, at síá heim Atla;
sætir þú í sǫðlom sólheiða daga,
nái nauðfólva létir nornir gráta,
Húna scialdmeyiar hervi kannu,
enn Atla siálfan létir þú í ormgarð koma; [...]"⁴⁴

Rise up now, Fiornir, send the warriors' golden goblets
Passing around the hall from hand to hand! [...]"

⁴³ Now it happened that Gunnar was very drunk, and also that great power had been offered, nor could he fight against destiny.

⁴⁴ "[...] it would have been better, brother, if you'd come in a corslet,
With those helmets grouped round the hearth, to see Atli's home;
If you'd sat in the saddle all through sun-bright days,
Made the norns weep at the pallid corpses,

This suggests that their decisions are not only disastrous, but also recklessly planned (or not planned at all), with no wise preparation in order to minimise the foreshadowed dangers. Yet, it would have been cowardly or disrespectful to accept a formally friendly invitation by a superior or an ally and go prepared for war. Hence, they could have hardly done differently, while following the social norms. This contributes in maintaining intact their honour. Their ill-fated decisions do not taint their valour, and even if their conduct is utterly ill-fated, their ensuing praiseworthy behaviour seems not to lose any value. Their glory seems to be unaffected by their recklessness.

The recklessness of the Niflungar seems to be a common trait of theirs, since it is expressed also in *Am* and the dramatic effect is there made even more poignant, by the various omens and warnings against their ride at Atli's court. In this poem, the position of the narrator on the matter of Atli's treachery is made explicit at strophe 7, when he refers that the deceit was obvious:

Sýn vas svipvísi, ef þeir sín gæði⁴⁵

And this was so even before they heard the omens by their wives, of which they claim they would not be afraid (str. 13) or that they cannot retire their position, now that they have given their word (str. 29) - again being bound by honour. In *Am*, the climax of the Niflungar is reached when Guðrún, speaking wisely (str. 48), fails to convince the two parts to make peace: nobody accepts, including the Niflungar who stand no chances to survive, suggesting once more that their decisions are exclusively made upon criteria of honour – and nothing else. The battle rages and the endeavour undertaken by the Giúcingus is such that nothing equals it (str. 52):

Þjörko þar gorðo, Þęiri vas við brugðit,
 Þat brá um alt annat, er unno born Giúca;⁴⁶

Taught Hun shield-maidens how to haul a harrow,
 And Atli himself you could have put in the snake-pit; [...]"

⁴⁵ The deceptive thought was clear if they'd been on their guard;

⁴⁶ A battle they fought there for which they were famous;
 That surpassed all others, what the children of Giuki achieved;

The battle itself assumes exceptional attributes, by lasting for days and being brutally bloody (str. 52-53). Notwithstanding the hyperbolic style, the exceptional valour of the *Giúkungs* as it is conveyed here is undeniable. As in *Akv*, they are defeated while proving their courage and valour, but in *Am* we are given more details of their demise, with *Högni* taunting his enemies to carve out his heart, behaving as few would ('gerva svá færi', str. 64); *Gunnar's* tune with the lyre being so sublime that women and men alike shed tears as they hear it and beams burst asunder (str. 66). In both cases, their valour lived till the last moment (str. 67):

Léto þeir á læsti lifa íþróttu.⁴⁷

It seems that valour and courage can overcome even the worst defeat, if those traits are such that they last throughout death. The very last strophe of *Am* is a masterful narrative hyperbole, at once naming happy whoever can father children as *Giúki* did and referring that the deeds of the *Giúcung*s will endure in songs, as long as there is someone who listens (str. 105):

Sæll er hværr síðan, er slíct getr fœða
 ióð at afreki sems ól *Giúki*;
 lifa mun þat eftir á landi hverio,
 Þeira þrámaeli, hvargi er þjóð heyrir.⁴⁸

This strophe is remarkable for various reasons. It is not a narrative act, since it explicitly breaks the fourth wall, addressing directly to the audience. We see here that the *Niflungar* and their sister are ultimately praised, independently of their defeat, their strife staying as material for future narration. Even assuming that the primary focus of this strophe is a celebration of the narration itself, the story of the children of *Giúki* is

⁴⁷ they kept alive their prowess right 'til the end

⁴⁸ Fortunate is any man who afterwards can father
 Such heroic children as *Giuki* fathered.
 After them in every land
 Their defiance lives on wherever people hear it.

undeniably the material that makes it so important and valuable, hence their praise cannot be merely formal. They are only successful in proving their traits, and even failure can be redeemed, as long as those very traits, valour and courage, are exceptionally made to survive and expressed till the least breath. Laughing in the face of the uttermost pain and playing sublime chords have indeed nothing to do with successful warfare, which hints that glory is a status that can be reached with other means other than exceptional warlike achievements, as is the case for Helgi and Sigurðr. Even more, Gunnar's highest expression of valour is in playing the lyre, which is arguably the farthest thing from warfare and combat that one could normally conceive. Yet, his death is deemed as valiant in both poems, possibly reflecting the importance of art, including the activity of poets, skalds and musicians, on par with that of war. Interestingly enough, Gunnar's sublime song could even be understood as the symbol of a possible transcendence, from physical endeavour to spiritual glory, constituting a further development of glory and heroism (within the Codex) from success in warfare to extraordinary endurance in a dramatic tragedy.

Confronted with the cycle of Helgi, which involves battles between full armies and populations, we can see how both poems *Akv* and *Am*, arguably produced independently (Meli 2005), are deprived of their epic dimension, having merged and symbolised the whole fall of the Burgundian kingdom with the downfall of the Niflungar and their close retainers, the last members of the ruling dynasty of that population, and the struggle reduced to a battle which is defined with hyperbolic traits, but is fought between bands of champions counting barely over some twenty in total. The process of localisation is clear even between *Akv* and *Am*, where in the latter the setting related to allegedly full kingdoms are described as farmsteads instead of courts, castles and encampments as in the former, and it is even more evident if indeed compared with the Helgi cycle where battles are fought between full armies gathered from full tribes, clans and kingdoms.

It should be noted that the Niflungar are responsible for their defeat, but fate is ultimately called upon, directly by the poets, to explain why they acted that way (see below for the discussion about fate in Eddic poetry), for they behave exclusively according to honour and social duty, refusing to act or even provide for their safety every time they are given the chance. Yet, even with this flaw made clear in the narration, the

glory they achieve is untainted. Actually, the last strophe of *Am* clears any doubt about it and suggests that the personal flaws of theirs, which sealed their tragedy, contribute to and define their heroism, marking the difference from the heroism of Helgi and Sigurðr, while being equally revered.

Or, we should assume that the praise in the last strophe is a sophisticated antiphrasis, meaning the exact contrary of what it should (that no father should be happy to have such children as Giúki had), by virtue of the tragedy that lies underneath. Yet the exceptionality of those endeavours, as they are narrated, together with the valour involved, persists. Then we should understand the whole poem as a very clever mixture or an inextricable thread of glorious deeds and ill-fated choices, of how honour and valour can be upheld through courage and made eternal in poems at the expense of one's life and happiness – with no definitive hint of solution, tragedy as the inevitable product and the source altogether of praiseworthy heroism.

A further layer should be considered, between the narrative matter and our understanding of it, which is the diegetic level, celebrated *per se* in the two last lines of the last strophe (see above). It is evident how important these dramatic events are, in order to provide valuable material for the poems. So much so that a moral judgement by the poet would be far from granted, with the act of producing a dramatic narration being the real focus. However, any narration must draw upon some material that has substance of its own. Even if the poets were building a dramatic climax to fascinate the audience, we can hardly think that such effects could be achieved without being based on a common background and understanding of the narrated events, that is, the story. In other words, even assuming a shift of focus from the story, towards the drama itself, the significance of those events is yet irreducible to a meaningless subject.

Hence, even with this degree of opacity and complexity, we can infer that the poets of both *Akv* and *Am* take no definite position towards the flaws within the honourable and praiseworthy conduct of the Niflungar. Even if some (in the audience) could understand it so as to reach a renewed awareness on the matter of acting wisely, we are made to believe that no blame should be implied against the characters for their tragedy, while the praise they are granted, even though under the form of hyperbole, is undeniable.

The glorious side of the heroism of the Niflungar is a complex function that includes glory and recklessness, courage and defeat, but those variables are not conveyed, and possibly not conceived, as opposites that diminish each other. In fact, everything contributes to the absolute value of their glorious heroism.

Yet they are flawed characters, for they acted dishonourably or at least very selfishly against their loyal champion, Sigurðr. Their being problematic is what distinguishes them from the previous characters.

3.6. The sons of Guðrún: Hamðir and Sqrli

The story of Hamðir and Sqrli largely echoes the events between the Huns and the Burgundians. The sons of Guðrún play their own heroic part, as narrated in *Guðrúnarhvot* (*Ghv*) and in *Hamðismál* (*Hm*). In her lust for vengeance, out of her increasingly deep misfortune and grief, Guðrún convinces her sons to go and avenge the execution of their half-sister, Svanhildr, against Jormunrekr. She does so while knowing that the risks implied in such a mission are very high. In both poems, they are compelled by their mother who evokes the necessity of vengeance for honour, and she compares them with her brave brothers, calling them lazy and vain against their dutiful vengeance, and inferior to the kings of the people. Guðrún says that they would set for vengeance, if they had the spirit of her brothers or the hard mind of the kings of the Huns (and here the Hunnish ethnicity is used interestingly as an epithet bearing praise), as in *Ghv*, str. 3):

"[...] ef iþ móð ættið minna bræðra
eða harðan hug Húnkonunga."⁴⁹

Hamðir, repeatedly called *inn hugomstóri* (the great-minded) in both poems, answers that his mother didn't praise her brothers so much, when they killed her first husband. In *Hm*, Hamðir also reproaches her mother for having killed her own children by Atli, blinded by her lust for revenge, adding that revenge should not bring damage to oneself, (implying that children are strictly part of the kin group for a mother), as in str. 8:

⁴⁹ "[...] if you had the temperament of my brothers
Or the fierce spirit of the Hunnish kings."

"[...] Atla þóttiz þú stríða at Erps morði
 oc at Eitils aldragi, þat var þér enn verra;
 svá scyldi hverr qðrom veria til aldraga
 sverði sárbeito, at sér né stríddit."⁵⁰

Then Sqrli, *svinna hafði hann hyggio* (he had a wise mind, str. 9), seals the discussion, saying that words are of no avail, and that he and his brother stand there *feigir* (doomed, str. 10) by the call to arms of her mother, who should set to mourn for the loss of her sons. They bravely and dramatically decide to go towards their apparently inevitable destiny, imposed to them by their mother by invoking the absolute necessity of vengeance because of honour. They respond the call similarly to how dutiful soldiers obey the commands of their leader, loyalty unrestrained, doomed by reckless orders. In this poem, honour is not only held as a most important value, but as an essential value, that must be pursued at all costs. Once more, this is a magnification of str. 76-77 of *Hav*.

Moreover, the theme of honour is so pervasive as to obscure the worst mistakes towards the achievement of renown. Indeed, even more similarly to their uncles, Hamðir and Sqrli also commit an unforgiving mistake in killing their half-brother Erpr along the way, for futile reasons, instead of taking him with them for their endeavour. They fight valiantly against innumerable foes, they cut hands and feet to Jormunrekr, yet they are overwhelmed by the soldiers of the king. Hamðir and Sqrli realise too late that they would have killed Jormunrekr if Erpr, battle-ready, was still alive and with them (str. 28)

"Af væri nú haufuð, ef Erpr lifði,
 bróðir occarr inn bōðfræcni, er við á braut vágom,
 verr inn vígfræcni - hvōttomc at dísir -,
 gumi inn gunnhelgi -gorðomz at vígi -. [...]"⁵¹

⁵⁰ "[...] Atli you intended to hurt by Erp's death
 And by the loss of Eitil, but it was even worse for you;
 Every one should bring about death for others,
 With a painfully biting sword, so that he does not harm himself."
⁵¹ "Off his head would be now, if Erp were alive,
 Our brother bold in battle, whom we killed on the road,
 The man so fierce in war – the disir drove us to do it -
 The man inviolate in fighting – they spurred us to slaughter. [...]"

