The Valkyrie's Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender

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This article argues that the medieval Scandinavian valkyrie and shield-maiden, overlapping categories of warrior, are best understood as a third gender, a hybrid of masculine and feminine attributes. Found in a variety of texts, myths, and legends of heroes, for example, these figures are clad in masculine attire, armor, and weapons, and exercise masculine power as they fight and choose who will die in battle. At the same time, linguistic markers, literary devices, and other of their activities mark them as feminine. The article further argues that the shield-maiden who chooses a male spouse subsequently transitions from the third gender to the feminine gender. As a consequence, she loses many of the powerful abilities of a warrior woman, along with her armor and weapons. Furthermore, her subjectivity is altered so that it is founded and dependent on that of her husband. When he dies, she is left with a diminished social network that, given the construction of subjectivity in this medieval context, leaves her personhood diminished as well.

Keywords: medieval Scandinavia / Old Norse mythology / shield-maidens / subjectivity / third gender / valkyries

The valkyrie is a figure familiar to many: from television to opera, armored, weapon-carrying warrior women march through modernity's imaginary worlds. The inspiration for these warrior women comes from diverse sources: stories of the Amazons, Celtic goddesses of war, Joan of Arc, and any number of narratives, myths, and other, often pseudo-historical retellings of the lives of past women. Valkyries have been the inspiration for a diverse range of cultural products, including Richard Wagner's character Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*,

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the valkyries of the Marvel comic-book series *The Mighty Thor*, and a plethora of others from elite and popular culture. A simple internet search of the term *valkyrie* brings up an array of texts and images, many of which depict the valkyrie as a scantily clad, buxom woman, lounging suggestively while grasping a weapon. It is easy to see that the modern valkyrie is deeply implicated in discourses of gender.

In the medieval Scandinavian world, the valkyrie and her close relative, the shield-maiden, are also deeply implicated in discourses of gender (Anderson and Swenson 2002; Clover 1986, 1993; Clunies Ross 1981; Jesch [1991] 2010; Jochens 1995, 1996; Larrington 1992a, 1992b; Layher 2007; Meulengracht Sørensen 1983; Quinn 2005). Their depiction in these Scandinavian sources is different from modern depictions, despite a few surface similarities. While they do carry weapons and wear armor—although more than some of their scantily clad, twenty-first-century sisters—they also act in battle and abide in battlefields, where they converse with carrion birds and the recently dead.

Most scholarship on valkyries and shield-maidens categorizes them as women, as kinds of warrior women who are connected to other, rare warrior women, such as the maiden king (*meykongr*) and to other women who, in exceptional circumstances, take up arms to fight (Andersson 1980; Damico 1984; Jesch [1991] 2010; Larrington 1992b; Præstergaard Andersen 2002; Quinn 2006, 2007). These discussions of valkyries and shield-maidens tend to insert them into a binary of masculine and feminine, wherein they sit somewhat uneasily in the feminine category. Yet, as other scholarship on Old Norse gender and sex has shown, the situation for all persons, not just valkyries, is much more complicated. The boundaries between masculine and feminine are not always rigid, at least insofar as women can take on masculine characteristics and receive approval, even if that approval was limited.[1] Valkyries and shield-maidens, like the strong women of the sagas, are met with admiration, though not as paragons of femininity. As this article argues, these figures are best understood as a third gender—a hybrid of masculine and feminine characteristics that were dominant during the time period explored.

The texts that speak of valkyries represent gender and valorize masculinity simultaneously. They put forth variations of a sex/gender system that were "historically and culturally specific arrogation[s] of the human body for ideological purposes" (Epstein and Straub 1991, 3). This system, like most others, is labile, but the normative assertions made in these texts orbit around certain centers. Male and female bodies represented in the texts discussed below, and in related medieval Icelandic texts, are distinguished particularly by their "body codes"—that is, "clothing, cosmetics, behaviors, miens, affective and sexual object choices" (ibid.). In particular, clothing differentiated men from women. As William Layher (2007, 185) notes, "[b]ecause masculinity and femininity were codified, if not established outright, through appropriate clothing in Norse society, items such as colorful silken coats, homespun cloaks, headdresses and

the like had a semiotic function whose authority sometimes spoke louder than words." However, gender differentiation was not limited to clothing; men were supposed to take women as their affective and sexual-object choices, and women were to take men as theirs. At times, human reproduction was closely associated with the feminine gender. One mythological text encapsulates this by saying that men who die in battle and women who die in childbirth are rewarded with an afterlife in Valhǫll, the residence of the honored dead, located in Asgard, the gods' realm. The virtue of death in battle points out the strong association of masculinity and martial action, an activity in which valkyries and shield-maidens also participated. The most positively valorized gender is the idealized masculinity, embodied by gods like Thor. These gods were considered strong, highly capable with weapons, fearless, powerful, and bold. As Layher states: "[M]asculinity becomes the master signifier in the Norse gender system: it is masculinity or manly courage (called among other things *drengskapr*), which is valorized above all other virtues" (189). The loss of masculinity was disparaged; for example, the divine being Loki is disparaged for his transformations into a feminine form, and for his transsexual and trans-species activity when s/he gives birth to a foal (Faulkes 2005, 34–35).[2] Moving from the feminine to the masculine end of the spectrum could be met with approval, but the inverse was rarely true. Divine beings other than Loki have their moments of gender blurring, but it is usually treated disparagingly, such as in the poem *Þrymskviða* where Thor's transvestitism is treated with somewhat humorous disapproval. The cumulative effect is to reinforce the boundaries built around the masculine gender.

It is a mixing of body codes that marks the valkyrie and the shield-maidens as neither male nor female, but a mixture of the two. While valkyrie, shield-maiden, and *meykongr* designate a different sort of person, there does not appear to have been a term for these figures. In poetic usage, the term *valkyrie* is not consistently used to mean only a warrior women. Nevertheless, they, like other third genders or sexes, "transcend the categories of male and female, masculine and feminine" (Herdt 1993, 21). These figures do not fit into the classification *woman*, although the shield-maiden may leave the male/female hybrid to be repositioned squarely in that feminine category. Their hybridity is marked in multiple ways: clothing is certainly one of the most significant body codes, as the example of Brynhild, discussed below, pointedly shows. Their presence in battle is one of the strongest masculine attributes that they had. Additionally, the shield-maidens' power to determine their male spouses when they did marry shows their capacity to act in a role usually limited to men. Other attributes are those usually assigned to the female, such as affective and sexual choices, the gender of the pronouns used to refer to them, and in some points in the narratives, feminine, as opposed to masculine, clothing.

The sources that speak of valkyries and shield-maidens are of multiple genres and are composed at different times, though most were recorded in writing in the thirteenth century. Two earlier sources are the poems, *Haraldskvæði*

and *Hákonarmál*, which scholars date to the tenth century and usually categorize as skaldic poetry, although both have characteristics of eddic poetry (Clunies Ross 2005, 28; Harris 2005, 121; Lindow 2005, 29). They memorialize kings, and valkyries appear within them as part of that project. Eddic poetry incorporates both mythological and heroic subjects. It is very difficult to date this poetry, and scholars' dates for the poetry range from 850 to 1300 CE. Much of this poetry is recorded in the manuscript named *Codex Regius*, which is often dated to circa 1270 (Harris 2005, 93). This collection of poems can be divided by subject into mythological and heroic poems, though there is some overlap between the two. Both parts clearly have roots in the pagan past. These heroic poems retell stories that are set in and even loosely based on events of the deeper past (the "age of migrations") and that have parallels in other, continental literatures. Material concerning valkyries and shield-maidens is found primarily in the latter. Another mythological source that contains discussions of valkyries and shield-maidens is Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, often called the *Snorra Edda* or *Prose Edda* to distinguish it from the body of eddic poetry that is sometimes called the *Poetic Edda*. The mythological portion of his work (*Gylfaginning*) is based on a number of the same eddic poems, but some of Snorri's quotations reveal that he either had an earlier manuscript or relied on oral tradition (Faulkes 2005, xxv). Written circa 1220, his *Edda* is an exposition on poetry that requires knowing the mythology; thus, Snorri includes a systemization of the mythology in his text. His presentation of that mythology is largely in prose, with poetic quotations, and in dialogue form. Similarly, *Vǫlsunga saga* reworks eddic poetry to create its narrative. Written between 1200 and 1270 (probably ca. 1250) (Tulinius 2002, 139), it is a *fornaldarsaga*—a mythic-heroic saga that could, like other *fornaldarsǫgur*, "give free expression to the concerns and fascinations medieval Norse audiences could not otherwise articulate directly" (Layher 2007, 191). In that sense, it is rather like the fantasy literature of today, imagining possible human relations and ways of being human that do not reflect social reality, but have the potential to influence it.

