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Nema ein Guðrún er hon æva grét

Emotion, gender and revenge in heroic poetry

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Abstract

Revenge is a central theme of the heroic poetry of the Poetic Edda as are the attendant emotions such as shame and honour. Similarly the role of men and women in feud and vengeance is one of the prime concerns of this corpus of literature. Despite this centrality the heroic poems also bear a reputation for grim stoicism and a supposedly barren emotional landscape. Recent scholarship into the history of the emotions and the affective turn has begun to focus on the expression of emotion in medieval literature. This thesis surveys the language of emotion, the physical expressions of sentiment and emotional interactions in the final four poems of the Völsunga and Niflunga narratives of the Poetic Edda; *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál*. Further, this study provides an analysis of the shield maiden and inciter archetypes of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. It discusses the ways in which the language of emotion and attendant characterisation was used to subvert medieval conceptions around gender, violence and revenge.

Ágrip

Meginstef hetjukvæða í eddukvæðum er hefnd, skömmin sem hefndinni fylgir, og heiður. Auk þess er þar rík áhersla lögð á hlutverk karla og kvenna í fæðardeilum og hefnd. Þrátt fyrir þessa áherslu er frásagnaraðferð hetjukvæða yfirleitt talin hófstíllt hvað tjáningut ilfinninga varðar. Nýlega hefur þó tilfinningalíf og tilfinningatjáning verið í umræðunni meðal fræðimanna á sviði norræna fræða. Í þessari ritgerð er fjallað um tungumál tilfinninga, líkamlegrar tjáningar væntumþykju og tilfinningalegra samskipta í eftirfarandi kvæðum; *Atlakviðu*, *Atlamálum*, *Guðrúnarhvöt* og *Hamðismálum*. Rætt er um skjaldmeyjar og aðrar staðalmyndir norræna bókmennta. Auk þess fjallar hún um hvernig tilfinningarnar í málinu voru notaðar til að grafa undan hugmyndum miðalda um kyn, ofbeldi og hefnd.

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1. Introduction

Ymr varð á bekkjum, afkár songr virða,
gnýr un guðvefjum, grétu born Húna
nema ein Guðrún er hon æva grét
(*Atlakviða*)¹

Despite passages such as that above, which describes the grief of the Huns on discovering Guðrún's great revenge against her husband Atli, Old Norse-Icelandic heroic poetry has been considered, historically, to rarely engage with the realm of emotion, particularly in contrast with later medieval works and genres. The literary corpus as a whole could be described as emotionally cold and the heroic poetry of the Edda as suffering stoicism to an extreme degree. However, recent studies in the history of emotions suggest that this approach to medieval literatures is misunderstood and that the style of Old Icelandic texts masks a rich emotional landscape that expresses and reflects the concerns of medieval Icelanders.

Throughout the poetic corpus few characters made such an indelible mark on their world as the heroine Guðrún Gjukadóttir. As a daughter of and wife to kings and princes of the epic past, Guðrún's story encapsulates the end of dynasties and describes the tragedy of bloody hatred, revenge and grief. The development and representation of those attendant emotions, which Guðrún's tragedy entails, is the subject of this thesis. As such this work will primarily focus on the expression of grief, anger, shame, and the desire for revenge in a selection of medieval heroic poetry. The goals of this project are two-fold; to develop a linguistic survey of the key language related to emotion and to provide a literary analysis of the key emotional complexes of heroic poetry. The key areas of enquiry are the form and representation of emotion; how emotion intersects with other concerns such as the gender of participants and emotional structure of the poems; how the audience might therefore

¹ Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, eds., *Eddukvæði II*, Íslensk fornrit (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014).

"There was moaning on the benches, a terrible song of men / howling under the battle cloaks, the children of the Huns wept / all but Guðrún, she who never wept"

Stanza translations are taken from Carolyne Larrington's translation of the Poetic Edda. See Carolyne Larrington, ed. *The Poetic Edda: A New Translation by Carolyne Larrington* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). All other translations are my own unless specified.

have been intended to understand emotional exchanges, and how the use of emotion ultimately undermines the roles of both men and women in the so-called heroic ideal.