Judgement for their own recklessness comes from their own words in str. 27, when the full irony of Hamðir's epithet, great-minded, emerges in its full tragic nature, for sensible he'd have been, if he was wise, lack of common sense being a great flaw for a man.

"Hug hefðir þú, Hamðir, ef þú hefðir hyggiandi;
mikils er á mann hvern vant, er manvitz er."⁵²

However, even in their demise, they attribute themselves great glory for their endeavour against so many men, soothing themselves, for none can escape their fate (once more, as everywhere else in the Edda, being made not directly or entirely responsible for their actions), as in str. 30.

"[...] Vel hofom við vegit, stöndom á val Gotna,
ofan, eggmóðom, sem ernir á qvisti;
góðs hofom tírar fengið, þott scylim nú eða í gær deya,
qveldlífir maðr ecci eptir qvið norna."⁵³

The similitude with eagles (*ernir*) is remarkable, in conveying a powerful image about the yet defeated brothers. Once more, the glorious fighters die separated from each other, suggesting the solitude of the reckless and failing avengers (Clark 2005, 180). Once more, their heroism is in practice of no avail, for they fail, if not for gaining a self-defined glory as expressed in strophe 30. Yet, glory it is, and even their personal mistakes and flaws are reported as a fault of destiny, suggesting that they had no substantial responsibility in their demise, and even if they had, their glory is untainted, allegedly because of their uncompromising pursue of honour, through valour and courage, against all odds. On the other hand, the reproach of Sqrli cannot be overlooked, leaving room for

⁵² "You'd have had a mind, Hamdir, if you had some wits;
Much is lacking in a man when he lacks common sense."

⁵³ "[...] We have fought well, we stand on Goth corpses,
Weary from the sword-edge like eagles on a branch;
We have won great glory if we die now or yesterday,
No man outlasts the evening after the norms have given their verdict."

a complex (and various, depending on subjectivity) understanding of their behaviour by the audience. Yet their errors contribute to their tragedy, while their valour and courage contribute to their glory, both increasing their heroic aura.

However, in the *VS* their glorious aura is reduced, compared with the poems and the other characters within the saga, as their valour is remarked just once and briefly, and, particularly, with no hyperbole:

Nú sækja menn at þeim, en þeir vörðusk vel ok drengiliga ok urðu mǫrgum manni at skaða⁵⁴

This shift in the importance given to the sons of Guðrún is dubious at best. On one hand, they are not of the line of the *Vǫlsungar*, which is the main theme of the *VS*, while the *Codex Regius* seems to be a more heterogeneous collection; on the other, it seems that according to the *VS* their heroism is somewhat less praiseworthy, in particular compared to that of the children of *Giúki* in the same text, who are equally tragic in their heroism yet worthy of more relevance within the saga itself. Factors could be many to account for this phenomenon, including the prose nature of *VS*, as well as its slightly different focus, yet the feat of the two young brothers is still remarkable, as they choose to face the whole court of a powerful king by themselves and elliptical as the scene of the fight is in the saga, they are the protagonists of the chapters they appear in, and they appear in the role of valorous defenders of the honour of their family. Their heroism and the glory they gain is yet coherent through the different texts, and no elements should make us think that one text denies the others.

At the underlying level, *Hamðir* and *Sqrli* can be conceived in a very similar way to their uncles, *Gunnar* and *Hǫgni*, brave and recklessly valorous, but also exceedingly proud, so much as to being somehow responsible of their own yet glorious demise.

⁵⁴ "They were now attacked. And they defended themselves valiantly and well, and were the death of many a man."

3.7. Sigrún/Sváva

Following the compiler's perspective, I am considering Sváva and Sigrún as reincarnations of the same character,⁵⁵ or, from our modern analytical point of view, as expressions of what, at the times of the Codex, were arguably perceived as the same underlying subject. We have previously seen the role of Sigrún and Sváva in function of Helgi in the Helgi cycle. She is a key character in the evolution of the male hero, since she is the cause for him to undertake the battles against her family in *HH* and *HH.II*, as well as the trigger for the young Helgi Hjorvardsson to follow his destiny. It is interesting to notice how love (for and by Helgi) here functions as a trigger for the hero and his whole armies, causing so many deaths – just for the love of a couple. However, it is not just about love, but also a challenge of honour and courage posed to Helgi by the Valkyrie, with an inherent goal of power.

On the other hand, the Valkyrie (as Sigrún) is also ready to disown and lose her whole family in order to pursue her love. This, indeed, is not so surprising if we consider that she had been promised against her will, and to a man that she deems unsuitable or even dishonourable to her; but she was indeed subverting the social duties imposed by her father and family, which is an exceptional feature, for a female character as we find them in the Codex. Feature that is probably tempered in the narrative perspective by the fact that she was looking for the protection and love of the protagonist. Even more prominent characters, as we will see below, are bound to face tragedy when trying to pursue their own will against the social bonds forced upon them. In the case of Sigrún, the rebellion still requires the intervention of a male character, but it is successful at least in *HH*, as well as in the *VS*; not so much in *HH.II*, as her successful marriage with Helgi still has a most tragic backlash through her brother Dagr.

Sigrún also presents some contradiction in her capability to take action. Indeed, as a Valkyrie she can protect Helgi and his armies in their endeavours – but notably, never with active feats of strength proper, possibly with magic and runes of power. However, when Dagr, her brother, assassinates Helgi, and Dagr offers his sister Sigrún the wergild for the death of Helgi, in the form of half his lands, she refuses, maddened by the loss of

⁵⁵ The fact that the compiler explicitly introduces reincarnation from one character to the other rules out any problematicity of the subject, at the times of his writing. That is, reincarnation in legendary tales was arguably not seen as in contrast with Christian theological conceptions.

the man, the warrior and the hero she loved so much; yet, she is unable to do anything except than cursing her own brother – who is surprised and considers the woman to be out of her mind, since his action, although blamed upon Óðinn, killed her husband but also avenged their family, following the common code of honour as we have seen represented elsewhere in the Codex and the Helgi poems themselves.

Either way, her presence is portrayed as that of a passive or secondary character, whose self-assertion is limited to her independence in choosing her allegiance as wife, despite her previous status as a powerful Valkyrie. Most importantly, even when assisting Helgi during his travels and battles, her valour is never directly portrayed, nor is she ever glorified, while Helgi is. Her figure is ultimately bound to that of her husband, Helgi, to the point of dying of anguish out of loyalty and love for him, as in *HH.II*. Sigrún suggests that the heroic role of women, their space of action, is strictly bound to that of their families, and ultimately to men.

3.8. Sigrdrífa/Brynhildr

Similarly to Sigrún/Svava, Brynhildr is both a Valkyrie and a human being, daughter of Buðli and sister of Atli. Brynhildr is a pivotal character in more than a poem, she occupies a relevant part of the stories, yet she is denoted by no particular epithets, nor is she ever marked by hyperboles. This suggests that she was conceived as a main character, with supernatural and exceptional traits, but not a heroine; at least by the various authors of the poems, but arguably for the whole Norse culture in Medieval times.

It should be noted that the sequence regarding the early life of Brynhildr is not coherent across the poems, in particular, her encounter with the youngest son of Sigmundr happens under various circumstances, in each different poem. *VS* attempts to synthesise the different versions by enacting two different encounters between the two, and two promises of marriage – with poor results, in terms of narrative consistency. The tradition about Brynhildr had not reached a widespread, coherent rationalisation, at the time of its translation into literature, possibly also because of the past nature of early life, even in narrative terms, that is, she enters the narrative sequence after her early life already developed, and was arguably only reconstructed by each author, according to common elements.

She is first presented in the prophecy of Grípir, the *Grípisspá*. It is the only poem where we find a fair number of epithets about Brynhildr. We can find *harðugðict man* (fierce-minded woman, str. 27), *horsca Heimis fóstro* (wise fosterling of Heimir, str. 31), *morrar meyar* (splendid woman, str. 36), *framlundaða* (high-minded, str. 39), *lofsæl kona* (praiseworthy woman, str. 48), *ríc brúðr* (powerful lady, str. 49). However, *Grp* is a poem with a high frequency of epithets for all the characters mentioned there, the dialogue being highly formalised and ritualised. Such a fact diminishes the importance of the epithets given here to Brynhildr (as well as to the other characters mentioned here). Yet, the relevance of the character is undeniable, and it should be noted that in *Grp*, as well as in all the poems, Brynhildr is treated as a very noble character, possibly excessively proud, but also always a victim of the fate and of the treachery of others. Moreover, those epithets refer to how the character is initially introduced in the story, before the events develop in tragedy, and it is a trait of Brynhildr to enter the story as a noble woman, later synthesised in her past as Valkyrie. In fact, she enters the Eddic scene in *Sigrdrífomál*, as Sigrdrífa (identified with Brynhildr, in the *Helreið Brynhildar*), but we are told of her past, before she is cast into slumber by Óðinn, in the following poems, namely *Gðr* (25-27), *Sg* (34-40), *Hlr* (6-11).⁵⁶

In *Gðr*, she explains that Atli is the only responsible for the tragedy of the son of Sigmundr, by means of the sight of the (cursed) hoard of Andvari. In *Sg*, we find further explanation of this in, since we are told that she desired to marry no man, nor did she need it, for she was rich enough. However, when Sigurðr rode with the hoard to the court of Atli, her brother promised to Brynhildr, his sister, that he would not share any gold with her, if she married, and he started to administrate her share (str. 36). At that point, Brynhildr resolves to become a Valkyrie (str. 37) and gain renown as a warrior. However, she was still willing to gain gold, but from nobody else than the son of Sigmundr, and she promises herself to him. Interestingly, in this poem no further mention is made of her punishment and counter-vow to Óðinn about her marriage.

⁵⁶ It is my argument, as I will develop below, that the valorous past of Brynhildr serves the only purpose to introduce the character as a very noble one, possibly the noblest woman; not relevant to suggest a valorous depiction and judgement of the character, who, within the frame of the drama, is consistently bound to speech acts. In the context of performance, Brynhildr appeared honourable, noble, but the lack of praise and glory for her, despite her past as Valkyrie, can only be fully accounted for if we indeed consider her past as background material.

The desire of fame and gold can be read as a masculine side of the personality of Brynhildr, as well as a more general desire to find her own place in the society, on par and possibly in conflict with other men. This brings her quite far from the path of other women, even those of noble birth, represented by marriage. However, ironically or not, this obsession for gold and renown, a remarkable expression of individuality, subdues her back to the machine of the patriarchy, bound to honour, power and gold, to be attributed and received by other men. Despite her will and vow to accept them only by the man whom she deems worthy, she ends up being a victim of an unwilling marriage, the social institution that possibly better represents the power and predominance of men in Eddic poems, and arguably in Viking and Medieval Age Norse society.

In the *Helreið Brynhildar*, Brynhildr is riding to Hel after death, and in a scornful dialogue with a giantess who accuses her, Brynhildr recounts of her own life. Here we can have a better glimpse of her past as a warrior maiden, and we are even hinted that she gained renown independently of her nobility; but never directly of her battles, if not for the possible allusion to blood of men in the words of the giantess in the last line of str.2.

"[...] mild, af hǫndom mannz blóð þvegit." ⁵⁷

The same strophe also displays one of the few epithets attributed to Brynhildr, *Vár gullz* (gold-goddess, with unclear connotation, possibly to her previous dispersion of gold, while yet alive but agonising). We are also told of her initiation as a Valkyrie, but we find that the later oath by Brynhildr about marriage is part of the punishment commanded by Óðinn, with the addition that only the man who owns the hoard of Fáfñir would be able to cross the wall of lights (str. 9-10). Despite the clear summary of the past of Brynhildr, we are not given any representation of her warring endeavours and feats, and in the recounting of her allegedly glorious past there is no room for epithets. The same past is also always narrated by the character herself, never by a narrator. If we conceive these poems as the texts of performances, the past of Brynhildr would be narrated (by herself) but never played out, and no actor or narrator would express a glorious judgement for her - unless we assume a very complicated scenery. In other words, her allegedly glorious past is cast in a mythical setting, within a diegetic level that is consistently bound to the

⁵⁷ "[...] you, gentle lady, have washed your hands in a man's blood."

narrative frame (what Genette defines metadiegetic) together with the performative perspective makes her past relevant but incapable of obtaining an extratextual authority and value, as our notion of heroism would require. The fact that the distancing of her past is consistent across the poems (despite the incoherence of her past events), suggests that in the Norse cycle, during the Middle Ages, the role of Brynhildr as a Valkyrie was already fading out on a mythical level, incapable of contributing to her possible view as a heroine. Ironically, although probably by chance, the role of Brynhildr as Valkyrie, that of her highest freedom and expression of character, is embedded, constrained to the metadiegetic level in the same way her individuality is oppressed by her social context within the narration.