All of these texts were written down by Christians, whose relationship to their pagan past is a complex issue. Their reasons for recording them are, doubtlessly, just as complex. Perhaps the best way to regard these mythological and heroic stories is to do so from a somewhat similar perspective as the *fornaldarsaga*: certainly not true in any simple sense, but worthy of remembering and learning. While a redactor of myth and heroic legend may have been guided by and tied to an authoritative tradition, and while the writer of a *fornaldarsaga* may have been less constrained, the stories inherited from one's pagan ancestors did not have to be buried away with those ancestors. There is no space to go into such a difficult question here, but it may be helpful to regard the mythological material as a place where one might more easily explore alternatives to the two genders delineated in a masculine/feminine binary. These explorations could be tucked away in a pagan past that was valued, but not identical to the "us" of a

thirteenth-century Iceland. A third gender could be imagined and elaborated, but not given the same weight as representations of gender found in the texts of the dominant religion, Christianity.

In whatever ways these stories were adapted and transformed over the years to suit the interests of the societies that first retold them orally and later recorded them, we can know that the stories were considered worth repeating and committed to writing. Perhaps the stories spoke to an antiquarian interest or a loyalty to ancestors who were still admired. Whatever the case, within these narratives, representations of valkyries and shield-maidens show that other possibilities for gender, aside from dominant forms of masculinity and femininity, were envisioned. Moreover, shield-maidens' gender is represented as transmutable, but only in one direction—irreversibly, into the feminine gender. In doing so, they shed their agency and armor, and their social and familial networks are narrowed—networks crucial to constituting personhood in medieval Scandinavia—to the point, in many cases, where the once-independent individual was submerged into her husband's identity. A close examination of the stories of Brynhild, Sigrún, and Sváva will show that, when in contact with the most masculine of men, the shield-maidens' gender is altered to be more feminine.

Valkyries and Shield-Maidens

To describe valkyries and shield-maidens is to engage their hybrid gender: how they manifest both masculine and feminine characteristics. The valkyrie (*valkyrja*) is one of two differentiable though overlapping figures; the other is the shield-maiden (*skjaldmær*), who is sometimes treated as distinct in the scholarship, and at other times is considered the same type as the valkyrie. Moving among men in battle, valkyries were simultaneously awe-inspiring and fearsome beings whose task it was to select the men who would die in battle and then take them to Valhǫll, the hall of the slain. In some cases, their selection was dictated by Odin, the ruler of the gods, though in other cases, it seems it was the valkyrie who decided. The term itself is based on *valr* (the slain; corpses on a battlefield) and *kjósa* (to choose); thus, a valkyrie is a "chooser of the dead." In Valhǫll, which was in the realm of the gods, the valkyries' task was to serve the warriors drink. These men lived pleasurably in Valhǫll until the arrival of Ragnarǫk, the final battle that destroyed the world and almost all that was in it. Thus, the "afterlife" to which the valkyrie escorts the warrior, though filled with feasting and fighting (from which the men are always resurrected) and quite pleasurable, concludes, as it began, with death in battle. The valkyrie, like Odin, with whom and for whom she sometimes works, is not an entirely welcome figure for the warrior. Kings might succeed in many battles and expect that Odin will grant victories again, but instead they might lose their lives. Battle and its attendant deities were neither trustworthy nor held in an altogether positive light. The valkyrie of the tenth-century skaldic poem *Haraldskvæði* (attributed

to the poet Þorbjǫrn hornklofi and sometimes also called *Hrafnsmál*) evinces the valkyries' macabre aspect: she engages in conversation with a raven, a carrion bird, on a battlefield after the battle has ended. The poem describes the bird's bloody beak and the smell of dead flesh that accompanies it (*Haraldskvæði*, stanza 3, in Jónsson 1908–15, B-1:22).

In eddic poetry, shield-maidens are similarly denizens of battle. Whereas valkyries seem divine or, at the very least, semi-divine, the shield-maidens are human and have human parents and human lineages. However, they also have supernatural abilities, such as being able to ride over the sea and through the air. These beings take a special interest in human men—the heroes of the narrative—for whom, like the valkyries, they intercede in battle, but only to protect their heroes and aid them. Shield-maidens engage in sexual relationships with their heroes and most marry them; after that, they cease to be shield-maidens and become only feminine. The description here derives from the scant information available in the sources; there are not many examples of shield-maidens in the literature. One example is Sváva, who, like the other shield-maidens of the heroic poems of the *Edda*, is armored and carries weapons. Her helmet dominates the description of her as she rides among an accompanying troop of shield-maidens: "a white maiden under a helmet" (*Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar* [hereafter *HHv*], stanza 28, in Neckel 1983). Another example is Sigrún, a major character in two Helgi poems. Also described as helmeted, she and her band carry spears and wear blood-spattered byrnies, which are a sort of mail coat (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana* [hereafter *HH*] 1, stanza 15, in Neckel 1983). Valkyries and shield-maidens are similar in that both wear armor and carry weapons, act in battle to determine the fate of men, and are unmarried women. Shield-maidens are different in that they marry human men, which results in a change of status. Another significant difference is that the shield-maidens are more fully developed characters; valkyries are rather two-dimensional, having little depth to their characters or dialogue. At times, they seem to be only personifications of battle, though they are not limited to that (Quinn 2007, 96). Nevertheless, they are discussed together here because they have significant morphological similarities and because the sources do not make a strict distinction between the two: the term *valkyrja* is used for both Sigrún (*HH* 2, prose after stanzas 4, 13, 18) and Sváva (*HHv*, prose after stanzas 5, 9, 30), even though each is usually considered to be a shield-maiden and is usually treated as such by the scholarship. Brynhild, another significant member of the third gender, is both valkyrie and shield-maiden.

Despite their association with death and battle, valkyries and shield-maidens are described as beautiful and are associated with light—both lightness of complexion and light itself. In the skaldic poem *Haraldskvæði* (stanzas 1–2), an unnamed valkyrie has "shining hair" and is "white-throated." This is one of the few descriptions of a valkyrie's body, but shield-maidens' bodies are depicted in similar terms. In one eddic poem, the shield-maiden Sváva, for

example, is also said to be beautiful ("golden," as noted below). She is described as a "bright-faced woman" (*HHv*, stanza 7; the term for women is, literally, *bride* [*brúðr*], but in poetry this usage is not unusual), and, as noted above, as "a white-skinned maiden under a helmet" (stanza 28). The idea that whiteness and lightness are beautiful is hegemonic throughout medieval Old Norse texts (Jochens 1991, 19). For example, Gerðr, a giantess, captures the eye and becomes the object of lust of the god Freyr when he sees her arms radiate a brightness that lights up "all the air and the sea" (*Skírnismál*, stanza 6, in Neckel 1983). Like Sváva, Sigrún is fair and radiant; she is called a "sun-bright southern girl" (*HH* 2, stanza 45) and a "white lady" (stanza 48). Elsewhere (*HH* 1, stanza 15), her radiant beauty is framed by the light from the mountaintops from which she and her troop emerge—a light from which bolts of lightning shoot. Perhaps the fairness of the shield-maiden is highlighted because of her association with light more generally.

These images of fairness and beauty do not mark valkyries and shield-maidens as feminine, however. Beauty in Old Norse literature is assessed in the same way for both men and women, and as Jochens (1991, 4–5) notes, the same terminology of beauty is used. Words such as *væn(n)*, *frið(r)*, which may be translated as beautiful, and *fagr* (*fǫgr*), which may be translated as fair, are applied to both genders. In one of the poems under consideration (*HHv*), the eponymous hero Helgi is said to be *mikinn oc vænan* ("large and beautiful") (prose before stanza 6). In fact, men are more likely to be described as beautiful, and, more generally, are more likely to be described than women.

Valkyries and Shield-Maidens as Feminine

If beauty does not delineate bodily difference, what marks the valkyries and shield-maidens as feminine? As the term *shield-maiden* itself shows, these figures are semantically feminine: the word *mær* means "girl" or "maiden." In some contexts, the term also can be translated as virgin (in reference to the Virgin Mary, for example), and in poetry, it can be used to mean wife, lover, daughter, maid (as in servant), or slave woman. This same term is used to refer to shield-maidens, including Sigrún (*HH* 1, stanza 56) and Sváva, who is called a *margull-in mær* (*HHv*, stanzas 26, 28). (La Farge and Tucker [1992, 173] note that this term probably should be *marg-gullinn*—"much-golden.") Sigrún is also referred to as daughter (*Hǫgna dóttur*) in a kenning (a common literary device in Old Norse poetry). Other kennings also use feminine base terms (*HH* 1, stanzas 17, 56). *Snorra Edda*, Snorri's text on poetics that provides a systemization of the mythology, groups the valkyries with other goddesses (*Edda: Gylfaginning*, in Faulkes 2005, 29–30). The texts—with certain significant exceptions, one of which is addressed below—consistently use feminine-gendered pronouns for them. In terms of language, then, these figures are set in the category of the feminine.