1.1 The texts

For the purposes of this study I have chosen to deal with the final four poems of the so-called Niflung narrative, which deals primarily with the rise of the great hero Sigurðr, his death, and the later life of his widow Guðrún and her children.² The poems; *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál in grænlensku* (referred to as *Atlamál*), *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál* are the last of a collection of twenty poems which are generally classified as heroic poetry as they deal with the lives of heroes of the epic past. These texts, along with a collection of poetry dealing with cosmological and mythological matters are part of the *Codex Regius* manuscript, and known colloquially as the Poetic Edda.³ The poems' composition is in the alliterative *fornyrðislag* meter, which was generally used for epic narrative works, although *Atlamál* diverges into *málahátttr*.⁴

A brief summary of the greater narrative will be provided here which follows the tale of cursed gold, initially acquired by the Æsir Óðinn, Loki and Hœnir, as a compensation payment for the death of Óttarr.⁵ The giant Andvarri was forced to produce the wergild for the gods but cursed the final piece stating that it would bring tragedy to all who owned it. Fafnir, one of Hreiðmarr's other two sons, kills his father and retreats to Gnitaheiðr and guards the treasure in the form of a dragon. The third son, Regin, later becomes foster-father to Sigurðr and convinces the young prince to kill Fafnir so that Regin can claim the full hoard. Sigurðr succeeds and, while roasting Fafnir's heart, tastes some of the blood and is then able to understand the speech of birds. He overhears two nut-hatches in a nearby tree discussing Regin's plans to kill Sigurðr and claim the gold. Sigurðr of course strikes first and kills his foster-father and claims the treasure.

² I have retained the Old Norse-Icelandic spelling of proper nouns throughout including nominative endings where appropriate.

³ Although dating of the poems themselves has not been determined with any certainty (and is unlikely to be so in future) the manuscript itself, GKS 2365 4to, has been roughly dated to the latter half of the thirteenth century, c. 1270. The heroic poems which form the latter half of the manuscript comprise three lays relating the life of hero Helgi Hundingsbani; eighteen poems relating the Niflung cycle including *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál*; and the Jörmunrekkr lays which are comprised of only *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál*.

⁴ For an overview of Eddic poetry see Terry Gunnell's chapter in: Rory McTurk, ed. *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

⁵ This early section of the narrative, dealing with the Æsir correlates to *Reginismál*, included in the group of poems following the life of young Sigurðr, prior to his killing of Fafnir.

Sigurðr then meets Sigdrífa and they pledge themselves to each other, but a draught of forgetfulness later means that Sigurðr marries Guðrún when he arrives at Gjuki's court. He assists Gunnarr in wooing Brynhildr by meeting her in Gunnarr's likeness. The two marriages are brought asunder when Guðrún reveals the deception to Brynhildr as revenge for the other's cruel remarks. Brynhildr demands justice by asking Gunnarr to kill Sigurðr, which occurs when the sons of Gjúki kill Sigurðr in the bed he shares with Guðrún. Brynhildr commits suicide and is burned with Sigurðr on his funeral pyre. Guðrún is later given a drink of forgetfulness and is married to Atli who, in some versions at least, is the brother of Brynhildr.

Greed prompts Atli to invite Gunnarr and Högni to his court where he slays them, but without learning the location of the cursed wergild treasure. In revenge Guðrún kills her two sons with Atli and serves their flesh to him and the court's retainers. She later kills Atli and attempts to drown herself, but survives and is married for a third time, now to King Jónakr and having two more sons – Hamðir and Sqrli. Guðrún's daughter with Sigurðr, Svanhildr, is married to Jǫrmunrekkr, and he later has her trampled to death by horses for the supposed crime of adultery. Guðrún incites Hamðir and Sqrli to avenge their half-sister and, although they initially resist, the two relent and ultimately succeed in their revenge but are also slain.

I take as a starting point for this study the work of David Clark who maintains that the framing of events in the deep past is designed to distance the reader from the action of the poem, a world in which the heroic ideals that drive the narrative are in fact framed as destructive and ultimately anti-feminist.⁶ He argues that by using language such as “Ár var alda, þat er arar gullo” or “Heyrða ek segja í sogom fornum”⁷ in the introductory stanzas the poets frame the ‘heroic ideal’ as something which is not - and should not be – applicable in the present. Thus Guðrún's characterisation is ultimately negative and designed to undermine the concept of vengeance as a useful social arrangement. In order to explore further and to extend these arguments I will undertake a linguistic analysis of the various lexemes of emotion in each poem. I also examine the ways in which laughing and weeping, outward expressions of inner emotions, form pivots upon which the structures of the poems turn. In the second and third chapters this linguistic analysis is applied to

⁶ David Clark, *Gender, Violence and the Past in Edda and Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 18-20.

⁷ He translates these lines as: ‘It was in early times, when eagles yelled’ and ‘I heard it said in ancient stories’.

various aspects of the emotional landscape of the narratives in order to examine emotion in intersection with both gender and heroic ideal. I will examine the role of women as violent avengers and the role of men in the *hvot* with regards to the ways in which emotion is deployed to undermine the values and excesses generally associated with the theme of heroic vengeance in the narratives.