In *Sd*, she is freed by Sigurðr, who crosses with Grani the wall of light, which burned up to the sky (possibly a reference to the northern lights), cutting open her armour with Gramr, awaking her from her slumber. It is the compiler in *Sd* who explains that she was a Valkyrie, punished by Óðinn for having disobeyed him and condemned to marriage – which crucially excludes her from being a Valkyrie anymore. She answered with an oath to marry only a man who knows no fear, after which she was turned into slumber and surrounded by the wall of light, and there came Sigurðr, fearless of dragons and walls of fire. From this moment, she enters the narrative frame, and crucially, she is bound to speech acts, where her previous status as a Valkyrie is forbidden and she is reduced to be a potential wife. She rewards Sigurðr for her freedom with precepts and runes of wisdom and various utility.

Before the end of the poem, the Codex presents its lacuna, resuming with the ending fragment of another poem, called *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* (*Br*). In the *VS*, after the encounter, Brynhildr and Sigurðr swear love to each other, twice (ch. 22, 25), but in both cases Sigurðr rides away before the marriage is performed. We should assume, from *Grp* and from how the events evolve in the Codex, that reciprocal oaths were produced in the Codex in the missing poem(s) as well. We know from the *VS* and the *Grp* that Brynhildr is then cheated, through sorcery, into marrying Gunnar. In the *VS* the trickery explicitly happens through the magical drink of forgetfulness brewed by Grimhildr, the mother of Gunnar and then by a sorcery of hers, that switches the resemblance of Gunnar and Sigurðr.

When Brynhildr discovers it, she realises that she had not only been cheated in an unhappy marriage, but most importantly in breaking her own vows. That is, Brynhildr's honour has been compromised and she seeks for vengeance, as it appears to be the only response and consequence to the offense received. Her oath was so important to her that her whole life and happiness are irreparably compromised by its breaking. Brynhildr falls into desperation and madness. She holds Gunnar, and even more so Sigurðr responsible for the deceit. Sigurðr is also the man she loves, but this does not stop her from scheming for his death. After the death of Sigurðr, Brynhildr enjoys her vengeance fulfilled, but also gives out in her hysteria, since no further satisfaction is left for her, nor does she deem her own life any more valuable, after the death of the only man she ever loved, the only one who could fulfil her oath.

In the *Brot af Sigurðarqviðu* Brynhildr deceives Gunnar and tells him that Sigurðr did not respect the pacts (which is true, if referred to the promise of love towards her; while it is false in respect to him having slept with her as lover, as Gunnar understands out of jealousy, in str. 2). In *Sg*, she simply tells Gunnar that she cannot be happy with him and she will leave, unless he kills Sigurðr (str. 11), and so dear is Brynhildr to Gunnar, that in the end he incites his half-brother, Guthormr, who was not bound by blood-oaths with Sigurðr, to kill the him. Certainly, the hoard of Andvari plays a role in this, as in str. 16 of *Sg*. Hǫgni, while acting as Gunnar's advisor, suggests that it would be joyful to possess such a treasure, showing that the curse of Andvari is still active, and a key element of the plot, but its role in the events seems very subtle, and not remarked as we should expect, in particular if compared with the relations between characters, having a much more direct impact for the development of the story. Despite the argument that she used to convince Gunnar, as soon as Sigurðr is killed, Brynhildr also decides to die, while accusing the brothers of being oath breakers themselves. She reacts hysterically to any interaction or dialogue, crying or laughing at times while the tragedy storms everyone. In the final part of *Sg*, she arranges the funeral of Sigurðr and her own, and then she commits suicide with a sword. While agonising, she predicts the future of the children of Giúki to Gunnar.

Applying a synthetic view of the character of Brynhildr means assuming that she was a Valkyrie once, and at a point she was involved with Sigurðr. Anything else in the representation level about her past is variable. She properly enters the narrative sequence

after the meeting with the young hero, and from there, she cannot be properly synthesised as a glorious character, for we have no element that contribute to that idea. We can notice how Brynhildr in the Poetic Edda acts mainly as a speaker, her identity and role entirely defined by her words (Friðriksdóttir 2013, 118). Brynhildr is in a sense a personification of female honour and pride, under the constraints and pressures of an essentially patriarchal society that forces and deceives her into an unwilling marriage and a breaking of a personal oath. It is a woman, Grimhildr, who first deceives Sigurðr in forgetting his love for Brynhildr, in order to arrange for a good marriage for her daughter, Guðrún. But again, one could argue that the institution of marriage itself was made a forceful necessity for women by that kind of society. Indeed, even though noble of birth, Brynhildr cannot control or bend the social order and institutions, to the point where her brother Atli was in charge of her own part of wealth since her birth (*Sg*, str. 36), but she tries her own way to subvert to it, involving other male characters (Friðriksdóttir 2013, 126) and succeeding at least in her vengeance, while failing in the full restoration of her oath. Finally, the individuality of Brynhildr is remarkably expression of both her role as oppressed by normative femininity, as well as her pride, but crucially, her pride, and her individuality as a whole are arguably more intense and powerful than any other characters in the Eddic poems, including the male protagonists.

In conclusion, despite her strict adherence to the code of honour, her dramatic conduct, and in general the exceptionality of the character, she is hardly attributed with epithets and hyperboles of praise with sufficient frequency, if at all (with the notable exception of *Grp*). In context, the only epithets we find are referred to her nobility, in the same way they are used to refer to Grípir, who plays no further heroic role in the poems. Her glorious past as a Valkyrie and a perpetual rebel is only referred to, never directly represented in the narrative frame, casting it into a different, distant context that seems to be more mythic than properly heroic, and it does not trigger particular praise or glorification in the texts.

I believe that Brynhildr could have been conceived as a glorious heroine in a more distant past than the written sources we possess, but we lack real evidence. My synthetic focus shows that her allegedly glorious heroism was overridden, as soon as the themes of pride and vengeance were introduced in her character, for such pride, individualism and selfishness, of extraordinary intensity, made her unpredictable and vicious, traits that are

incompatible with the social stability of a clan, as it was required for her to be praiseworthy and glorious (see also below the case of Guðrún and vengeance for female characters)⁵⁸.

Her past avails her an undeniable nobility of character, which in turn makes her so relevant and exceptional as soon as she enters the narrative sequence and it is maintained by the idea of hostile destiny, which diminishes her personal responsibilities. In her role with other characters, she is much similar to Sigrún, bound to others' will. In her self-assertion she is considered either guilty herself, or the victim of the deceptions of Grimhildr. Either way, she is consistently deprived of any glorious aura of her own. She is a character that demands respect, but she is never portrayed to trigger admiration; she was conceived to be censured or at most pitied, in those versions of the stories and poems that privileged the idea of responsibility attributed to Gunnar and his family.

3.9. Oddrún

Oddrún, sister of Brynhildr, has a dedicated poem, the *Oddrúnargrátr*, a lament, where she appears as a benevolent sorceress (str. 7), who promised to help anybody in need (str. 10). Her coming to the help of Borgný, who is pregnant and in pain, constitutes the narrative frame where Oddrún can become the narrator of her own unfortunate story. Her love for Gunnar, reciprocated, becomes real after the death of Brynhildr, that is, when hostility started to grow, between Atli and the Niflungar. They cannot resist to meet, even if they are aware that Atli would be utterly contrary to their love, even refusing a formal offer (str. 21-22). One day they are found, the fact reported to Atli, and the matter of the hoard of Andvari is interwoven with a more private matter of prohibited love. Atli then prepares his own grim deceit also to punish Gunnar for his love for Oddrún. This motive is never replicated in the other poems, where Atli asserts to be acting in revenge of his sister Brynhildr and Sigurðr. In this poem, Gunnar plays his lyre in order to call for the help Oddrún (str. 29), but she arrives too late.

⁵⁸ It is harder to define beyond doubt whether the inadequacy of the heroism of Brynhildr was enhanced by normative femininity, that is, the dangers and flaws of a female role while yet within the social norms. The cases of Atli and Fáfnir as male selfish and greedy heroes/characters suggest that excessive individuality was problematic independently of gender.

However, no epithet, nor any particular hyperbole is attributed to Oddrún in the poem (with a *bauga deili*, ring-giver, in str. 20, attributed to Gunnar), while the magic element that makes her a powerful but benevolent sorceress is exceptional in itself, enough to define the woman as a remarkable character, worth to be mentioned in legends; but the lament is reduced to the recounting of the usual dramatic tropes, contributing with new details to the fatal conflict between the Niflungar and the Huns, but without celebrating any new heroic characters or heroism.

The character itself appears only in this poem, which is not enough for the comparative method applied in this dissertation, to evaluate how she was possibly understood by the audience.

3.10. Guðrún

Guðrún can be seen as the protagonist of the cycle after the death Brynhildr, or a very relevant character in all the remaining poems. In *Guðrúnarqviða in fyrsta*, the scene is occupied by the grief of Guðrún. Her sorrow is not inferior than that of Brynhildr, but her dignity or her sufferance is such as to initially prevent her from crying, "lament like other women" (*né qveina um sem konor aðrar*. Str. 1). Her exceptional demeanour is underlined by the repetition of a whole strophe in 5 and 11.

Þeygi Guðrún gráta mátti;
svá var hon móðug at mǫg dauðan
oc harðhuguð um hrer fylkis.⁵⁹

Other women of the court try to soothe her, but at no avail. Only in the end, she gives into tears. She curses her brothers, also reinforcing the curse of Andvari upon the hoard that Sigurðr gained from Fáfnir, and she also expresses all her hate to Brynhildr, who is accused of orchestrating the tragedy. Notably, in the poems that follow the death of Sigurðr, Guðrún is acting as a wife and a widow, nothing more, but her exceptionality emerges even in such a context, in particular by her being incredibly harsh and self-

⁵⁹ Even so Gudrun could not weep;
She was so impassioned at the young man's death
So fierce in mind at the fall of the prince.

controlled. The word *harð*, often referred to one's mind and already found attributed to her brothers, is often used to describe her self-control or her cruelty, in various poems also beyond *Gðr* (str. 2, 5, 11; *Am* str. 49, 86; *Ghv* str. 1), defining a character that appears as utterly resolute in the direst situations. This harshness of hers, often resulting in actions cold-bloodily performed, somehow contrasts with the emotionality of Brynhildr. Both characters are led to madness, but Guðrún remains cold-hearted until the last of her family clan are sent to die. In the poems following the lacuna in the Codex, we can still find numerous epithets, but specifically attributed to Sigurðr, and only few to Gunnar, while Guðrún is depicted in dramatic, tragic scenes that do not define her heroism, but contribute in building the image of her exceptional temper. Not all the poems have the same (heroic) focus, but we can see how they are overall coherent in their conception - confirming the idea of a synthetic reception of character even through a heterogeneous set of poems and tales about the same legendarium. While mourning and glorifying her deceased husband, in str. 19 she also describes herself as excellent compared to others, even to Valkyries, but only as a reflex of her being the wife of the most astounding of men.

"[...] Ec þóttac oc þjóðans reccom
 hverri hæri Herians dísi;
 nú em ec svá lítil, sem lauf sé
 opt í iolstrom, at iofur dauðan. [...]"⁶⁰

The contrast of her own reputation of herself, between before and after the death of his husband, as hyperbolically rendered in this strophe, is functional for the dramatization of the poem, but it is not entirely true with her actual, absolute value, if compared with her actions as narrated in subsequent poems, her comparison with Valkyries proving soon to be true.