Aside from this linguistic categorization as female, valkyries and shield-maidens have a number of other attributes that are part of medieval Icelandic culture's hegemonic constructions of femininity. Perhaps one of the most "traditional" feminine activities of the valkyrie is her work in Valhǫll, serving men drinks. At the same time that Snorri describes the valkyries' functions in battle, he writes that they "serve drink and look after the tableware and drinking vessels" (30). An example of this work is found in *Snorra Edda*, in which the goddess Freyja is the only one who dares to bring a drink to the giant Hrungnir, whom no other is brave enough to serve (*Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, in Faulkes 1998, 20). Human women similarly serve drinks to the men in the hall. As the keeper of food-stores and the manager of the household, women of the highest rank in Iceland were closely associated with food and its distribution. By serving men, they enacted that association and their subordinate position to the men they served. By depicting valkyries in this feminine role, the texts are able to have their cake and eat it too—the warrior woman is domesticated in Odin's "beer-hall."

Occasionally, these figures are described with phrases denoting feminine appearance. These phrases focus on jewelry as a specifically feminine sort of bodily decoration. In *HH* 2, Sigrún is the "gold-adorned lady" (stanza 45) and "ring-adorned woman" (stanza 35). Snorri notes in *Skáldskaparmál*, one part of his *Edda*, that "[a] woman shall be referred to by all female adornment, gold and jewels" (Faulkes 1998, 40). For example, *men-Gefn* literally means *necklace-Gefn*. *Gefn* is one of the names of the goddess Freyja, and the names of goddesses often substitute for all anthropomorphic, feminine beings; therefore, *necklace-goddess* simply means *woman* (for other examples, see Quinn 2005, 520). In Sigrún's case, these descriptions of her in conventionally feminine terms only occur after her marriage—a change that may hint at her transition to the feminine gender. Intriguingly, however, despite the fact that men's and women's clothing clearly marked their genders in medieval Scandinavia—there were even laws prohibiting transvestitism (Jochens 1991, 9)—valkyries and shield-maidens wear male clothing. Thus, this is one of their male attributes, which will be discussed below at greater length.

Their jewelry, their task as drink-bearers, and the language used for them all mark these warrior women as female. So also does their positioning as appropriate objects of male heterosexual desire in a culture that rigidly repressed any other possible sexualities, and rejected other possible sexualities in literature and law. Much energy was expended condemning male homosexuality (female homosexuality is not mentioned). Anything other than heterosexuality was considered shameful, and male/male sexual penetration was considered dishonorable and stridently condemned. These condemnations were parts of a complex of insults, sometimes called the *ergi complex*, in which accusations of cowardice and laziness could be directed at men and grouped with accusations that a man had been sexually penetrated by another man (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983; Ström 1974).

Insults based in this complex were deeply shaming and offensive. In contrast, when women were the target of insult, they were accused of being too receptive to male sexual advances. The adjective *blandinn* might be used as an insult that, when applied to women, might refer to either an impurity acquired from sexual intercourse or a fickle nature. The impurity of sexual intercourse, especially with men considered "outsiders," was considered to contaminate women and threaten the larger community (Borovsky 2002, 1–5). Unlike men, however, women could not act to prove the accusations wrong. The intensity of the condemnation can be seen in the law as well. Medieval Icelandic law, as encoded in *Grágás*, which incorporates laws of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, held accusations based in the *ergi* complex to be crimes punishable with some of the highest possible penalties, even allowing, in some cases, for the person who propagated the insult to be outlawed (Finsen 1852, 2:181–85). This opened up the possibility of killing the insulter as a legitimate form of retributive violence. Often, different parts of the complex are blended together for the most powerful effect. In the *ergi* complex, the laws that address it, and the vast majority of Old Norse literature, women are presented as the only appropriate objects of men's sexual penetration. Further, women were only to be the sex objects of their husbands, who were chosen by their male guardians, or the women would be shamed.

Usually, in those few instances when sources refer to valkyrie and shield-maiden sexuality, they are portrayed as desiring men and being desired by men. In eddic poetry, the sight of a shield-maiden could spark interest in the male hero: upon first viewing Sigrún and her troop of warrior women, the hero Helgi invites them to come home with him and his warriors (*HH* 1, stanza 15). Similarly, Helgi Hjǫrvarðsson (a different Helgi) is immediately attracted to Sváva. Once she gives him a name, he asks what else she will give and insists that she must be part of the offer (*HHv*, stanza 7). In the other eddic poem about Sigrún and Helgi Hundingsbana, she initiates the relationship. She seeks him out for a first meeting: "Sigrún sought out the cheerful prince / she took Helgi's hand; / she kissed and greeted the king under his helmet, / then the ruler's heart began to feel affection for the woman" (*HH* 2, stanza 14). She persuades him to oppose her father and family, and then aids him in that struggle so that they may marry. The other shield-maidens interact with their male partners similarly. Valkyries also seem to have sexual relations with men, but unlike shield-maidens, these relationships are not legal marriages and, further, they do not produce children. Judy Quinn (2007, 96) has argued that in addition to being a "fiery personification of battle, serving as an arbiter of a warrior's favoured status as a victor," valkyries were sometimes presented as "seductresses" who provided the dying warriors "with a soft landing somewhere else." Despite minor differences in depictions of valkyries and shield-maidens in terms of their marital relations with men, the fact that they are presented as appropriate objects of male sexual desire—like their role as drink-bearers, their gold and jewelry, and the language used to refer to them—serves to underscore their femininity.

Valkyries and Shield-Maidens as Masculine

At the same time, valkyries and shield-maidens embody masculinity: they wear men's clothing and act in ways understood by medieval Icelandic culture to be masculine. It is significant that they clothe themselves as men not simply by wearing "the pants," but by putting on the garb and carrying the tools that mark the most admired sort of man—the warrior. The helmets and other armor together are common elements in their appearance and important aspects of the valkyrie's masculinity. Sigrún and her troop's blood-spattered byrnies (noted above) are quite striking. The byrnie (or brynie) also figures importantly in the story of Brynhild, who was the most famous of all of these warrior women. The word itself is one part of her compound name: *Brynie-hild* (*brynie-battle*).

This armor-wearing valkyrie is not simply named for armor, but her armor becomes part of her. One of the texts that describes her first meeting with the warrior Sigurd the dragon-slayer notes that he initially mistakes the valkyrie for a man. According to *Vǫlsunga saga*, the thirteenth-century heroic-mythic saga, after his victory over the eponymous dragon, Sigurd follows the advice of some birds he has overheard talking, and rides away to find a shining wall of shields they have described. Even though the birds said that he will find a woman/valkyrie there, when he first enters, he sees a sleeping "man dressed in all weapons of war" (*Vǫlsunga saga ok Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*, chapter 21, in Olsen 1906–08, 48). In a rare example, the text uses the noun for man, *maðr*, and in the next sentence uses the masculine pronoun when Sigurd first takes off "his helmet." Once the valkyrie's helmet is off, Sigurd sees that the person is a woman, in a byrnie "so tight it was as if it had grown into her flesh." The phrase "had grown into her flesh," translates one word, *hóldgroinn*, which can be taken to mean "grown to the flesh," or "flesh-grown"—a growing together of a thing into the flesh (Cleasby and Vigfusson [1874] 1957, 278; La Farge and Tucker 1992, 118). It is as if Brynhild's body has merged with the armor: she has become the masculine clothing of war itself. However, she does not remain this way for much longer, because Sigurd awakens her when he cuts the byrnie off her with his sword. First, he slices down the neck and then along the arms of the byrnie—an odd process, when he could have removed it as easily, if not more so, by simply cutting down the middle. Alternatively, of course, he could have simply pulled it off or untied it, should it be laced on. What this method of cutting does is render the mail coat unusable. It is a mail coat no longer, but scrap metal. By cutting it off in this way, down the neck and then along the arms, the remains of the byrnie simply fall away from her. She awakens to ask what was "so strong" that it could cut through her armor. In sum, the removal of the byrnie is the removal of one of the valkyrie's most important masculine attributes. In the version in *Vǫlsunga saga*, the removal of the mail coat marks the end of her time in the third gender. As that story progresses, and a different version of the same narrative in *Snorra Edda*, Brynhild soon ceases to be a valkyrie and enters the feminine gender.[3]

Before exploring this transition and similar transitions further, the other masculine attributes of the valkyrie and shield-maiden must be discussed. It is not just clothing, but weapons also that are a part of their masculine appearance. Spears are most common, and it is probably not a coincidence that the spear is also Odin's weapon. In *Hákonarmál*, a valkyrie can be found leaning on her spear shaft as she converses with a king, Hákon the Good, after he has died in battle (stanzas 12–14, in Jónsson 1908–15, B-1:58–59). Similarly, in an eddic poem, Sigrún's troop carries spears that emit rays of light, spears that they carry as they emerge from the light from mountaintops and the valkyries themselves radiate light. This imagery of light and beauty contrasts with the dark, gore-flecked battlefields where the valkyries speak with carrion birds and dead kings. The other armament that a valkyrie carries in battle is a shield. Given that the valkyrie fights in battle and protects men engaged in fighting—she is not just the chooser of those who will die—it makes sense that this would be one of her tools. As Quinn notes (2007, 101–2), swords could also be their weapons. Sword, spear, and shield are all men's gear, like armor.