1.2 Previous scholarship

This study is intended as a review of scholarship relating to the representation of emotion in four of the heroic poems of the Poetic Edda - *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Guðrúnarhvot* and *Hamðismál*. While there has been significant scholarship in various fields related to these poems there has yet to be more specific work relating to the analysis of the emotional content, form and representation. It is important to note that early scholarship on the representation of emotion in the heroic poems of the Edda has tended to focus on its use as a dating mechanism, that is, as a tool to quantify certain poems as more ancient, and therefore perhaps more authentically Germanic or historic, than others. Andreas Heusler is perhaps the most well-known and earliest of modern scholars to approach the heroic poems in this fashion, however similar arguments have been put forward as recently as 2005 by Vésteinn Ólason, for example.⁸ Heusler's arguments revolve specifically around the so-called 'elegies' of the poems of the Volsunga cycle; *Guðrúnarkviða I*, *Guðrúnarkviða II*, *Guðrúnarhvot*, *Oddrúnargrátr* and *Helreið Brynhildar*.⁹ In his analysis of this group he posits that the heightened emotional style and content meant that they should be categorised as 'weibliche Rückblickslieder' or 'retrospective women's songs'. They could also be called "Frauklagen" that is, 'women's complaints'. For Heusler it was particularly important that these poems did not conform to either of the two other major categories in his *Gestambild*. The first of these are the 'double-aspect poems of action', 'doppelseitige Ereignislieder', which feature both dialogue and narrative passages, and revolve around action - *Brot af Sigurðarkviða*, *Hlqðskviða*, *Vqlundarkviða*, *Hamðismál* and *Atlakviða* make up this category. The second group, which includes *Fafnismál*, *Reginismál* and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, were described as 'einseitige

⁸ Vésteinn Ólason, "Heusler and the Dating of Eddic Poetry - With Special Reference to 'isländische Nachblüte der Heldendichtung,'" in *Germanentum im Fin de siècle: Wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Studien zum Werk Andreas Heuslers*, ed. Jürg Glauser and Julia Zernack (Basel: Schwabe, 2005).

⁹ Andreas Heusler, *Die altgermanische Dichtung*, Second edition ed. (Potsdam: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1941), 181-88.

Ereignislieder’ or ‘single-aspect poems of action’ as they were composed solely of dialogue and yet still concerned primarily with action. These two categories, but particularly the double-aspect poems, Heusler dated to the ninth or tenth centuries. The ‘Frauklaugen’ poems mentioned above fall under an umbrella group which Heusler called an ‘isändische Nachblüte der Heldendichtung’ or ‘late Icelandic flowering of heroic poetry’, and dates them, accordingly, to the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Daniel Sävborg points out in his analysis of Heusler’s categorisation that “the reason these formal features should be the basic criterion for division of the Eddic poems is not made clear”.¹⁰ Sävborg goes on to suggest that rather than considering grief and lamentation as alien to the supposed Norse tradition of heroic poetry we should in fact look to parallels in a “larger generic, literary and social context” and discusses the links between violence, grief and lamentation in Ancient Greek and Old French literary works.¹¹ While Heusler’s arguments about the nature of these poems is not directly related to the representation of emotion in the poems I intend to discuss, it is worthwhile noting the nature of historic analysis and how emotion has been understood within the genre of Old Norse-Icelandic heroic poetry.

1.2.1 *The history of emotions*

More recent work has focussed on the role and expression of emotion within the text itself. Carolyne Larrington’s article on the psychology and physiology of emotion asserts its importance to the study of the medieval period. Larrington outlines theories of emotionality and how they may be useful for thinking about emotion in literature of the medieval period.¹² Physical and somatic effects, also well documented in texts from the *Íslendingasögur* or *fornaldarsögur* for example, are important to our understanding of the expressed emotions. “To some extent the physiological symptoms of anger can be exaggerated or stylised, but they are none the less recognisable both to us and to the characters within the texts who are depicted as aware of normative standards.”¹³ She notes as a particular example the permissibility

¹⁰ Daniel Sävborg, "Elegy in Eddic Poetry: Its Origin and Context," in *Revisiting The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York: Routledge, 2013), 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

¹² Carolyne Larrington, "The Psychology of Emotion and the Study of the Medieval Period," *Early Medieval Europe* 10, no. 2 (2001).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 254.

of tears for men in some cultures but not in others, for example the weeping King Arthur contrasted with Gunnarr in *Brennu-Njáls saga*.