Indeed, soon after the sorrow for the death of Sigurðr, we can arguably conceive Guðrún as the personification of vengeance. Indeed, both Guðrún and Völundr actually

⁶⁰ "[...] I seemed also, among the prince's warriors,
 To be higher than any of Óðinn's ladies;
 I am as little as a leaf
 Among the bay-willows now the prince is dead. [...]"

share the same ruthlessness and sinister traits when approaching to the climax of their revenge, such as serving the pieces of murdered children as food and as jewels, respectively. Both of them are successful in their revenge but no battle or direct fight is involved. However, even if Guðrún is depicted differently in *Atlaqviða* than in *Atlamál*, her warlike behaviour (hence her valour and courage) is variously remarked in both poems, unlike what happens for Vǫlundr (who is the protagonist of a poem about vengeance, not to be considered as a hero proper). Indeed, in *Akv* she tries to protect her brothers with warnings, and she later avenges them against Atli, but she does not take up arms and fight in the battle. But also in *Akv*, she is portrayed as wearing a byrnie (str. 43), an armour, her exceptionality described with the epithet *biort* (bright), in avenging her brothers and bringing words of death to three kings.

Fullrott er um þetta; ferr engi svá síðan
brúðr í brynio broðra at hefna;
hon hefir þriggia þjóðkonunga
banorð borið, biort, áðr sylti.⁶¹

while in the story we have no mention of Guðrún fighting, as we can see instead in *Am*. One could argue that she was wearing battle gear in her revenge against Atli, but in practice it can hardly be the case since everything, from the murder of Atli to the fire of the whole court, happened during the night, in an ambush where no armour was necessary at all. Indeed, some deem str.43 of *Akv* to be a later addition to the poem (Finnur Jónsson and Adams Bellows), possibly in the light of *Am* itself. This would allow for more internal coherence of *Akv* as we have it, while marking the contraposition with *Am*. If we ignore str. 43 in *Akv*, Guðrún's active role is relegated to a ruthless but extremely subtle revenge. In *Am*, instead, she is also an avenger and a valorous fighter altogether. Alternatively, we should consider the byrnie of *Akv* as the remainders of some lost details, a symbol for her role as a fighter as it is fully developed in *Am*.

⁶¹ Now this story is all told; never since has a bride
In a byrnie acted so to avenge her brothers;
She brought news of death to three great kings,
That bright woman, before she died.

Either way, we must notice that the revenge of Guðrún against Atli is exceptional if compared to other cases of women taking revenge against someone: Brynhildr is constricted to speech acts, reaching her target only indirectly, through others; Borghildr, one of the wives of Sigmundr, kills Sinfiotli with poison (in *Sf*). Arguably, the typical view in narration was that a married woman, a wife (forbidden from the capabilities of a Valkyrie or a shieldmaiden) would have had little chances to defeat a warrior in an open fight. Guðrún had nobody to act for her, but she could have poisoned Atli by the same subtlety for which he was tricked into cannibalism. She didn't, and killed Atli with a sword instead. Subtly, while Atli was drunk and unarmed, but she fulfilled her duty against the most dreadful of warlords with an act of physical strength and using the weapon of a warrior. The exceptionality of this action, given the context, opens up for the possibility of Guðrún to be viewed differently already in *Akv*, as a character, as it happens indeed in *Am*, where she is a dreadful fighter on par or better of many men. We cannot know which version of Guðrún was prevalent in folklore and culture - arguably none, each possibility shifting in time and space. In the *Völsunga Saga*, the unknown author follows the direction of the *Am*, possibly by the criterion of synthesising as much as he could from the poems and/or his own sources. But the fact that Guðrún is confirmed in her role as a valiant fighter suggests that such a view was not an exotic invention of *Am*, or even of the Edda, and that at the very least, her prowess in combat is an element which would yet be coherent with the abstract conception and reception of her character. Hence there is a continuum between *Akv* and *Am* concerning the figure of Guðrún, even if the two expressions are remarkably different. Indeed, in *Am* Guðrún goes as far as openly and valorously fighting with weapons together with her brothers, and with equal prowess. Here she is given the chance to openly prove her courage and valour and indeed she walks in fearlessly (*fóra fælt þeygi*, str. 47) towards her brothers and her thoughts are resolute (*hugði á harðræði*, str. 49). Moreover, in *Am* she is openly praised for her valour in battle (str. 49-53), and put on the same level as her brothers when the poet praises the exceptional valour and courage of the children of Giúki, with the battle that bloodily infuriates, hyperbolically for a whole day (str. 52, 105). The endeavour of the children of Giúki, including Guðrún, is remarked as exceptional, better than any other, in str. 52

Piorco þar gorðo, þeiri var við brugðit;
þat brá um alt annat, er unno born Giúca;⁶²

Because of her actions across all the poems, a difference exists, between Guðrún and other women in the poems, including the uncompromising Brynhildr, similar to the opposition between *blauðr* (weak, inherently bad) and *hvatr* (vigorous, inherently good)⁶³. According to those opposites, Brynhildr is self-asserting, which can be associated with *hvatr*, but only with words, which in the Norse world are still inherently *blauðr* (Clover 1993, 383-4)⁶⁴, whereas Guðrún, in *Akv* and *Am*, proves to be fully *hvatr*, bodily, with actions, by embracing the way of the weapons, her valour being arguably part of the underlying conception of her character.

However, it is important to notice that she is not in the same position as their brothers, when they are condemned to death and insist in their courage up to their last breath. Guðrún does not perish in the battle. While trying her best to defend her family, including Gunnar and Högni, from further tragedies, she repeatedly encounters overwhelming hostilities (in the person of wicked and oppressing male leaders such as Atli and Jǫrmunrekr) that lead her to an increasing rampage of vengeance, to the point of murdering her own children from Atli just to punish him and erase any bond with him, and later on conscientiously inciting her last surviving sons with Jonakr, Hamðir and Sǫrli, to run towards certain death, in order to impossibly avenge Svanhildr. In *Ghv*, Guðrún cries for the probable death of her sons but at the same time she is also satisfied for their tragic decision. She is left dishearteningly alone, with no purpose for the future and no relative to care about. Only grief and the nostalgic recalling of the brief good times with Sigurðr and her daughter Svanhildr are remaining. Narrative necessity and her maddening sorrow are interwoven together when she takes the place of the narrator and

⁶² A battle they fought there for which they were famous;
That surpassed all others, what the children of Giuki achieved;

⁶³ See also Clover (1993), for a full discussion about these opposite categories in Medieval Icelandic literature and culture, as associated with gender, but not necessarily bound to it. My results about glory for the heroines of the Eddic poems fit quite well with Clover's suggestion about gender perception in Norse culture. However, the one-gender model cannot be fully applied to completely define the role of characters across the poems. Indeed, in the Eddic heroic setting, we should be inclined to think that women were definitely perceived and treated as *blauðr* by default, not simply as an outcome of their personality.

⁶⁴ Despite the apparent importance given to Skalds, authors and speech acts in general.

start evoking to herself (and the audience) her memories. Left completely alone after honour and vengeance have consumed all of her relatives, in her grief she invokes the spirit of Sigurðr to meet her, while she asks for her a great pyre to burn her altogether with her sufferance. Yet, in *Hm* she compares herself to a full-grown tree, in str. 5, contrasting the image she had of herself as a leaf, after the death of her first husband.

"[...] Einstœð em ec orðin sem ǫsp í holti,
fallin at frændom sem fura at qvisti, [...]"⁶⁵

There, despite the repeating tragedy, we can observe a growth of the character, coherent across poems. Exactly as it happens to Brynhildr, vengeance for a woman turns out to be self-destructive, which hints of the subordinate role of women in Norse culture, even those who reach extraordinary importance in legends and myths. Yet, as I tried to demonstrate, the subordination of women is not forbidding towards them achieving heroism, as it is the case of Guðrún against that of Brynhildr, who falls down in a descending parabola, from her entrance in the sequence.

The cathartic intention of the poet is then made explicit in the final str. 21, where the fourth wall is broken (similarly to *Akv* and *Am*) by the direct comparison by the narrator of such a tragedy with that of any other person (in the audience), which should then result much more light-hearted.

Iorlom ǫllom óðal batni,
snótom ǫllom sorg at minni,
at þetta tregróf um talið væri.⁶⁶

Guðrún only knows some happiness during her marriage with Sigurðr, while he lives, but despite her extraordinary individuality, arguably on par with that of any other major character in the cycle, she is unable to be successful in any of her purposes (except

⁶⁵ "[...] I have come to stand alone like an aspen in the forest,
My kinsmen cut away as a fir's branches, [...]"

⁶⁶ To all warriors - may your lot be made better;
To all ladies - may your sorrows grow less,
Now this chain of griefs has been recounted.

for her revenge against Atli, but with grim recoils against herself): her whole family, brothers and children, die of pointless, although glorious, deaths. The social and cultural constrictions Guðrún undergoes are not enough to annihilate her, yet they deprive her of any capability of building her own happiness or peace, despite her strong individuality (Clark 2005, 181). What is left to her, vengeance, is brought to its ill-fated extreme – similarly to how the other Niflungar embody and sublimate warlike heroism; to the point of sacrificing her own children, while being of no relieve to her. In fact, the pursue of vengeance ignites the vicious circle that makes her sorrow unbearable. Ultimate loneliness ties her together with the Niflungar who themselves blindly pursued the path of honour and vengeance. Together with her brothers she is praised (in *Akv* and *Am*) for her uncompromising choices and actions, her honour above anything and herself and defended with valorous resolution. Her tragedy does not diminish the admiration that she is meant to trigger in the audience, yet her glorious achievements cannot deny the darker sides of her uncompromising vengeance, leading paradoxically to the extinction of her lineage. Praise and censure, glory and tragedy are developed altogether across the various phases of the life of Guðrún, and ultimately her perception should have been that of a complex character with duplicitous valence.

4. Heroism, Honour and Glory

Here I am analysing together the various factors referring to heroism as we have found them remarked in the texts. As I will argue below, the kind of heroism we find depicted in the Eddic poems is almost exclusively moved by honour, although not achieved by all the characters in the same manner. In particular, other than all characters receiving a various degree of both praise and censure, only some characters are glorified. That is, glory as the most hyperbolic and celebrative expression of praise.

I will start from explaining why some main characters are possibly praised, but never depicted as glorious, and then investigate further how others fulfil their glorious heroism. The result will be a thorough synthesis of Norse heroism as it is expressed in the extant Eddic poetry: crucially, this synthesis is not meant as a fully conscient authorial intention, rather a reconstruction of a perspective on a cultural system, based on the available material. As an extension and an application, Icelandic sagas of the same period (Medieval Age, mainly XIII century) can be considered for a useful comparison and definition of the general cultural environment where the Eddic heroic ethos is narrated and transmitted, and its significance.

As we have seen, a particular expression of praise for the characters of the heroic poems is glory, as the highest, superlative degree of praise. Most characters in the heroic poems are worthy of praise, although in variable measure, but only a limited group of them is worthy of glorification. Glorification, or the lack of it, is then an important criterion to distinguish characters in different groups. We can now try to explain the role of glorification and its reasons, at the level of the fictional social system. If glory, in its superlative dimension, is conceived to trigger the highest degree of admiration, it is instrumental in giving us crucial and fundamental details of the fictional social system, which is in turn based on the real Norse social system of historical times.

4.1. Old Norse Heroism and the Honour code

Honour was an important concept in much of Medieval Norse literature, even more so in Eddic Poetry. It is often crucial in the development of heroic characters and plots, and the tragedies develop from the uncompromising honour of all the heroes of the poems.