The valkyries' and shield-maidens' presence on the battlefield itself is also masculinizing. The battleground is the preeminently masculine domain where true masculinity is displayed, tested, made, or lost. A truly "manly" man seeks combat from an early age and rejects the feminine spaces of the home. In *Haraldskvæði*, another tenth century skaldic poem, the raven with whom the valkyrie converses conveys this in his description of the recently slain and Valhǫll-bound Harald, saying "The youth, he loathed the hearth / and sitting inside the house, / the warm women's room, / and gloves full of down" (stanza 6). Action on the battlefield is one of the most masculine behaviors.

The valkyries' close association with battle is quite evident in their names, which are often words associated with it. As noted above, Brynhild is named for her armor. Sigrdrífa—her double in some versions of the Sigurd cycle—has a name that is also a compound: the first part, *sigr*, means "victory." These names are not unique in tying the valkyrie or shield-maiden more closely to battle (Jochens 1996, 39). The *rand* in Randgríð is from *rǫnd*, meaning "shield." Similarly, *geirr* in Geirahóð means "spear," and the entire name means "spear war," while Gunnr, Hildr, and Hlǫkk are all valkyrie names that can also be translated as "battle" (Faulkes 1998, 286, 468, 475, 477). Names like Hildr were not restricted to valkyries and could be part of women's names as well. In the poetry, sometimes it can be difficult to discern if the word refers to the name of a valkyrie or simply to the word *battle*, since valkyrie names can be used in the common Old Norse poetic device of kennings.

Valkyries and shield-maidens, then, are masculine insofar as they inhabit the battlefield and determine the results of the battle as a whole and the fate of men in particular. As protectors, they could be comforting figures, but as figures firmly associated with death, they could be unwelcome agents of life's end. The protection of warriors and the selection of the dead are their two most

common activities on the battlefield. The valkyrie or shield-maiden has power over men's fate in this arena, albeit that power, at times, is only an expression of the power and decisions of Odin.

Whether they act on their own or at the behest of Odin, they are depicted doing battle as *sárvitr*, "wound-creatures" (*HH* 1, stanza 54). One valkyrie—an unusual figure named Sigrdrífa discussed below—is depicted killing a man in battle. Quinn (2007, 101–2) discusses valkyrie's violence in several verses of *Háttatal* (part of *Snorra Edda*) in which sword-wielding valkyries slay men in images of "the lunge and parry of bodies in fight." At the same time, it is not uncommon that they, like male warriors, are depicted in the aftereffects of battle. One poem describes men still in their armor "eating raw meat" after battle (*HH* 2, stanza 7); similarly, valkyries are shown as blood-spattered or looking out over the battlefield once the conflict is over. Quite commonly, the poems depict battle indirectly, using literary devices like a kenning based on a valkyrie name. The phrase *at Hlakkar drífa*, for example, means "in Hlǫkk's snowstorm"—that is, in battle (*Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 66). Like much of the action of the poems, the audience is left to imagine the spears and shields of the valkyries, and men, in action.

The power to decide when a man dies or to protect him from death is not the shield-maidens' only power. Unlike valkyries, who may have sexual relations with men, but do not marry them, shield-maidens marry; they marry or are supposed to marry the best of men—men who are heroic and accomplished in battle. However, the marriage is not contracted in the way a human marriage usually would be. The shield-maiden exercises more control over the man she eventually marries—in other words, she is masculine because she is able to determine her marriage partner. While a woman could be exchanged in marriage without being asked for her consent or without being consulted on her choice of husband, shield-maidens chose their own fiancés; they protect their heroes in battle until marriage. For example, Sigrún even goes against her father's will to seek out her own fiancé.

In the eddic poem *HH* 1, Sigrún seeks out Helgi, the story's hero. It is in this context that she and her troop, all covered in blood, appear from the lightning-laced light on the mountains and are invited by Helgi to accompany him and his men for some convivial beer-drinking. In reply, Sigrún says that they have "other business," and proceeds to tell him of her engagement to a man named Hǫðbroddr, son of Granmarr (stanza 17). Speaking directly and bluntly, as is common in eddic poetry and most Old Norse literature, she states the reason for her objection to this match: "I have called Hǫðbroddr / a bold king—as bold as a kitten" (stanza 18). This last verse clearly indicates Sigrún's scorn for a man she judges to be beneath her because of his timidity. She goes on to suggest that Helgi challenge Hǫðbroddr to battle or to simply take her from him (stanza 19). Helgi does not choose the latter option, but the former: to battle Sigrún's fiancé. The remaining text of the poem relates this conflict, Sigrún's and her valkyries'

protection of Helgi and his men, and Helgi's eventual victory. Despite this power that Sigrún exercises over her marriage, there is much in this narrative that shows that Sigrún is limited in other ways: she cannot simply refuse her father's choice of husband nor can she fight Hǫðbroddr herself, thereby freeing herself from the engagement. Nevertheless, she exercises more power over her marriage than most women in the texts, mythological or otherwise.

Indeed, Sigrún's agency is all the more remarkable when considered in light of what we know about ordinary marriages in the society that committed these texts to writing. Medieval Icelandic law, unsurprisingly, had much to say about marriage. The laws in *Grágás* are found in two manuscripts that can be dated to approximately 1260 and 1280, respectively. However, because a "substantial body of law was committed to writing in the early twelfth century," the laws can be assumed to represent laws of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There are internal contradictions and "provisions of arguable validity" as well (Miller 1990, 43–44). Granted, these laws cannot be read as simple reflections of social practice any more than any other body of law. However, they do represent an ideal mode of social interaction, one that some authority or authorities felt was best, and that was itself authoritative. By contrast, the eddic poem may be more at liberty to imagine alternative possibilities, whether they were based in past social practice of a pre-Christian time or the refashioned "memory" of what it might have been like. According to these laws, a betrothal was arranged by a legal guardian, usually a woman's father, unless she was a widow. Of the seven possible relatives listed, only one is female: a woman's mother might arrange her marriage, but only if her father and brother (by the same father) were dead. This legal guardian received the suitor's or his representative's proposal. Assuming there were no legal or other obstacles to marriage and the guardian accepted the proposal, he would set up the marriage contract, including the amount of the bride's wealth and dowry, and the date of the wedding (*Grágás*, in Finsen 1852, 2:29–30; Hastrup 1985, 93). The laws did not consider a woman's consent to be necessary (Frank 1973, 475). This disregard is echoed in other texts; for example, the family sagas—written in the late twelfth through the mid-fourteenth centuries but set mostly in the tenth and early eleventh—rarely depict a woman's consent to a betrothal to be normal or necessary, though they may also include negative consequences of not obtaining it. Other genres of saga are less consistent (Jochens 1986, 150). Similarly, the eddic poems consider the possibility and the kind of pressure that could be brought to bear on a woman who might exercise a right of refusal. One of the few moments of outright refusal comes from the goddess Freyja, when she refuses to be married off to the giant Þrymr (*Þrymskviða*, stanza 13, in Neckel 1983, 113). It does not appear to be relevant in this story that other texts say she is already married. In another mythological poem, *Skírnismál*, the giantess Gerðr tries to refuse an offer of marriage but is coerced into agreeing to it by threats from her suitor's representative. Also, like the more realistic family sagas, women in mythological

and legendary texts might not be consulted, which had similarly disastrous consequences. For example, Guðrún, a major female character in the eddic poems under consideration here, marries first Sigurd and then Atli, and both of these marriages are arranged by her brothers, even though her mother influences the marriages in the background.

None of these texts are simple reflections of social practice, but the majority of the evidence suggests that women did not have much choice over who their husbands would be. That Sigrún and the other shield-maidens chose their own husbands, then, is not merely unusual. It put them in the position of the man in contracting a marriage. An "ideal" marriage was contracted by a woman's father or other male relative, who would oversee the exchange of property and arrange the rituals of the wedding. Instead, the shield-maiden acts as a man in competition with her father.