Barbara Rosenwein is also concerned with the normativity of emotional responses and her research has had a long engagement with the history of emotions with particular emphasis on medieval literatures. “I postulate the existence of ‘emotional communities’: groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value – or devalue – the same or related emotion.”¹⁴ She suggests that scholarship on the history of emotions must take into account that there existed a range of emotional responses and that we must approach them suspiciously and that authors are very likely testing or playing with sentiment. “Already long ago we realized that our sources are ‘interested,’ often ‘insincere’. What should we make of them when they purport to tell us of emotions?”¹⁵

William Ian Miller’s work on emotions in the sagas suggests however that the modern view that they are emotionally cold simply reflects “a kind of non-chalance that borders on insensibility”.¹⁶ Rather than being devoid of sentiment, he suggests that the ‘taciturn’ nature of sentiment and emotion in the sagas reflects a preoccupation with honour and shame, an aspect most obvious in the discussion of physical reactions to emotions and their suppression.¹⁷ It is important to note that while these scholars do not address the issue of gender and emotion as their primary focus, it none-the-less is a distinct feature of analysis for each of them, especially with regard to Old Icelandic texts. It can be seen that the intersection of appropriate and condoned emotional behaviour is a primary concern in medieval texts and that these emotional responses are seen to be positive or negative dependent on whether the actor is male or female.

1.2.2 *Gender and performativity*

I am interested in the intersection between gender and the performativity of emotions as they are presented in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Both the description and performance of emotional exchanges can be considered kinds of performativity, in which characters engage. J.L Austin and, later, John Searle both discussed the nature

¹⁴ Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶ William Ian Miller, "Emotions and the Sagas," in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative approaches to early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992), 91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

of performative speech acts in everyday language, in which ‘saying something’ is considered the same as ‘doing something’.¹⁸ Judith Butler built upon this foundation in her discussion of performativity and gender identity. Butler has argued that all gender is performed through a series of acts that are rehearsed social constructs.

The representation of women in Old Norse-Icelandic texts has been the basis of much study, particularly the various archetypes as presented in both prose and poetry. Jenny Jochens’ analysis of the ‘avenger’ archetype in particular is of interest here.¹⁹ Jochens asserts that the role of the avenger and the whetter, a related type, are connected; yet their activities “can be separated into physical action – bodily revenge – and the cerebral activity of whetting, mainly with words”.²⁰ In these four poems I will examine how Guðrún performs both of these activities and I would like to investigate how the language of the poetry signifies the different states, that is; Guðrún as avenging shield maiden or as a monstrous figure whetting and destroying kin and blood ties.

Thomas D. Hill’s discussion of the physiological elements of grief in another Eddic poem, *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta*, outlines the importance of physical release in evaluating how emotion is embodied and potentially understood by audiences.²¹ What is particularly interesting in his account of emotional performativity is that here it directly intersects with the role of gender in the Eddic poems. No other poem is so expressive with regard to the physical accoutrements of grief, particularly tears, and these markers are generally only presented by women, in their lamentation of a death. Given that other Old Icelandic literature such as the *Íslendingasögur* often make claims that women were flagrant or irresponsible in their emotional responses, there seems to be a direct correlation in medieval thought about how women engage and perform sentiments such as grief or anger.

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, by contrast, discusses the role of grief and other emotions with regard to how female characters endorse or subvert appropriate behaviour. Focussing on Brynhildr, whom Jóhanna categorises as a subversive character, she argues that women in the Edda “are marked by their refusal to speak

¹⁸ J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, ed. J.O Urmson (London: Clarendon Press, 1962). And John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

¹⁹ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

²¹ Thomas Hill, D., "Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta: Guðrún's Healing Tears," in *Revisiting The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York: Routledge, 2013).

and act as they ought, at least in the eyes of some of the poems' male characters, and thus probably the hegemonic thirteenth century reading position".²²

David Clark approaches the centrality of vengeance in the heroic poems of the Edda with emphasis on its intersection with gender.²³ He suggests that gender complicates and problematises vengeance and undermines the heroic ideal that the poems initially seem to support. In his article 'Undermining and Engendering Violence', Clark questions whether "the portrayal of Guðrún is anti-feminist or in fact constitutes a portrait of an autonomous female figure in control of her own destiny".²⁴ He further argues that the setting of the poem, that is, in the 'heroic past', problematises the issues around violence, vengeance and honour by stating that these heroic ideals actually 'belong' in that past world and its expression is meant to question the appropriateness of revenge which is likely not applicable to the contemporary audiences.²⁵