4.1.1. Honour as the social definition of an individual

We can see a common pattern across many of the cases we analysed, that is, all the characters are continuously challenged about their honour, be it in defence of it, or to gain more renown, expand one's honour. We haven't given a precise definition yet, but we can conceive it as the social definition of a person (Sørensen 2000, 23), a variable that determines the value of the individual in society. For an individual, honour is what establishes relations (of power) within society. In fact, the theme of honour in Eddic poetry is much more pervasive than the defence or the acquisition of practical social status, to gain treasures or lands. This conception of honour is not to be taken as a particularity of heroism and heroic narrative, as we can see that characters, arguably shaped on the basis of real persons, follow a varied motive of honour also in other literary sources, such as the Family sagas more or less contemporary to the Edda and the Codex Regius. Honour was perceived as a principle of social interaction in Viking Age and Medieval Iceland, and the related issues were a matter for the literary discourse about the individual in the social system.⁶⁷

Yet, the motive of honour in the heroic context is brought to an extreme, to the point that honour seems to be all that matters. The idea of honour is explicitly remarked in some stanzas of the *Hávamál*, specifically strophes 76-77.

Deyr fé, deyia frændr,
deyr siálfr it sama;
enn orðztír deyr aldregi,
hveim er sér góðan getr.

Deyr fé, deyia frændr,
deyr siálfr it sama;

⁶⁷ Andersson (1970) analyses some characters in the Family Sagas, arguing that the previous scholarly view of these texts as focused on uncompromising honour was incomplete, and that both *Háv* and the sagas would suggest compromise and moderation, over the absolute based on the honour code. I argue that in the heroic poems, social obligations are in fact much more polarized, and compromise is inappropriate, however desirable from some characters' point of view, and arguably by the audience as well.

ec veit einn, at aldri deyr:
dómr um dauðan hvern.⁶⁸

Even contextualising them with the following strophes, in a broader reminder towards moderation and modesty, the remarking of one's honour cannot be denied. Extracted from their context, these two strophes are exactly what is applied by most of the main characters of the heroic poems: uncompromising honour.

The ethos of honour has various articulations, one of which is the rule of vengeance, which can be claimed in retaliation of murder⁶⁹ or offended honour in general. Once more, we can better understand this if by honour we intend the expendable social power of an individual. Then, the importance to defend one's honour, even with violence, becomes clearer: honour is vital to the individual as a social being. Moreover, and strictly following str. 76-77 of *Háv*, honour is the only thing that is left of one's individuality, even beyond death, and this, once more, is related to a conception of honour as deeply rooted in the existence of a social individual. Nothing else can be as everlasting as honour (not even the most majestic treasure), hence honour must be the worthiest ideal to pursue. This is indeed what we can infer from the heroic poems. The fact that the heroic social system was a fictional derivation of the social reality of Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavia and Iceland does not mean that the narrative discourse around honour, including the Eddic poems, was not relevant for their audiences, nor that the relevance of the Eddic poems as received in Medieval times was in contrast with the discourse developed by the sagas: honour was problematic. The Eddic poems show their own way to solve that.

In more than one occasion, Sigurðr asserts that he is not afraid to withstand whatever undertaking, including his tragic destiny. Even more interesting the assertion referred to

⁶⁸ Cattle die, kinsmen die,
The self must also die;
But the glory of reputation never dies,
For the man who can get himself a good one.

Cattle die, kinsmen die,
The self must also die;
I know one thing which never dies:
The reputation of each dead man.

⁶⁹ There seems to be no clear reference to the legal difference between manslaughter or murder in the Eddic poems. Any intentional assassination seems to be a valid trigger for vengeance, and weregild is only an option that can be refused by the offended party. This once more reflects both the idealised context of the poems, as well as the absolute degree of the stance of the characters.

Helgi, by his half-brother, for which it is more fitting for him to fight rather than proposing peace to his enemies, suggesting that the honour of a hero and a king as renowned as Helgi should not be bound by compromise, even if that seems a wise choice. Similarly when Guðrún suggests a peace between his brothers and Atli to pacifically resolve a compromised situation, and everyone refuses. Gunnar refuses to concede his treasure in exchange for his life, even knowing that he has no heirs and the treasure is left to the wolves – as if the hoard was the material extension of his own honour. Hamðir and Sqrli are forced to go against an overwhelming enemy exclusively because they are taunted by their mother on their honour, which calls them to vengeance for their sister. According to the honour code implied in the poem, they cannot avoid such a call, even if it is an extremely dangerous endeavour. The problem is clear, while the solution is subtler, if it can be called a solution at all.

About honour as the social definition of an individual, we can also see, in the character of Brynhildr, how honour is the definition of the individual in the face of the self, by reflection. Her oaths are made to the divinity, but in secret, with no human witnesses. By extension, she swears to herself. Indeed, those oaths are to her more important than life itself, because once broken, her very image, in her own eyes, is broken. Her pleads are what define her not only against the divinity and against the society, but also against the self. This is proved by the fact that once her oaths are broken, nobody has a lesser opinion of her, and she feels utterly wronged and meaningless as a person only after she becomes aware of the treachery: to her, the actual oath-breaking is secondary to the awareness of it. This can be explained if we conceive her oath as coincident with her honour and her honour as the conscient image she has of herself. Even if this is a reflection derived by her understanding of the society and her relation with it, she is the subject that builds that image which is her own. In other words, we can see how Brynhildr presents narcissistic traits, transcending motives of honour into motives of self-defined pride, in a short circuit of honour of sorts.

From a comparison between Brynhildr and Guðrún, we can see that honour can be a motive for women as well, but it can be praiseworthy, and a source of glorious heroism, only if that honour is the honour of their clan, not just their own, personal honour. Also, a woman is called to display valour, as much as an experienced warrior, in order to reach

glorification. This further suggests that the social status of women in Old Norse societies was secondary to that of men, but not entirely and not one-sidedly.

Any main characters in the heroic poems are bound to their honour, and even when they fail to do so, they can find a redemption of sorts, so that the pursuit of honour alone is not a sufficient characterisation for heroism and glory. However, honour as we have found it, is a crucial feature. Indeed, if heroes are characters that emerge from the text, far beyond their narrative role and importance, honour must be important to them, in a conception of individuality as we see reported also in the *Hávamál*. The capability to not only uncompromisingly uphold but also improve and expand one's honour against all odds must be the base of what the Old Norse society perceived as heroic and inspiring. Even if Medieval Scandinavian society was arguably moving from a strict application of the honour code, towards a culture of moderation (due to an increasingly centralised political power in conjunction with the application of a system of laws), the question of honour must have been still vividly relevant.

Notably, these concepts about honour and heroism are not alien even to the modern reader, although our conception may be substantially different and articulated. It should also be noted that the polarised applications of the honour code, much similar and as crude as to what we find it in the Eddic poems, or analogous, still survive in marginal but far from irrelevant spaces of our own modern Western society.

4.1.2. Honour and Oaths: defining the plot

If we conceive honour as a circle (or a sphere, for the sake of complexity and precision) that surrounds each individual, within their society, each circle determines the reach of action of individuals, as permitted by culture and law. The boundaries of the circle contain the individuality of a person. Once honour is threatened, that is, if a circle is crossed by someone, intentionally or not, it must be defended, in order to safeguard the place of the very individual in that society. Then, we can better see that oaths can constitute a proactive way of defining and defending that circle which is one's honour, as if with an oath is equal to a declaration that a given social territory belongs to them. Following this metaphor, we can clearly see how the overlapping of the circles of honour generates a thread, that is both the social thread, as well as the dynamic narrative plot. In the case of Brynhildr, her oath coincides with her own assertion of honour, possibly also

because her special oath is uttered against a deity, which in practical terms must be assumed as an oath to the self for the lack of witnesses, only indirectly addressed to the rest of the society. The concept of honour and oaths as signatures of an individual in society is poignantly represented by an allegory, regarding Brynhildr, in the poems as well as in the saga: the wall of fire. Notably, only Sigurðr can cross it, as he is the only person that fits the oath, the boundaries imposed by Brynhildr's will.

By means of oath, consequences and reaction are generated, prepared, announced and fulfilled. It is because of the oath of Brynhildr that Sigurðr is murdered, which in turn opens for the quarrel between the children of Giúki and Atli (via the cursed hoard, which was apparently kept under control by the might of Sigurðr, while he was alive); it is by means of the vengeance, triggered by the compromised family honour, that Atli finds his own demise.

The complex thread of binding honour and oaths are a fundamental source of tragedy and plot development, often synthesised in the concept of fate. Recalling the previous image of honour as a personal circle, its boundaries are defined by the force of the individual in self-assertion, as well as by the spheres of other individuals, pushing from the outside.

4.1.3. Loyalty and Leadership

Two representations of social hierarchy are particularly interesting and represent specific expressions of a social system built upon honour: that of Sigurðr as subject/ally of Gunnar, and that of the children of Giúki as subject/allies of Atli. In both cases, the higher standing patron betrays his loyal ally, and tragic climax is developed around the fulfilment of such betrayal.⁷⁰ Moreover, the betrayal is judged as very improper in the texts, and not just for the consequences to come, in the form of retaliation. In practical terms, the oath breaker patrons are not just accused of being dishonourable, but it is showed how their dishonourable behaviour is uselessly selfish, and self-damaging, for they end up severely undermining their own power, Gunnar for (unrequited) love, Atli for greed, and ultimately their lives.

⁷⁰ *Vǫlundarkviða* is related to the matter, although not a proper heroic poem, as analysed in the previous chapter. It is not, however, a proper relation of leadership and (betrayed) loyalty, rather abuse of power and revenge.

The fact that both cases are (understandably) presented in a negative light suggests that matters of patronage and loyalty were understood as important, even in Greenland (if we are to believe that at least *Am* has Greenlandic origins). Evidently, with this lore being transmitted in Iceland, while reporting situations that clearly remind of a feudal system (at the aristocratic level, between vassals and their kings), we should think that such hierarchical social dynamics, based on tight relations of patronage, were far from alien to Viking Age and Medieval Iceland, despite the initial concept of an Icelandic society deprived of a hierarchy amongst free men.

At the same time, the fact that specifically kings are criticised as overbearing against their allies is telling of the fact that leadership in Scandinavia and Iceland (with a possibly more ancient origin of the theme) was not seen as a given fact, but as something that always had its foundation on a lower hierarchical level, at least, inherently, within the same social class. The theme of leadership and loyalty is developed in the poems as a relation *inter pares*, for it seems indeed that Gunnar and Atli are considered as *primi inter pares*, more powerful but not more noble, with Sigurðr and the children of Giúki respectively, rather than kings, of a higher class against their subjects.

A leader could then gain stable power, and even abuse it, but he was bound to meet retaliation by fate (or simply by some avenger). We could think that this retaliation against bad or selfish kings is just an artifice for tragedy, but I would argue that it is instead revealing of the social awareness about how nobody could live detached from consequences, not even the mightiest of kings. The theme is not necessarily original to the Norse narrative or social context, nonetheless its recurring presence and the explicit accusations are revealing of the Norse own ideas and conception of power, even if just at a stereotypical level.

4.1.4. *Women and Marriage*

As we have seen, all the female main characters move in a context where their individuality and their sociality are continuously threatened by the institution of marriage. This scheme also includes Oddrún. Such a situation could be analysed as an occurrence of patriarchy in a Medieval narrative setting (which would loosely replicate the real

setting). The threat is performed in various ways against each character, and each of them reacts in their own, personal terms.

Sigrún, threatened by a marriage that she does not want, decides to side against her whole family, causing their destruction. Notably, she does (or can do) so only by siding with another man, in exchange for another marriage – only, this time more suitable to her taste. Even then, such a favourable marriage leads to tragic destinies, as in *HH.II*, because of the ensuing vengeance. Sigrún tries to escape imposed marriage, but in the end, she is bound to cause and suffer much tragedy and grief.

Brynhildr is cheated into a marriage she does not want, and she is also constrained by the greed of her powerful brother. Most importantly, the sorcery also made her break her own oath, corrupting her honour and individuality. She tries to subvert that situation, but she is bound to speech acts. Even when she can indirectly achieve vengeance, she obtains the death of the only man she actually loved, object of her own honour and obsession, meaning that her oath cannot be restored, her honour remaining forever compromised, with ensuing madness and death as the only solution – and the suffering of many others.