From Third Gender to Woman: Sváva and Sigrún

It is the mixture of masculine and feminine characteristics that sets the valkyrie and the shield-maiden apart from most women and men of the eddic poems and other Old Norse literature. Their blending of attributes and actions that the ideology of gender would ideally attribute to either the masculine or feminine is what makes them a third gender. While valkyries, the more two-dimensional figures, are and remain members of the third gender, the shield-maidens do not. They change genders when they choose to marry a man—usually a man who is held up as a hero and who is the paramount example of the masculine gender. This transformation is only depicted in a small number of eddic poems, most of which have already been mentioned. In each, once the shield-maiden marries, all of her masculine abilities and appearance disappear, while her feminine characteristics remain or, in a few cases, appear for the first time. Once married, she does not return to the third gender—the change is irrevocable.[4]

A clear example of this gender transition comes from *HH* 2. In this poem, as in *HH* 1, Sigrún chooses Helgi to be her husband; she then aids him in battle against her father, family, and her father's choice of fiancé. *HH* 1 ends with her marriage to Helgi, but *HH* 2 continues the story, briefly recounting their lives after marriage.[5] In all of the ways that matter, Sigrún is no longer a shield-maiden. She no longer wears armor nor carries weapons; she is no longer a presence on the battlefield, nor does she hold any power over the fates of men in battle—not even her husband's.[6]

HH 2's plot does nothing to overtly note these changes to her identity; they seem given and unremarkable. A prose interlude informs the reader that the two are married and that they have many sons; it also says that Odin is intervening in human affairs by lending his spear to Sigrún's brother Dagr, thus giving him an enormous advantage in battle. From there, the narrative moves immediately to Helgi's death at Dagr's hands. In the verse, Dagr tells his sister that he has

killed her husband. The text never overtly states that Sigrún has no power to protect her husband; she simply does not. In contrast to her earlier protective actions, she now moves into a mode of vengeance. In response to her brother's news, she curses him (*HH* 2, stanzas 30–33).

As the story continues, the intensity of Sigrún's loss is communicated by her refusal to accept any compensation from her brother for Helgi's death. Her only reply to his offer of gold and land is to say that it is impossible for her to be happy or content in life without Helgi (stanza 36). It seems that her relationship with Helgi has become all-consuming. In the two stanzas that follow, she praises him: "Thus Helgi surpassed the warriors / as the magnificent ash surpasses the thorn bush" (stanza 38). As a prose passage at the end of the poem relates, Sigrún despairs and soon dies. However, before her death, she sees Helgi one last time. In a set of morbid scenes, the poem relates how one evening, one of Sigrún's maids sees Helgi and a troop of fighters entering his burial mound. When she hears of this, Sigrún goes out to meet him. Helgi travels from his food- and action-filled life as one of the battle dead in Valhǫll to the world of the living, where he appears as a reanimated, bloody corpse. When she meets him, Helgi is a corpse with "hair heavy with hoar-frost" and "clammy hands" (stanza 44). Helgi tells her that it is her tears that fall on him, each as a drop of blood. Despite his gruesome appearance Sigrún makes a bed for them, saying that "I will fall asleep in your embrace," just as she would have when he was alive. These passages show how inseparable Sigrún and Helgi have become. However, this does not have to be interpreted in a romantic way; rather, she has become dependent on him for her own existence. In his absence, she despairs of happiness and can only talk about his superior qualities. She would rather live with his dead corpse than without him. In a certain sense, her identity has merged into his, and once he is dead, she ceases to have the fullness and completeness of self that she needs to continue to live.

Before marriage, Sigrún had the ability to influence her own future and Helgi's. Now, that ability is gone, and as his wife, she is swept away by his death. Her last action is to attempt to re-create their marriage in his burial mound, a re-creation that is impossible as Helgi returns to Valhǫll. In Sigrún's death, there is no mention of her sons or her role as their mother. Her identification as wife has taken over and she can be nothing else, not even a widow. In this way and others, Sigrún's story in *HH* 2 shows the transition from the third gender to the feminine gender as represented in medieval Iceland. She becomes a member of the feminine gender and is identified as wife, and even her role as a mother falls to a faint second after her identity as spouse. A significant component of her change of subjectivity is her dependence on her husband for her identity: she cannot live without the man who now defines her.

The changes to Sváva's subjectivity are similar. Even though conventional descriptors for the feminine gender are used to describe her both before and after marriage, once she is married she no longer wears armor nor carries weapons, nor

is she masculine in any way. Before her marriage, Sváva protects Helgi in battle quite effectively, even fending off the attacks of a particularly powerful giantess (*HHv*, stanza 26). After Sváva and Helgi marry, he dies in a duel in much the same way that Sigrún's husband did. There is no indication that she has any power to aid or protect him. Certainly, she swears she will have vengeance on those who killed Helgi, but the passionate desire for vengeance is common to both masculine and feminine genders in many genres of Old Norse literature.

Although one section of prose between stanzas 30 and 31 states that after her marriage, Sváva is still "a valkyrie as before," she does not act or appear as a valkyrie. For example, she does not wear armor or carry arms. There are other possible interpretations, but none as compelling as her actual behavior.[7] The alternative readings are that Sváva continues as a valkyrie while married, or that she is still a valkyrie and that she and Helgi are not really married. However, this alternative reading does not seem to be the case. In terms of how they are presented in the poem, Sváva and Helgi are married: the same prose section that says that she remains a valkyrie also says that Helgi has asked her father for her, a standard part of the marriage ritual.

One clear indication that Sváva has become a member of the feminine gender is that she has lost one of her key masculine attributes: her ability to influence her choice of husband. As is the pattern in the stories of shield-maidens, her desired mate dies. Unlike Sigrún, she lives on past her husband's death. However, her grief is similarly profound: the poem describes her weeping as Helgi lies dying. He asks her to remarry, and she resists: "I had said . . . when Helgi chose me for rings, that I would not willingly, after my battle-leader died / take a prince of no renown in my arms" (stanza 42). It may be that she does not find her dying husband's choice of second husband, his brother Hedin, to be a sufficiently prestigious spouse, since she has sworn that if Helgi died, she would refuse a man of little or no reputation. Neither Hedin nor Helgi heed this statement and in the last stanza of the poem Hedin demands a kiss from her—a very intimate act in a society in which sitting together in plain view of others was considered a significant interchange between a man and a woman (stanza 43; Jochens 1995, 69–71). The implication seems to be that she cannot compel either man to respect the oath she swore, and that she will end up married to Hedin. In short, because she is no longer of the third gender she has no power over her marriage alliances; her agency has been reduced to that of any woman. Sváva's attempts to control her future in marriage may well reflect the desire any woman might have to control, or at least influence, an alliance that would impact them so significantly.

From Third Gender to Woman: Brynhild

In imagining the shield-maiden or the valkyrie, these texts set up marriage as a turning point—or, more strongly, as antithetical to their existence as a

valkyrie or shield-maiden. It seems that marriage and the third gender do not mix. One valkyrie's marriage highlights this—Brynhild's; for her, marriage is a punishment. Her betrothal and marriage also reveal what goes wrong when the valkyrie's choice of husband is thwarted.

Brynhild is a challenging figure with whom to work because of the difficulty of the sources. Nevertheless, she is a complex, rich figure and worthy of discussion. As with the story of Helgi and Sigrún, hers is retold in multiple versions. These versions are further complicated by two problems. First, it is difficult to determine whether Brynhild and the parallel figure Sigrdrífa are one and the same person with two names, or whether they are two different people. It is possible that Brynhild has been conflated with Sigrdrífa, or it may be that they were always one person. Second, *Codex Regius*, the only manuscript that includes the poem that mentions Sigrdrífa by name, has a lacuna of several leaves. It is possible to reconstruct the parts of the narrative that must have been included in those missing leaves by consulting the other versions of the story, but any revealing particularities of this version are lost and a reconstruction does little to answer the question of whether Sigrdrífa and Brynhild are two distinct persons or the same one. Scholars have dealt with this lacuna in the manuscript of the *Poetic Edda* in a number of ways, arguing for either the original identity of the two figures or a later conflation of distinct ones (for the latter, see Andersson 1980, 83; Jochens 1996, 92–93). The confusion exists in the sources themselves, some of which speak of only one woman and some of two different women.

Because of the gap in the manuscript, if Sigrdrífa is a separate figure, we cannot know if she became betrothed to Sigurd or if her gender changes. What can be stated with some certainty is that in some poems and in the reworked versions in *Vǫlsunga saga*, Brynhild is clearly identified as a warrior woman who later marries. In other words, some sources present Brynhild as a woman who was one of the figures with a hybridized gender and some do not. This article will draw evidence from those poems and other texts that clearly indicate that Brynhild was a member of the third gender in her past and will use the eddic poem about Sigrdrífa for a discussion of the hybrid gender of shield-maidens and valkyries and as a supplement for what we know about Brynhild.

The bare-bones plot of the narrative is consistent among the different versions: before introducing the valkyrie, the story is about the dragon-slayer, Sigurd. He is the one who meets and forms an attachment to the valkyrie (Brynhild/Sigrdrífa). She has been punished by Odin for rejecting his decision to kill one warrior, instead giving the victory to the warrior of her own choosing. Cast into a supernatural sleep, she is later awakened by Sigurd, who first perceives the sleeper as male and then, upon removing his/her helmet, perceives her as a woman. Following all of this, she imparts wisdom to him. At this point, the valkyrie is either out of the story or continues to be a major character. In all versions of the story, Sigurd betrays his first fiancée (sometimes a valkyrie) when

he marries another woman (Guðrún). The first fiancée is deceived into marrying another man, later learns of the deception, and in anger engineers Sigurd's death at the hands of her husband and his brothers. These men are also Sigurd's brothers-in-law because Guðrún is their sister—a very complicated domestic arrangement. After Sigurd is murdered, the former valkyrie kills herself.

In the *Poetic Edda*, the valkyrie figure enters the narrative in the poem *Sigrdrífumál* in which Sigurd meets Sigrdrífa, whom Odin has placed into a supernatural sleep. This is parallel to the passage discussed above concerning the removal of the byrnie from the valkyrie Brynhild. She is being punished because she killed the warrior to whom Odin had promised victory. Her punishment does not stop there: she will never "win the victory in battle" again and must marry. It is marriage as a punishment that is most interesting and significant. Instead of being the unremarkable "given" that shapes her adult life, marriage is a consequence of disobeying the king of the gods, the "Allfather" who is her symbolic, if not biological, patriarch. Sigrdrífa makes a counter-vow that she will never marry a man who could know fear—a vow that perhaps is intended to avoid the punishment altogether, for what man knows no fear? This vow puts her in a position from which she can only contract a marriage with the best of men, a hero like Sigurd. The end result of this encounter between Sigrdrífa and Sigurd is not known because it is in the middle of this poem that there is a gap in the manuscript. Nonetheless, even with the confusion of the Brynhild/Sigrdrífa problem, we learn that valkyries and marriage do not mix.

The parallel episode in *Vǫlsunga saga* tells much the same story, though now the valkyrie figure is called Brynhild. Just as with Sigrdrífa, marriage is a punishment for her because she a member of the third gender (chapter 21, 47–55). As in *Sigrdrífumál*, Brynhild recites poetry to Sigurd that teaches him about runes, but in this text she continues to give him advice, although in prose form. Then, he expresses his attachment to her and swears he will marry her; she does the same. As we can see, Brynhild is exercising control over the choice of her husband as the shield-maidens do, and she and the hero are on the path to marriage to one another. At this point in Brynhild's story, the valkyrie's work in the battlefield is directly juxtaposed to marriage, and the incompatibility between the valkyrie's hybrid gender and marriage is highlighted.

Returning to the *Poetic Edda*, Sigrdrífa is no longer mentioned, but Brynhild becomes the central figure. The next poem after the gap in the manuscript concerns Brynhild, who is now married to Gunnarr Gjúkason, not Sigurd. As one part of the tragic series of betrayals, she marries Gunnarr, one of Sigurd's brothers-in-law. Sigurd lives with his wife's family in an oddly matrilocal marriage and, therefore, also lives in the same household as Brynhild, the woman he once swore to marry. This matrilocal living situation also exacerbates any jealousies or rivalries between Sigurd and his brothers-in-law.[8] This is a recipe for disaster, and it is not long in coming. Brynhild, furious because she has been

betrayed and jealous of the rank and prestige of Sigurd's wife Guðrún, plots his demise. One poem describes her going outside to the ice floes and glaciers every night, filled with evil (*Sigurðarkviða in skamma* [hereafter *Sg*], stanza 8, in Neckel 1983). This icy fury comes to fruition when, partly at her connivance and partly because they are greedy for Sigurd's vast treasure of gold, Gunnarr and his brothers conspire to kill Sigurd. One of his brothers-in-law attacks him dishonorably—either while he is asleep in bed or from behind while in the forest, depending on the version. It is at this point that Brynhild, now grief-stricken at Sigurd's death, kills herself. The story goes on to narrate the lives of Guðrún and her brothers.

It is the intervening episodes, the passages concerning her vengeance, that most strongly point out how Brynhild's gender has changed after marriage. In plotting Sigurd's death, she pursues vengeance in the way common for women in these texts: by goading her male relatives. Instead of using violence or the valkyrie's supernatural ability to shape fate in battle, Brynhild uses words to compel her male relations to act in the ways she wants. In *Sg*, she goes to her husband Gunnarr and incites him to take violent action, telling him that she will leave and take her property with her unless he kills Sigurd (stanza 10). Part of what is at stake for her in this is her honor, which is dependent on his: "unless you have Sigurd killed / and become a prince more powerful than others" (stanza 11). She also suggests that Sigurd's son be killed, as he might eventually grow up to take vengeance for his father. This poem provides the most detail about her goading; others make only indirect references to the "severe vengeance" she caused (*Oddrúnargrátr*, stanza 19, in Neckel 1983). The results are the same in each case: Sigurd dies.

In acting this way, Brynhild takes vengeance in the mode of a woman; as a member of the third gender, she could have used violent force to exact vengeance. As noted above in regard to Sváva, the desire for vengeance itself is not masculine, but it is the means of obtaining it that is. Instead of using force, women goad and incite their male relations to do so. Women use words and, at times, bring a bloody token (or a severed head) to spur men's violent action (Miller 1983). Dependent as she was on men for "her status, her property, and safety," she, like other, less powerful members of society, used the means available to her to shame the powerful to act (Miller 1990, 212; for examples of female goading, see Jochens 1996, 162–203). The scholarship on these women's roles designates Brynhild as a *Hetzerin*, or "whetter." Using the actions of Guðrún and Brynhild in the *Poetic Edda* as her basis, Jochens defines whetting as a "well-defined female role . . . in which a woman—injured by an injustice for which revenge was beyond her capability—addressed a male relative(s), explained the crime's effect on him, reproached him for not having acted sooner, specified the requirements, and threatened dire consequences for noncompliance" (165). Brynhild does not seek redress for a crime in *Sg*, but she clearly intends "dire consequences" when she threatens to leave her husband and take her wealth

with her. In a poem that occurs later in the broader narrative, *Guðrúnarhvǫt*, Guðrún goads her sons (by her third husband) to action by impugning their laziness: "Why do you sit, why do you sleep life away?" (stanza 2, in Neckel 1983). Her harsh urgings are effective, and her sons leave to avenge their sister, at the cost of their own lives.

In other texts, women's goading could be even more directly challenging to a man's masculinity. Direct accusations of cowardice and indirect allusions to the man's physical and/or martial weakness could be used to spur action. Jochens (1996) discusses the example of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir in the family saga, *Laxdæla saga*, who addresses her brothers "with the repeated challenge 'you do not dare' and includes the insult that they seem more like women than men" (190, quoting *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 48). In response, her brothers immediately get up and go into action. Women's goading usually draws on the *ergi* complex discussed above. It is no accident that Guðrún begins goading her brothers by waking them from sleep. True men are persons of action. This idea is articulated concisely in another family saga by the character Svanr, who, when he hears of his friend Þjóstólfr's killing of another man, remarks, "such I call men, for whom nothing is insurmountable" (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, in Sveinsson 1954, 35). Þjóstólfr himself goes into action when his foster-daughter, Hallgerðr, makes certain that he sees the bruise left on her face by her husband and chides him for being far away, as if he did not care for her at all (34). Her words are met with action and Þjóstólfr kills her husband almost immediately, exemplifying the cause-and-effect relationship between a woman's words and a man's action in creating vengeance in this literature. Brynhild's desire for vengeance and her means of obtaining it are very similar in *Vǫlsunga saga*. She reproaches her husband Gunnarr for his actions and lies and tells him she will never be cheerful again. To prove this, she tears up her weaving and has the door to her room opened so that more people can hear her grieve (chapter 31, 73–74).

Besides seeking vengeance in this feminine mode, Brynhild's gender reflects the same change to the feminine that also occurs in the other texts that include Sigrún and Sváva. As noted above, her mode of dress is no longer masculine: she does not wear armor or carry weapons. As a wife, she can only recall the time before her marriage when she was "a bold woman in a byrnie" (*Sg*, stanza 37). There are some indications that as a married woman, she has traded her byrnie and spear for feminine activities. In the eddic poem *Helreið Brunhildar*, a giantess, whom Brynhild meets when riding to the underworld, says it would be better if Brynhild were "weaving / rather than visiting another woman's man"—a reference to the possibility that, although Brynhild could not have Sigurd in life, she will live with him in the underworld (stanza 1, in Neckel 1983). However, this can be juxtaposed to a scene of her doing embroidery before marriage, in another eddic poem, *Oddrúnargrátr* (stanza 17). However, even as she embroiders, she rules over lands and men all lost to her after marriage—a multitasking that demonstrates her membership in the third gender.

A stronger indication of her transformed gender after marriage is that, like Sigrún and Sváva, her subjectivity, or sense of self, is based on that of a man. This change of subjectivity is clearly evident in *Vǫlsunga saga*. It can be found in the scene in which she learns that she has been deceived into marrying Gunnarr instead of Sigurd. When she and Guðrún go out to bathe in a river, Brynhild wades farther out in the river because, she says, she is Guðrún's superior: "I think that my father is more powerful than yours, and that my husband has performed many powerful deeds and rode [through] the burning fire, but your husband was King Hjálprekr's slave" (chapter 30, 69). Guðrún is angered and replies that her husband (Sigurd) is unique and that it was *he* who rode through the flames, not Gunnarr. Brynhild is shocked to hear this and goes silent for the rest of the evening. What matters here is that Brynhild's subjectivity is based on the value and worth of her father and husband. She has become an appendage to their identities, especially to that of her husband. She does not assert her victory at war, her time as a valkyrie, or the gold and wealth she controlled—all of which she presents as reasons against marrying earlier in the saga.