In all these cases, we can see how marriage binds women to a subordinate role in society, and this also applies to Valkyries. After marriage, they seem to be unable to use weapons or to act directly in general.⁷¹ Even more importantly, women's own perception of the self, largely overlapping with their honour, seems to be greatly dependant on the man they marry, and the fact is made explicit by Guðrún, who remarks with metaphors how she perceives herself before and after the death of her first husband. The cases of Brynhildr and Sigrún also show that whenever women attempt to bend the institution of marriage, choosing a husband independently of the familiar or patriarchal impositions, their fate turns out to be tragic, as if such a choice was inappropriate to women, deserving of punishment.

Moreover, despite the subordinate position of wives, there seems to be an element of distrust towards them, especially in the case of Brynhildr. She behaves in a way that is both compliant with a subordinate position within the couple and society (speech acts),

⁷¹ Guðrún being a notable exception.

as well as assertive of power, as a matter of fact. In a word, the subversion of Brynhildr is so subtle as to appear even more threatening.

4.1.5. Women, Subversion and Vengeance

Brynhildr uses speech acts, typical of her representation, as a way to subvert to the social order that oppresses her.⁷² Her oath to marry only the bravest of men, is a declaration of her will in a matter that highly concerns female characters, as we have seen.⁷³ In that sense, her oath sounds as a subversion of the subordinate role of women, because of the institution of marriage. Once her oath is besieged, her individuality is compromised. After the disobedience of Brynhildr, Óðinn imposes that she is banished from being a Valkyrie, forced to marriage. Brynhildr defends with a counter-oath, that acts as a sort of counter spell, and she is cast into slumber, upon a fortification of shields and surrounded by the fire. In this allegory, Óðinn can be seen as the personification of the male authority (or patriarchy) that constraints females to the subordination of marriage, and the fire as a barring obstacle would be the result of the clash between the constriction of marriage and her own will to be free, in a sort of outlawry. Hence, the subversion of Brynhildr via her oath is made completely clear, and it is quite effective, as her social will assumes the repelling force of a wall of fire. Yet, the scheming of other individuals (Grimhildr, Gunnar and his allies) manages to abuse her own oath to subdue her to an unwilling marriage. At this point, the wall of fire stops being an allegory of the barrier of her honour, as she is not aware of what happened, and does not immediately act in order to defend it.

⁷² Friðriksdóttir (2013) makes an insightful analysis of the role of speech acts for women in the Poetic Edda, as a means for their subversion. Indeed, we can see how the case of Brynhildr in particular reveals a sort of mistrust towards women, who, while behaving within the subordinate position of a wife, find a way to subvert their own social role and be as influential as men. In this sense, we can see how the character of Brynhildr is seen as wicked, manipulative and generally dangerous by the others, arguably including the audience.

⁷³ Friðriksdóttir (2013, 122-24) suggest that oaths by women, as means of self-assertion, are socially inappropriate both in the Eddic fictional world and in that of the audience. However, even in front of the rarity of both oaths and vows by women, we lack final evidence for the hypothetical social inappropriateness of oaths for women (not even in the literary examples she provides from outside of the Edda). We should rather think that women did not often have the individual and social power to personally undertake and fulfil what they could swear. But that does not imply social inappropriateness.

Brynhildr cannot find her own happiness or satisfaction despite her own gigantic force of will, yet it is enough to cause the uttermost mayhem in the society that attempted to subdue her. Crucially, the matter of honour in Brynhildr proves once more that honour is both the social boundary of an individual as well as the perception of it by the very individual, a narcissistic state of existence that Brynhildr brings to tragic consequences, arguably for the whole society that surrounds her. The drama of Brynhildr represents the tragic conflict between feelings, social bonds, relations of power and individual honour, to the point where she still loves and is obsessed about the man that triggered her vengeful intentions by means of her broken oath: in the case of Brynhildr, she whets Gunnar to act on her behalf, rather than pursuing vengeance on her own. That is, refusing to accept her deception, she provokes the uttermost tragedy while yet behaving as *blauðr*, soft, indirectly and with further deception, rather than a settlement through truce or direct confrontation. Moreover, this conflict is so dramatically extreme for Brynhildr to lead her to a contradictory hysteria. The extreme of unrequited love in conjunction with personal honour, oaths and vengeance have led Brynhildr, and those related to her, to utterly ill-fated outcomes. Her final representation in *Gðr* is that of a dragon-like monster, str. 27.

Stóð hon und stoð, strengði hon elvi;
brann Brynhildi, Buðla dóttur,
eldr ór augom, eitri fnæsti,
er hon sár um leit á Sigurði.⁷⁴

There is no solution to her state of mind, which makes her untreatable and dangerous to the others.⁷⁵ The undeniable oppression of Brynhildr by the male-centric society is undeniable, and it triggers her subversion and causes the utterly tragic

⁷⁴ She stood by the pillar, she summoned up all her strength;
From Brynhild, daughter of Budli,
Fire burned from the eyes, she snorted out poison,
When she looked at the wounds upon Sigurd.

⁷⁵ Friðriksdóttir (2013, 126) suggests that such an image would reflect her acts of subversion against the social restrictions of females, through oaths, whetting and vengeance, crucially embodying the fears of the male-centric society against such a subversion. While questions of gender are certainly implied in the story of Brynhildr, I argue that the draconic image is much more than that, reflecting a preoccupation that is much more fundamental than the social role of genders: self-obsession against society and civilisation.

development of her story. Her fate is the product of personal honour in conjunction with the limited amount of power of women, bound to speech acts. The specific draconic image of Brynhildr should not be understood in that light. In fact, it is a larger question which includes but is not resolved by the gender-related conflict.

Indeed, after the death of Sigurðr, the subversive and vengeful stance of Brynhildr has already been fulfilled, and at that point it cannot explain in itself the state of the character. Indeed, Fáfnir is the embodiment of the same symbol, that of the Dragon, without any implication about gender conflict or subversion, but about the conflictual, hostile stance of an individual against the whole society. Therefore, I argue that we should conceive the draconic depiction of Brynhildr as a broader representation of the severance of Brynhildr, by means of her obsession for her personal honour (of which Sigurðr could be understood as the objectification), from the society and by extension from mankind, for which she becomes a threat by means of her sufferance, hysteria and irrationality. Severance that had begun with her repeated subversion (against marriage) and is completed after the death of Sigurðr.

In context, the inevitability should be remarked, of the conflict between such a self-obsessed character and the Dragonslayer, who, as we have already analysed, can be held as the symbol for social cohesion against obsessive, hostile (and fearful) outlawry or inhumanity. That is, the enemy of the Dragonslayer must in turn have draconic traits, and is bound to become an enemy herself of the whole society. It is then no wonder that Brynhildr can hardly be praised, for she places herself out of the reach of the community (both fictional and symbolic), which is the source of praise and glory. This, in conjunction with a resolution that can consistently be ascribed to the sphere of *blauðr*, even in vengeance, forbid Brynhildr from reaching glory.

Guðrún is initially married to a man she can appreciate and love, even if such a marriage is arranged for her by others, without apparently asking for her opinion. Such a happy marriage elevates her perception of herself to a magnificence that is on par with that of Valkyries. However, the fatal interaction with Brynhildr leads her to much suffering and to a new marriage, this time with a man, Atli, she cannot love or like, so much so that she deems vengeance more important than their own children. Guðrún is the only woman in the Edda that acts as a man would, in order to gain vengeance, that is using weapons and fighting. She breaks her marriage by herself, but she inevitably ends up in

another marriage – this time once more apparently favourable. It is the third marriage for her, as if she could not avoid it. It is, however, the grim consequences of another marriage forced by relations of power – that between her daughter, Svanhildr, and Jǫrmunrekr - that lead to the destruction of all her children and her whole family. Even in the case of Guðrún, it is marriage (even if happy) that leads to tragedy.

However, while equal to Brynhildr in the pursuit of honour, towards a self-destructive vengeance, Guðrún is always loyal to her family clan, and in this view, even the sacrifice of her children by Atli could be seen as the uttermost proof of loyalty by a woman and a mother, eager to kill her own children if that corresponds to fulfilling vengeance in favour of her family, independently of marriage. The different treatment she reserves to her sons by Atli and her sons by Jónakr can also be seen in the view of loyalty towards her clan and relentlessly vengeful only against those who prove hostile to it – however reckless and problematic that attitude can be, towards her sons. In other words, Guðrún is more loyal to her clan than to herself, and I argue that such a character is even more fitting with the glorious, valiant view we have of her in *Akv* and *Am*. A critique of the code of honour emerges in *Hm*, when the two brothers argue of the self-damaging vengeance she undertook, explicitly deemed as unwise for a proper vengeance. Here, Guðrún is for the first time censured for her actions, beyond her direct enemies, but such an accusation is only restricted to the representation of the character, as given in *Ghv* and *Hm*. In fact, the view of Guðrún as a relentless avenger, loyal to her clan against a dishonourable husband, to the extent of being self-destructive (against her own children), is echoed by Sygny in the *VS*, and most importantly, her achievements as expressed in the other poems are not denied here.

In order to complete the predominance of valorous heroism in the synthetic view regarding Guðrún, we should consider the story of *Hm*, together with the last chapter of the *VS*, and the summary given by Snorri himself. In these stories, the brothers commit the mistake of killing Erpr, which is definitely not something that her mother told to do, when compelling them to vengeance. Moreover, in *VS* we are recounted of the usage of stones to harm, which the brothers mistakenly did, contrarily to the suggestion made by her mother not to do so, for that was the only vulnerability of the armours she provided for them, and would have turned against them, as it did. Snorri partly backs up this version in ch. 6 of *Skáldskaparmál*. All in all, we are hinted that not all representations of the

whetting of Guðrún should be taken as a blind, reckless pursuit of vengeance, for in the alternate versions we find that she prepared the endeavour quite carefully, both towards success and the integrity of her sons.

She utterly fails to protect her children and her family, and she moved along a dangerous, questionable and ultimately tragic path, but she also did her best, against all odds and valiantly so, to keep the name of her family high. This further contributes to a tragic but glorious, heroic vision of the character, even in her self-destruction, much in line with the conception of her brothers; crucially because her valiant vengeance is triggered by her selfless loyalty to her family, not simply to her own personal honour, that is, pride, as it is the case of Brynhildr, who in fact receives little to no praise. Hence, for the underlying conception of Guðrún, we can say that she is an honourable avenger of her family and clan, relentless in her path, but glorious nonetheless. Yet, the potential of tragedy in the pursuit of family honour is consistently matter for dramatic developments on the surface level, as in *Hm* and *Ghv*, so much so that the inherent censure of an uncompromising code of vengeance should be taken as part of the generalised conception of her character, together with her glorious vengeance. The bright and dark sides of family honour and vengeance are juxtaposed in the duplicitous character of Guðrún.

The importance for women of the affiliation to their family clan, despite marriage, is reinforced by the fact that Brynhildr, in her pursuit for personal honour, causes not only the lack of praise, but even censure, and explicitly about the fact that she is so selfish as being careless of her family, chiefly of her brother Atli. Such accusation is explicit in the words of Gunnar in *Sg*, str. 32.

“[...] Þú værir þess verðust qvenna,
at fyr augom þér Atla hiøggim,
sæir brœðr þínom blóðuct sár,
undir dreyr gar, knættir yfir binda.”⁷⁶

⁷⁶ “[...] More than all women you deserve
That we should strike down Atli before your eyes,
So you should see on your brother bloody wounds,
Flowing gashes, that you’d have to bind up.”

All these elements can be explained with the expectation about heroines to defend the honour of their family clan and members.

All women are bound to marriage, and whether happy or not, it ultimately leads to individual and social tragedy, even more so when women try to subvert an imposed situation. Yet, as we have seen, that does not forbid them *a priori* to reach their own heroic and even glorious status. Female vengeance is always seen as self-destructive – and crucially so because of their subdued social status, defined by marriage, which forces them to be strictly related to the men who incur their vengeful actions, often the fathers of their children. Such a self-destructive vengeance always also has the power to lead to social disaster, suggesting that their subdued status in society was not to be held as a given fact, even by the most powerful men. Vengeance and subversion, even when self-destructive, could then take different paths and be seen according to different conceptions, depending on their context and specific development. Where Brynhildr exclusively followed her personal honour⁷⁷, she met much respect but little glory in the texts, and is even represented with monstrous, draconic traits; whereas Guðrún, always fighting for the honour of her clan, the Gjúkungs, ends up in the uttermost loneliness, but is also given a glorious heroic (although utterly tragic) aura.