The idea that Brynhild's gender has become female is reinforced by the very activity of hair-washing. The parallel passage in *Snorra Edda* makes it clear that she is going farther upstream so that she will not have to wash her hair with dirty water that has run through Guðrún's hair (*Skáldskaparmál*, 48). Jochens (1995, 127–28) notes that hair-washing was an activity usually associated with women, who washed their own hair when alone and also washed their husbands', male companions', and children's hair as one of many kinds of service performed for others. While the setting of the story is not in Iceland—the women are washing in the Rhine River—this activity would have been understood by its audience as appropriate for women. Therefore, it is while engaged in a feminine activity that Brynhild learns that she has been betrayed. In both cases, in this competition between the women, we see Brynhild basing her status on that of her husband, just as Sigrún and Sváva do once they marry.

The exact parallel—that Brynhild's identity would be based on her husband's—does not always exist because of the very complicated relationship among Brynhild, Sigurd (whom she wanted to marry), and Gunnarr (whom she is tricked into marrying). Although initially she ties her identity to that of her husband, he is eventually replaced by Sigurd. In what follows in *Vǫlsunga saga*, Brynhild seems to enter into a crisis of identity. The fact that she wanted to marry one man and ends up married to another complicates her subjectivity. It is as if her sense of self is damaged by her knowledge of the betrayal. It is then that she falls into a deep sorrow, tells Gunnarr he will never see her happy again, and tears up her weaving. Sigurd goes to speak to her and at the end of their conversation offers to marry her, but Brynhild rejects his offer, replying that "I will not have two kings in one hall" (chapter 31, 76). This is echoed in *Sg* in which Brynhild speaks of having a grim heart and being without joy (stanza 9). In both *Vǫlsunga saga* and this same poem, once Sigurd is dead, first Brynhild

laughs and then grieves (*Vǫlsunga saga*, chapter 32, 81–82; *Sg*, stanzas 30 [for laughter] and 40–41 [for sorrow]). In the end, the loss of Sigurd, the man who was supposed to be her husband, is too much and she stabs herself with a sword and slowly dies. She asks that she be burned on the funeral pyre with Sigurd, with a sword lying between them so that it will be as it was when he appeared to her in the guise of Gunnarr, "when we went into one bed and promised to be man and wife" (*Vǫlsunga saga*, chapter 33, 84). Eventually she walks out to the pyre and dies there by burning alongside him.

Certain eddic poems (*Oddrúnargrátr*, *Guðrúnarkviða* 1, and *Helreið Brynhildar*) also depict these events, including Brynhild's cremation on a funeral pyre alongside Sigurd. In *Sg* (stanza 47), she puts on a "golden byrnie" before stabbing herself. This is, perhaps, a gesture toward her previous gender when she had some control over her choice of male partner. Later in the same poem, she asks to be burned alongside Sigurd, an act she understands to be the result of her *hugr* (spirit) and an act Guðrún *should* be undertaking (stanza 61). This last ritual act resembles that of another woman, Nanna, the goddess who is the wife of Baldr. *Snorra Edda* relates the story of Baldr's death at the connivance of Loki. At his funeral, as his body is placed on the ship that will serve as his funeral pyre, Nanna "burst with grief and died." She is then carried onto the ship as well, and it is set alight (*Edda: Gylfaginning*, 46).

Given the similarity of Brynhild's actions, it would seem that she is identifying with Sigurd as a wife would to her husband, much like Sigrún and Sváva identified with their husbands. Gunnarr has been replaced by Sigurd. Thus, in *Vǫlsunga saga*, Brynhild first bases her identity on that of her husband Gunnarr, but later speaks of herself as wedded to Sigurd, the man she chose and who overcame a wall of flame to claim her as wife. With the exception of the short poem about Sigurd, in the eddic poems, information about her subjectivity in regards to Sigurd is sparser, but it seems that, from her parallel action in seeking death and placement alongside him on a pyre, she sees herself as his wife. The similarity among the three figures—Brynhild, Sigrún, and Sváva—is that their attachments to men causes them to change from the third gender to the feminine gender. The difference with Brynhild is that she does not marry her chosen mate, but comes to act as if, and speak as if, he were her husband.

At the same time, Brynhild's despairing actions reveal a complexity and contradiction in her feminine subjectivity that goes beyond just her case: Does she identify with her legal husband Gunnar or her intended or "true" husband Sigurd? In many ways, the texts are thinking through the problem of emotional attachment and the legal contracts arranged by one's parents for practical, political, and other reasons. In *Vǫlsunga saga*, Brynhild singles out her mother-in-law as a target for her anger once she learns that it was she who gave Sigurd a potion that caused him to forget his promises and marry Guðrún instead. This is ironic, considering that it would usually be the father who arranged marriages for his daughters.

As this discussion shows, Brynhild's transition from the third to the feminine gender is made much more complicated because her choice of husband is denied her. In becoming women, Sváva and Sigrún (in *HH* 2) choose husbands and get married, which results in subjectivities that are deeply tied to those of their husbands. According to *Vǫlsunga saga* and the short poem about Sigurd, Brynhild's sense of self is fragmented—vested in both Gunnarr and Sigurd, the man she chose. Her statements and suicide show that she thinks of Sigurd as her "real" husband. In dying after him, she resembles Sigrún, whose grief (in *HH* 2) at the loss of Helgi leads to her death.

What Brynhild's fractured and conflicted sense of self reveals is that the subjectivities of all three women are not very rich; they lack the multiple connections needed to maintain full and flourishing selves. That is to say, they do not have large, diverse social networks that provide them with many diverse relationships. Medieval Icelandic subjectivity differs from a conception of subjectivity that prioritizes or emphasizes singularity or interiority; rather, it tends to stress relations with others as constitutive of the self. The medieval Icelandic subject consists of the interweaving of biological and fictive kin relationships, such as fosterage and blood brotherhood, marriage alliances, and other sorts of bonds formed through oaths and formal alliances. The sagas exemplify this pre-modern subjectivity each time that a significant character is introduced. Following such introductions, genealogical information about that person and usually his or her spouse is introduced; sometimes this information is quite lengthy, running on for many lines. The plots of family sagas often hinge on the formation and failure of trans-familial alliances.

Considering the shield-maidens with this understanding of subjectivity in mind, one sees that their networks are anemic. For example, Sigrún *loses* her familial network when she spurns her father's choice of husband because she instigates a battle between Helgi and her family that results in the death of her father, one of her brothers, and others of her family. Although she is glad to see her former betrothed dead, she weeps when she learns of her father's and brother's deaths (*HH* 2, prose after stanza 28). Sváva does not lose her family at the hands of her husband, but her network does not expand when he dies, since she is passed to his brother. In general, in this culture, women had few means of expanding their networks. Their avenues for making alliances were far more restricted than those of men, meaning that they could not easily enrich their subjectivities. Many found themselves in situations not entirely dissimilar from Brynhild's: that is, being alone in a family that, it turned out, had its own best interests at heart, placing her interests a distant second. Brynhild's domestic situation is even more fraught because, in an unusual and almost aberrant decision, her sister-in-law Guðrún continues to reside with her own family, the Gjukings. It is that much the worse that Sigurd is Guðrún's husband.

Although it is reasonable to interpret Brynhild's suicide as an attempt to rewrite her subjectivity as either Sigurd's wife or as the result of an irresolvable

contradiction of her oath and the reality of her marriage, her suicide might also be understood as the despairing act of a person whose subjectivity has been reduced to almost nothing. She has rejected her husband Gunnar; she apparently cannot return to her father's home; and she cannot complete the alliance she attempted to make with Sigurd. In *Vǫlsunga saga*, Sigurd seems to try to convince Brynhild that she has sufficient bonds with others that will make her happy; he tells her that he loves her, that he was also deceived, and he tries to convince her that she can love both him and Gunnarr. She retorts that the oath she swore was to marry only that man who rode through the flames for her or else die. As she is foresworn, she now wishes to end her life. At this point, Sigurd even offers to leave Guðrún and go with her, but she rejects his offer. It is not just that Brynhild's wishes—stated while still a valkyrie—have been thwarted; she grieves on learning of her betrayal, because that betrayal means that her subjectivity is founded on a falsity, on a lie. What should be the most important bond creating her subjectivity is corrupt. That same loss affects Sigrún (in *HH* 2) dramatically also, and Sváva has no desire to replace her alliance with Helgi through marriage to his brother.