Women seem to be tragically trapped between unavoidable marriage, giving power over them to an external clan, and their belonging to their family clan and their duty of honour towards it. At the same time, they were to be judged with the same criteria as men and had to sustain the same efforts as men to reach equal praise, while being heavily encumbered by crossed family duties. The space for women to reach glory, is narrow and their stance inevitably flawed and problematic.

⁷⁷ Which could be called ‘pride’, but since pride is a moral category typically associated with Christian culture, I am refraining from such usage, preferring ‘self-obsession’ instead, which is actually more psychological and fitting to describe the state of Brynhildr, which should not be understood in moral terms, but as anti-social on a more practical level.

4.2. Destiny and Heroism

4.2.1 *Fate as the ultimate and necessary enemy*

Destiny, often personified with the mysterious Norns, is a powerful element across the Eddic poems. Together with the concept of honour as the social definition of an individual, we can conceive destiny, as it is represented in the heroic poems, as the force of the complex system of personal honours, that is, fate is overwhelming because it is the sum of all the other individuals' honour and power against one (recalling the image of the circles).

This would help explaining why it is often remarked how one's fate is inevitable, binding characters to their own tragedies, even if it seems that choice is possible *a priori*. This conception is shared by all the heroic poems of the Edda and the *Völsunga Saga*, and we can infer it from the mythological poems as well, chiefly the *Völuspá*, suggesting that the idea of destiny was widespread in Old Norse literature. In a narrative environment, it is particularly easy to depict fate as something that is unavoidably pre-determined via the fact that the (omniscient) narrator typically knows from the very beginning the conclusion of his or her own story. Harder it is to make assumptions about the concept of fate about everyday life and culture in Medieval Norse populations, but it is not far-fetched to think that some kind of inevitable destiny was conceived, at least *a posteriori*, that is, once events already developed in some way, as an explanation of sorts – and as something that is so complicated and obscure to human knowledge that it is pointless to care about *a priori*. Either way, in the poems we find fate as the rationalisation of complex social relations, and this is a feature at least partly shared with the vast saga corpus as well (Meylan 2014, 163).

Either way, we find that the characters under discussion are inherently absolved in their behaviour and fatal errors, by the very idea of fate that permeates the poems. That means that even the most reckless of heroes, such as the Niflungar, are not to be taken as truly self-destructive, because they were doomed by their destiny, to which their choices were bound. Moreover, this implies that their glorious heroism, even if proved only under the instance of defeat and death, is entirely valuable as such, as the textual approach made us hypothesise at first. This reasoning is made possible even on a deeper semantic level,

thanks to the conception of fate as an abstract enemy. In other words, their praise and their glory are never under discussion, once expressed and proved.

Moreover, the doom of the Niflungar acts as their penance⁷⁸ for their past mistakes and their dishonourable conduct against their brother-in-law. This construction could be conceived in analogy with the concept of redemption, more typically associated with Christian theology.

4.2.2. *Tragedy as a magnifier of Heroism and a trial for Glory*

As we have seen, together with glorious achievements of various quality, a remarkable tragic vein flows throughout all the heroic poems of the Edda and the cycle of Sigurðr and Guðrún in general. All the main characters find a tragic ending to their life, except of Helgi in *HH*. It is a matter of taste and genre, very probably, but tragedy is also substantial in the construction of Eddic heroism: Eddic glorious heroes find themselves magnified, glorified, exactly because of the tragedy they valorously withstand. The Niflungar, for example, without the clever and dramatic plot that binds them to their duty and honour, would not have been in the situation to prove themselves worthy of praise and songs.

If vengeance offers a fitting proving ground for the hero, tragedy is the ultimate stage for it, the ultimate enemy (Meylan 2014, 158). The pathos conveyed by tragedy is what magnifies events to the point of being worthy to be narrated in a poem. Tragedy magnifies and is a means for the construction of extraordinary, exceptional events, which is in itself a requirement for a narration to be the matter of a heroic poem.

In the case of Guðrún, who does not die together with her brothers, she is deprived of a crucial dramatic element, and of a further, final trial of one's traits and capability of being honourable. Arguably, because of this, her heroism would be slightly inferior to that of her brothers. However, there is an element of tragic self-destruction in Guðrún's story as well, that is in the murder of her children. The dramatic event is made tragic against the audience by the voice of the children themselves, who warn their mother against what she is about to do, as something that is going to haunt her for the rest of her life. She makes a choice based on priority, and she attributes the uttermost importance to

⁷⁸ But without any religious connotations. I am using these terms purely in their abstract meaning in the context of social morality.

vengeance in the name of her clan, and if that prompts her to infanticide, it is a product of fate, and tragedy. By the logic adopted here, a dramatic, tragic event such as this, contextualised and undergone by an already exceptional and worthy character, should place Guðrún on the very same level as her brothers.

In the heroic poems, tragedy is strictly tied to the concept of fate, and it can be conceived as the expression of it in the heroic context, the ultimate enemy for any praiseworthy hero: the mode of the confrontation (not its outcome, which is ultimately and inevitably the defeat of the hero) is what defines the verdict about glory.

4.3. Valour and Courage as requirements for Glory

4.3.1. *Inglorious main characters*

Vǫlundr, Sváva/Sigrún, Brynhildr and Atli are never given any explicit glory, at most, they are given praise, but in that case, also consistent censure. Obviously, this is not only due to the traits of the characters, but also to the focus of the poets and the lore in general, which was focused on a limited number of characters.

In the poems, those inglorious main characters never explicitly fight, even if they are closely related to warfare. There are hints of direct, past (and even recent) fights for the Valkyries, but both in the poems as in the *VS* their battles are only elliptically described, never magnified. For Brynhildr, her role as shield-maiden contributes to her not marrying the son of Sigmundr, but overall Valkyries in the Codex are either unimportant as active characters (the wife of Vǫlundr) or they are narratively subjugated to the men they are bound to marry, losing any warlike behaviour and characterisation.

Vǫlundr, made lame, is bound to act with subtlety, even though with weapons, while Atli, king of the most dreaded army, never explicitly appears while personally fighting together with his retainers – at most he commands them, so that even those sparse valorous attributes he is given are deprived of any significance.

These characters can never prove their courage and their valour in the context of the narration (and possibly performance). Indeed, even if these are all main characters for importance, there is no textual hint that they should be praised for any of their other traits.

They are sometimes successful but never depicted as glorious, hence they cannot be considered as praiseworthy by their audiences. It should be noted that Vǫlundr and Brynhildr are exclusively moved by honour, exactly as the other heroic characters (at least some of them), and the main difference with them is indeed the fact that Vǫlundr and Brynhildr never take their honour dispute in warfare or a direct fight. That was not their scope within their narrative frame as conceived by Eddic authors, but this is nonetheless the root explanation for them not being glorious.

I should like to remark once more the case of Brynhildr, who is undoubtedly a honourable character. Together with Sváva/Sigrún, she shares an indeniably valorous past, even recent and partially overlapping with the narration, but their warlike and bloodthirsty endeavours are never magnified. In particular, Brynhildr, she is ultimately bound to her own individuality, while being unable to express it as she deems it to be fitting. Enveloped by tragedy and her own suffocating self, she is unable to reach glory. She acts as the personification of how normative femininity, in conjunction with an uncompromising honour code, can be dangerous for the existence of society.

Instead, courage and valour seem to be the only traits worthy of glorification, and this is demonstrable for Helgi, Sigurðr, Gunnar and Hǫgni, Hamðir and Sǫrli, as well as for Guðrún. This suggests that valour and courage are key variables, necessary to reach a glorious status. Once proved (or fated to do so), they grant words of praise and epithets in the texts of the poems and even in the prose of the *VS*, either in direct form, by the voice of the poet or the narrator, or through dialogues and characters' speeches.

All the inglorious characters I mentioned above uncompromisingly pursue their honour (or boast for such a stance), yet that does not avail them the textual references that give them exceptional relevance and celebration, as the others do. This proves that honour alone is not enough to define heroism. The heroic ethos as seen in the Edda can indeed be conceived as polarized between honourable and dishonourable⁷⁹, but one of the main themes of the discourse implied by the Eddic poems was indeed to show how an honourable conduct could still be highly problematic, especially if conflict arises between honourable characters.

⁷⁹ While the Norse social system in the Viking Age was not necessarily so polarised and defined.

4.3.2. Courage as a key variable and a turning point

If honour, in heroic poetry, is more important than life, then lack of fear, or courage, is the necessary trait for the honourable character, the courage to risk one's life in order to defend or improve one's honour. It is interesting to notice how, courage given, then valour is taken for granted. This emerges in particular from the dialogue between Reginn and Sigurðr after the death of the Dragon, where the young hero defends his position for which courage comes above all, even the foremost sword, for courage alone makes possible the greatest endeavours independently from the tools one can have at their disposal (Jakobsson 2010).

Moreover, in all these cases valour and courage emerge as basic qualities in warfare and fighting, the aptitude to risk one's life in order to define one's honour. This is clear in all of the analysed characters, but it is particularly evident from the adventures of Helgi, who is a commander and a king, as we have already seen. His courage lies in deciding to fight any battle, together with his armies, but always from the first lines.

On the other hand, with honour being more important than life, it is perfectly possible to be successful in terms of honour, yet also die in the process, as it is the case for Gunnar and Högni, Hamðir and Sqrli. Their courage and valour are proved to the highest degrees, which avails them their textual glory, but they die in that achievement, to the point where death is a necessary part of it. It seems that their glory is fulfilled exactly in the same event that causes their death – not before. Crucially, Helgi and Sigurðr proved gloriously brave and valorous at the pinnacle of their adventures, enough to enjoy that glory themselves, while yet alive. This differentiation can reinforce the idea that valour is bound to courage as a variable in the making of a hero, for valour could be great but insufficient in the achievement of a mission, but courage brought to the highest possible degrees, against all odds, is enough to grant praise and glory.

Courage, expressed with valour, is that trait that allows a hero to penetrate the boundaries of personal honour and of overwhelming fate (conceived as the sum of the others' honour and power) at once. This is not enough to break the chains of fate, but enough to sublimate one's oppressions and essence, towards glory.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ I would like to reinforce the idea with another, apparently silly but meaningful metaphor: destiny can be conceived as the dynamic evolution of a foam (that represents the whole heroic society) where each bubble represents individuality, the slight soap barrier of each being honour. Tragic fate means that

4.3.3. *Successful vengeance as the initiation of the virtuous hero*

A social situation where vengeance is required, that is, where honour has been offended, is a fitting context for an (re)assertion of honour through valour. As we have previously seen, vengeance is a main theme for many of the most important characters of the Poetic Edda. Some male heroes are first defined, in the stories, by an act of self-assertion pursued through vengeance for their own family, to restore their honour. This is true for each of the Helgi in his cycle, as well as for Sigurðr. Successful vengeance works for them as a heroic initiation ritual - even though their heroism does not stop there. Not so much for the Niflungar and the sons of Guðrún. Gunnar and Högni hardly face the conflict of a family feud at all (they actually cause it), while Hamðir and Sǫrli seem to go towards a path similar to that of the ancient heroes, avenging their sister as their first heroic endeavour, but they fail and die for their own fault. Hence success in vengeance can work as a criterion to divide within the group of glorious heroes: Helgi and Sigurðr against the Niflungar, and the sons of Guðrún.

However, successful vengeance is not necessarily a sufficient requirement for glory, nor is success with it. In fact, with the honour perspective, successful vengeance gives heroes a token of their honourable conduct,⁸¹ potentially glorious, projecting them towards glory, while the characters who do not need to fulfil an act of vengeance, or fail to do so, are left to prove their honour in other ways – such as in blindly pursuing their duties according to the honour code, refusing peace and projecting their individualities throughout their own death.

It is important to notice that Guðrún partially escapes this divide of vengeance, for she seems to be an apparently successful avenger. The problem with the successful and valorous vengeance of Guðrún is in the infanticide of her own children, and that is consequence of the state of women, asked and judged according to the metre of the honour

conflict, the pressure for each bubble, pushed by the others, is overwhelming. Glory through courage and valour means that the bubble reacts inflating from within (*hvatr*, strong, as in Clover 1993, to which I would associate the term 'outwards'), while inglorious conduct means that the bubble cannot overcome the pressure of the foam (*blauðr*, weak, 'inwards'). The bubble is bound to explode anyway (death), but how it reacts within the foam determines the occurrence of praise and glory.

⁸¹ In the case of Helgi, successful vengeance also provides his epithet *Hundingsbani*, which can be conceived as the public label of the hero, once more tied with the idea of honour as a social construction and the definition of the individual.

of the family, self-assertion and vigour on one hand (on par with men), while also being bound to the restrictions of marriage and motherhood (forcefully, with a man of a different clan, who could turn to hostility, as it is the case of Atli). Ultimately, success in vengeance alone cannot work to divide heroes in further categories. It must be used in conjunction with another, stronger criterion.

4.4. The Path to Glory

According to the generalisations derived from the available Eddic texts, heroic ethos was rooted into honour as the social definition of the self, but the pursuit of honour alone was not a sufficient condition to reach glory. Similarly, failure to comply to honour was not a point of irredeemable departure from glorious heroism.

In order for heroism to reach glory, honour must be fulfilled but at the same time transcended with actions that could prove the heroes exceptionally worthy, capable of sublimating their existence as characters and individuals and becoming larger than life, evading from the overwhelming and tragic fate. In all cases, the sublimation was realised with valorous or courageous actions, or both, triggered by the sense of honour. Failure to do so, prevented the access to glory even to the most honourable of characters.

The main distinction between glorious characters sets heroes and heroic characters apart, and it was marked by the expression of their valour or courage: either as a trait of the character; or condensed in feats of strength, of a character that was otherwise controversial, even in terms of honour.

Even if the honour code could easily lead to self-destruction and tragedy, nonetheless it acted as a means to reach glory, as long as honour was defended and pursued through valorous actions – that is with combat prowess and courage. This is why I chose the idea of transcendence for this phase: if the outcome of glorious valour and courage can still be death, it means that individuality is not at stake anymore. It is the apparent paradox of the very honour that was meant to define and defend individuality, which can only be explained if we conceive a status of existence, for these characters, that indeed transcends the biological one. For Eddic heroes, str. 76-77 of *Háv* are indeed not part of a call to moderation.

Through their textual presence and depiction, glorious actions and characters were meant to be judged as heroically inspiring, of an individual projecting their honour (that

is their social individuality) against and beyond the worldly limitations and constrictions, and the most overwhelming fate.

From this, we can synthesise a sequence, implied in the mechanism of the Eddic heroic ethos, where only the fulfilment of each step can lead to glory:

Honour > Fate/Tragedy > Challenge/Vengeance > Valour/Courage
(Transcendence) > Glory

Obviously, this sequence is valid only for (fictional) heroes, but as already assumed above, it is the narrative and then literary idealisation of a system of core values that must have been part of the Norse culture and society, through the Viking Age and arguably beyond. The honour code was narratively solved in its potential tragic flaws by the possibility of transcendence of honour itself, in a mythical depiction of the foundation of civilisation, where the favourable judgement of the many (praise and glory) was deemed as much important as one's individuality.

Yet, I should remark once more how the path of glory as above, even if fulfilled by a character, was not a fully redeeming achievement, and his or her past or future flaws, if any, were still problematic despite glory.

4.5. Heroism between Epitomes and Glorious Characters

All the male characters we have analysed, except possibly Vǫlundr and Atli, and with the notable addition of Guðrún, are surrounded by an aura of glory, although not all of them achieve glory by the same means. Indeed, it is important to notice that Sigurðr has in the acceptance of his destiny what is possibly his highest trait, yet, even if that eventually leads him to a tragic death, he had the chance during his life, to achieve the greatest endeavours, nonetheless. Not so much for Gunnar and Högni, whose heroic behaviour is of no avail to them during the rest of their lives; to the point that Gunnar is incapable of conquering Brynhildr, needing Sigurðr to do it for him. Similarly, for Hamðir and Sǫrli. Their heroism serves the only purpose of leading them to death and gain a glorious one. They can achieve glory only by demonstrating the uttermost courage and laughing in the face of death. When Sigurðr faces pivotal choices, such as in taking the

hoard of Andvari against the warning of Fáfnir, or in swearing loyalty to Brynhildr against her own warning, he always forfeits a safer fate for something great: the hoard itself in the first case, which makes him rich and fulfils the requirements to conquer Brynhildr, and the knowledge of a vast series of runes in the second case. Sigurðr is as fearless and hardy as Gunnar and Högni, yet Sigurðr takes care of fighting Fáfnir with a clever ambush, to avoid being overwhelmed by the dragon in an open fight, while the Niflungar consciously run against outnumbering foes, towards their death. Hamðir and Sǫrli kill their valorous brother Erpr for futile reasons, which was a dishonourable action that brought to their demise, as they admit when it is too late.

Futility and carelessness seal a compromised situation that could have been turned in their favour, had they been at least wiser in their reckless endeavours. Sigurðr does not fear death, but he does not run towards it. While the Niflungar directly forfeit their safety and life altogether for a glorious death, in a short-circuit that is incapable of generating any achievements within the domain of the real world. They bring heroism, bravery and glory to an ill-fated extreme. Sigurðr's glory is full of his earthly achievements, while the glory of the Niflungar is exactly in how they die. Sigurðr is the epitome of the hero, and together with Helgi he is a paragon of heroic virtue, an example to imitate and follow, while the same can hardly be assumed for the others yet praiseworthy and even glorious characters.

It is impossible to completely and safely reconstruct the perception of the audience in front of the different kinds of heroism they could hear in Helgi and Sigurðr against that of the Niflungar and Hamðir and Sǫrli. It is also impossible to discern a hypothetical chronological distinction of the two types. The difference between the two groups of heroes is there, so that any audience could mark it. Possibly, the Viking Age audience, still heavily (but variously) bound to the pagan religion, had a different taste, compared to that of the later Middle Ages, increasingly Christianised. Nonetheless, the Icelandic, as well as the Scandinavian audience, could have conceived the two types as different points within the same spectrum.

However, glory and praise as it appears in the various texts show how some characters showed some way to solve the problematic flaws of honour. The kind of heroism of the Niflungar and the sons of Guðrún was meant to be perceived as a partial critique, an excess and a flaw within a heroic system so overwhelmingly bound to honour.

Yet, as we have seen, their glory is undeniable, once proved. I argue that those characters could not act as *exempla* for their audience, as it could have been instead for Helgi or Sigurðr, for they make terrible mistakes, and even break bonds that should not have been broken, according to rules of honour. They are heavily censored for their errors. But their glory is such that their overly tragic heroism could have been a motive of pride for the Norse audience that culturally and at least partially ethnically identified with them, a proof of how their ancestral morals could have the power to honourably withstand the direst situation and hostile fate, making the most out of the situation that the Norns inevitably forced them into. I argue that the children of Giúki and the sons of Guðrún were still judged by the Old Norse audience as tragic and problematic yet praiseworthy characters, not paragons themselves, but their glorious actions being an everlasting source of inspiration, as those heroes that, overwhelmed by fate, proved their valour and courage at their highest levels.

This conflict within the Germanic heroic system can also be seen portrayed in other Medieval Germanic cultures and literatures, such as in the Old English (but already Christianised) *Battle of Maldon* and its Byrhtnoth,⁸² suggesting that the flaws and dangers of honour were widely taken as matter for narration and reflection, possibly also by virtue of their tragic and dramatic potential. However, my point is in fact that the Viking Age and Medieval Norse culture did not necessarily conceive recklessness and self-destruction as a conflictual point of the honour-led ethos, at least within the heroic narrative setting, by making tragedy a redeeming factor in favour of glorious heroism, not against it, particularly by virtue of the concept of destiny, so overwhelming that honour could assume its full, transcending value, towards glory.

Not all characters manage to find that transcendence, and even more importantly, that transcendence did not imply a full redemption of the characters and their questionable actions. A character that could not grant consistency about their honour and valour was inevitably flawed, therefore censured and bound to be conceived as problematic, despite his or her glorious feats of strength.

⁸² In that poem, the question of leadership and loyalty is arguably one of the main themes, much more than in the Eddic poems, oriented towards the relation between (main) characters and against fate. In Maldon, the perspective of the author is debated and not clear beyond doubt, but a possibility is that the author expressed how problematic was a leader, for his subjects and people, who allegedly behaved according to a heroic ethos analogous to that of the Eddic poems.

Censure is then the final criterion to divide glorious characters and flawless epitomes. It can be expressed for various reasons, from dishonourable treasons to the lack of valour or wisdom or moderation, but it is ultimately rooted in something that is perceived as socially inappropriate and indeed noxious. In our synthetic view of characters, glory is undeniable, but so is censure. Those characters who achieve both glory and are never censured must be considered as flawless, epitomes, and only Helgi and Sigurðr comply both requirements for the highest form of glorious heroism in the heroic poems. Being *hvatr* is not enough to be immune to censure and therefore flawless.

Conclusions

According to the textual criteria I defined, following the metre of censure, praise and glory as expressed by poets and narrators to classify the main characters of the heroic poems, we can now distinguish three main categories or heroic types:

- I. Epitomes, glorious heroes properly said (Helgi and Sigurðr);
- II. Glorious characters (the children of Giúki and the sons of Guðrún), for glory is concentrated in particular feats of strength, while the characters are also heavily problematic.
- III. Inglorious legendary characters, embodiments, in their exceptionality, of various *topoi*, within the complexity of the Norse culture (Völundr, vengeance; Atli, warlord and overwhelming antagonist; Sigrún, conflictual female love; Brynhildr, female honour and pride);

However, it must be borne in mind that these categories are (and were) more like ideal centres of gravity around which characters in narrative orbit. This is consequence of the inherent variation within narrative and culture.

Failure to reach glory, as in the sequence defined in the previous section, leads to a hero or character of the III type, entirely overwhelmed by fatal tragedy. If the sequence is fulfilled only in specific feats of strength, possibly in death, we are in front of a hero of the II type. If the sequence is consistent throughout the existence of a character, that is, if the character is flawless, it is a hero of the I type, the epitome.

In this light, it should be noted that both types II and III are heavily censured, while only type I is immune to it. This is another way to see that glory, an attribute of types I and II, is not sufficient to fully redeem a problematic character. Showing how censure and glory could be interwoven by means of honour, and this was possibly the educational side of these heroic poems.

As an approximation, it could be assumed that the heroic ethos, that is the loose moral system followed by characters in the heroic poems of the Edda, was indeed part of the Norse cultural and ethical system of the Viking Age, but it is hardly useful to describe those societies in their complexity. In fact, it is an ideal, a set of themes, that any man and

any woman could use to confront themselves with, depending on their attitude and their perception of their individuality, with the knowledge of the heroic lore acting as an educational repertoire of sorts, embedded in a larger cultural heritage.

Most importantly, heroic honour, made absolute and uncompromising but possibly not too far from the honour code actually applied in Norse societies, was received and re-elaborated as increasingly complex and problematic in time, and we can already appreciate in the Edda how all the characters of type II are equally praiseworthy and questionable, glorious and infamous, while only the characters of type I can successfully and flawlessly bear the burden of tragic heroism and reach glory – while yet falling victims of the machinations of the others, in particular those of type III, who are typically victims or players of the darkest side of honour.

Honour, at the root of the heroic ethos, was conceived as the requirement for the development of courage first and valour next, instrumental, in its uncompromising realisation, for the definition of an individual as praiseworthy and even glorious, in the eyes of fictional and real Norse societies. Therefore, societies that privileged an assertive stance of individuals (*hvatr*), capable of carving their own space in the world, made often hostile by fate. At the same time, that very uncompromising honour was to be held as the potential source for the uttermost tragedy and the source, direct or indirect, of a tragic destiny.

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