Conclusion

This article argues that valkyries and shield-maidens are best understood as a third gender, a hybrid of masculine and feminine attributes. The valkyries of the *Poetic Edda*, *Snorra Edda*, and skaldic poems like *Hákonarmál* exemplify this mixed gender: armored and armed warrior women who fight and choose the dead on the field of battle so that they might lead them to Valhǫll, but who nonetheless wear jewelry, present drinks, and are represented as being appropriate objects of male desire. It argues further that when these figures choose a male spouse and marry, they transition from this third to the feminine gender. Now disarmed, shedding their male attire and any other masculine body codes, shield-maidens like Sváva and Sigrún and valkyries like Brynhild become women and wives. The poems that relate the stories of Sigrún and Sváva trace this change and some of the consequences of that choice. Each chooses a hero and marries him, becoming, along the way, a woman with a diminished social network who cannot easily survive her hero's death. Ironically, in exercising choice over her spouse—a power usually reserved for men—they find themselves lessened. Sigrún shows this change most sharply because her decision to marry Helgi requires that he fight and kill members of her family. There is something tragic and sad that the exercise of power over the alliance most important to a woman results in a reduction of the fullness of her person-ness. The same diminishment of self occurs for Brynhild. Her transition, related in several of the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda* and in *Vǫlsunga saga*, is complicated by the deception practiced on her by Gunnarr and Sigurd. However, the conflict it creates for her has the same basic cause: she is the victim of a shrinking network of

human relationships. The betrayal only diminishes these connections further. In these narratives that show a third-gender person becoming a feminine person, there is little that is uplifting.

The myths and legendary sagas of medieval Iceland that are retold and recorded offer up both the possibility of the third gender, in the form of the unmarried valkyrie, and the stories of the effects of marriage on members of that gender. In the stories of Brynhild, Sváva, and Sigrún, one gets a sense of the life of any married woman of the time, though, more accurately, their stories most closely represent the life of a woman with few family members or other relationships. These myths and sagas have also provided a reservoir of depictions that have fed later cultural products up to the present day. With the exception of Wagner's Brünnhilde—the unmarried warrior woman—the valkyries of the third gender are most influential. Though often filtered through the modern retellings of Norse myth, the contemporary valkyrie is still recognizable as such. She still speaks to a modern audience, but now seems to tell a very different story, especially in the pop-culture arena. The blood-spattered byrnies are gone; these women do not loiter on battlefields to converse with ravens besmirched with gore. Instead, metal bikinis abound and the battlefield has receded into the background or faded away altogether. Image searches uncover a plethora of near-nude or nude women, helmeted and gauntleted, armed with swords and spears. The video game *Valkyrie Profile* (and its later derivations) and the Marvel comic *Valkyrie* are clear influences, though the larger aesthetic of fantasy art holds sway over many of these images. While some valkyries are depicted in action, riding horses through the sky or swinging their weapons, most are at rest. Many still lean on spears or swords, but are now in sexual postures or holding weapons that sometimes blur into phalluses, especially in those images in which the valkyrie squats on the ground with her sword or spear angled through her spread knees. These hyper-sexualized pictures of recumbent women are still connected to the valkyries of Norse myth, although, at times, the connection stretches thin.

One of the most striking differences is the gender of the pop-culture valkyrie. The valkyrie of a website like deviantart.com is a woman, not a hybrid of masculine and feminine. She usually has an exaggerated feminine form, her large breasts and hips contrasting with a small waist. Even when more than a few pieces of chain mail are draped across her form, her armor is form-fitted, designed to make free movement impractical, if not impossible. It is armor that is not really armor, quite unlike the mail coats of the medieval valkyrie. Instead, it feminizes her, whereas the byrnie masculinizes her medieval counterpart. Further, although depictions of violent actions are common enough and the potential for violence exists even in some of the contemporary images of the valkyrie at rest, the majority suggest that this feminine form is waiting for a man to claim it. She is all the more enticing because she is willing to put down those weapons for him. If there is gender-bending to be had from the medieval past, it

does not seem to be present in these pop-culture images. It is odd that a figure from medieval Norse myth could imagine a hybrid gender, albeit a gender that must change if the valkyrie or shield-maiden married, but is even odder that modern pop-culture images tend to place her in a narrowly defined femininity. While some of these images begin to imagine a powerful woman who possesses and uses weapons contrary to modern gender stereotypes, many fall short of this goal or else they arm a largely passive figure. Given that these images are products most likely primarily created and consumed by heterosexual men, the absence of the masculinity of the medieval valkyrie is not surprising. Although the subcultures of sci-fi, fantasy, and soft-core will probably continue to render the valkyrie in predictable and pedestrian ways, twenty-first-century scholars would do well to consider the medieval valkyrie more closely as a nuanced and even transgressive figure who can tell us something of our past and who might cast light on questions of gender, both past and present.

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Appendix: Old Norse Literature Cited in the Text

Brennu-Njáls saga (in Sveinsson 1954)
Edda: Gylfaginning and *Skáldskaparmál* (in Faulkes 2005 and 1998a, respectively)
Grágás (in Finsen 1852)
Guðrúnarhvǫt (in Neckel 1983)
Guðrúnarkviða I (in Neckel 1983)
Hákonarmál (in Jónsson 1908–15)
Haraldskvæði (in Jónsson 1908–15)
Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar (in Neckel 1983)
Helgakviða Hundingsbana 1–2 (in Neckel 1983)
Helreið Brunhildar (in Neckel 1983)
Oddrúnargrátr (in Neckel 1983)
Sigurðarkviða in skamma (in Neckel 1983)

Skírnismál (in Neckel 1983)
Vǫlsunga saga (in Olsen 1906–08)
Þrymskviða (in Neckel 1983)

Notes

1. Carol J. Clover (1993, 380) argues that there was only one sex and one gender in Old Norse society. Instead, the binaries *hvatr/blaudr* (bold/soft) and *magi/úmagi* (the powerful/the powerless or dependents) were the lines of "a social binary, a set of two categories into which all persons were divided . . . between able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman) on the one hand and, on the other, a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men)." Women acting like men could garner approval for doing so, although they are, as Clover notes, the exception. What Clover admirably argues for is the importance of power and the admiration of sovereignty over oneself and others—whether held "ideally and typically, but not solely" by men or (less often) by women (379).

2. All translations from Old Norse are my own and based on the edition cited at the first mention of a particular text. I provide the chapter, verse, or stanza number from the primary source and, in some cases, the page number(s) for the relevant edition. Names in Old Norse are in the nominative case except for those that are familiar to English readers, such as Odin, Thor, and Brynhild.

3. A parallel set of events can be found in the eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál*, which includes the term *man* and the male-gendered pronouns. Also, a parallel to their meeting occurs in this same poem, when Sigurd meets a valkyrie named Sigrdrífa.

4. By contrast, some warrior women in other texts do sometimes return to their warrior-maiden status. An insightful examination of two maiden warriors in two *fornaldarsǫgur* (legendary sagas) is William Layher's (2007), which examines the "cross-over" moments when the maiden warriors transition from masculine to feminine. In the texts under discussion here, there is only instance in which a character returns to the masculine gender: in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* (stanza 47), Brynhild puts on a golden byrnie after Sigurd is killed.

5. When working with the valkyrie and shield-maiden figures, one difficulty is that the stories about them are retold in multiple texts. For those not intimately familiar with the narratives, it can be hard to distinguish one version of the love of Sigrún and Helgi from the other. That Svava's husband is also named Helgi certainly does not help clarify matters. (The story of Brynhild and Sigurd is even more complicated.) To illustrate, the story of Sigrún the shield-maiden and her beloved Helgi is told in two eddic poems, *Snorra Edda* and *Vǫlsunga saga*. The plot is basically the same in each and it would be possible to treat their story as a single narrative or myth with certain variations; one might even attempt to sort out which is the "original" or an older version from which the others are derived. For the purposes of this article, however, each variation will be treated separately as expressions of the characteristics of the valkyrie and the shield-maiden.

6. Carolyne Larrington (1992b, 156) makes a related point that "[m]arriage puts an end to valkyrie activities and is therefore regarded as a punishment for disobedience." The reference to punishment is in regard to the valkyrie Sigrdrífa (or Brynhild).

7. For instance, the prose sections of the poems are the additions of the manuscript's compiler and may reveal more about that person's perspective or need to communicate pagan ideas to a Christian audience (Clunies Ross 2000, 124–25). Even if that were not the case, this same prose section says that Sváva remains "at home with her father," while Helgi goes raiding. This is a highly irregular form of marriage. Marriage in medieval Iceland was exclusively patrilocal, and the mythological and other texts simply take it for granted that the woman moves to live with her husband's family. In the literature, the only exceptions to that rule usually end badly (Sigurd) or simply create dire problems (Loki). If we take the prose section at its word, there is something odd about this marriage in general.

8. See Larrington (2011) on the repression of sibling rivalry and "free play" in affinal relationships in the heroic poems.

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