Carolyn Larrington examines what she suggests were likely related concerns about the role of women in medieval Icelandic (and probably Scandinavian) society, through the final four poems of the heroic cycle. She posits that Guðrún's role as a bride, and as "compensation for the unfortunate treatment of Atli's sister Brynhildr", and therefore her uneasy status as blood-kin or kin by marriage reflects a greater and probably deep seated uneasiness about the role and allegiances of women in the Middle Ages.²⁶

1.2.3 Gender and monstrosity

Given that the authors of saga and poetry are concerned with the appropriate female behaviour, I am interested in how Guðrún's infanticide is positioned in this context and how gender and monstrosity intersect. Paul Acker notes the horror of Guðrún's actions in a study of Grendel's mother in *Beowulf*.²⁷ He contrasts Hildeburgh and Wealhtheow, the only notable female characters in the poem, with Grendel's

²² Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, "'Gerðit Hon ... sem konar aðrar' Women and Subversion in Eddic Heroic Poetry," in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyn Larrington (New York: Routledge, 2013), 118.

²³ David Clark, "Undermining and En-Gendering Violence: Distancing and Anti-Feminism in the Poetic Edda," *Scandinavian Studies* 77, no. 2 (2005).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

²⁶ Carolyn Larrington, "'Long Have I Desired to Cure You of Old Age': Sibling Drama in the Later Heroic Poems of the Edda," in *Revisiting The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyn Larrington (New York: Routledge, 2013), 142.

²⁷ Paul Acker, "Horror and the Maternal in 'Beowulf,'" *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (May 2006) (2006).

nameless mother and notes that the monstrosity of the vengeance may have been highlighted because a creature that was both female and maternal undertook it.²⁸ Although there is no real direct correlation between the actions of Grendel's mother and Guðrún's infanticide it is worth noting the authors of these poems might have had similar ideas about the role of women and motherhood and the horror of its abjection and destruction.

The heroic poems of the Edda play an extremely important role in our understanding of both medieval Icelandic and Germanic psychological landscape. The narratives suggest a historic concern with honour and revenge and the importance of maintaining kin relationships. The poems, much like Old Norse literature in general, have a reputation for grim stoicism with little emotionality or sentiment. However, by focussing on the character of Guðrún Gjukadóttir, whose experiences of grief and vengeance underpin the poems of the *Völsunga* cycle, and through her status as a heroic avenger or monstrous maternal figure, a greater understanding of the emotional landscape of the poetry might be obtained.

1.3 *Emotion in Old Norse-Icelandic literature*

How do we recognise, analyse and understand the emotional complexes of the narratives of the Middle Ages? While the history of the study of emotions as an interdisciplinary field is relatively recent, especially as it applies to the study of literatures, the study of emotion itself - the generation of feelings, how they are expressed and whether or not all emotions exist for everybody, for example - has developed over decades. Of the definition of emotion Aristotle (384-322 BCE) provided the earliest example with his description of the Greek term *pathos*. "The emotions are all those affectations which cause men to change their opinion in regard to their judgements, and are accompanied by pleasure and pain; such are anger, pity, fear, and all similar emotions and their contraries."²⁹ Quantifying and qualifying the emotional content of literary works is a major point of this study and it is worthwhile establishing in what ways scholars have approached and perceived the differences between *emotion*, *feeling*, *sentiment* and *affect*. On the difference between these

²⁸ Ibid., 705.

²⁹ For an introduction to how emotion has been understood from antiquity until late Classical period see Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*. For a more extensive overview of thought on emotions, especially in relation to the life sciences, see Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An introduction*, trans. Keith Tribe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

qualities Derek Attridge warns that as each functions differently in various grammatical contexts we should probably not be too dogmatic about meanings.³⁰ It should be noted that discussions of these definitions encounter the problem of having to rely on other difficult to describe terms and so approaching a definition of *emotion*, for example, might resort to use of adjectives such as *feeling* and *sentiment*. For the purposes of literary analysis in the chapters that follow I will use the terms fairly freely and interchangeably and without direct reference to specific definitions unless required.

Old Norse-Icelandic literature of the Middle Ages has a reputation for being particularly opaque with regard to the emotional states of the players involved. The paratactic style, particularly in the *sögur* and *þættir*, described by W.P. Ker as ‘face of the clock’ storytelling, in which the barely-present narrator only describes what might be seen externally, the inner-workings invisible.³¹ However, practiced readers of these narratives learn to recognise the careful deployment of understatement, occasionally for comedic effect, but which also ably demonstrates more potent emotions such as fear, hate, or love. The Eddic poems dealing with the Völsung-Niflung narrative, by contrast, seem to indulge and revel in the emotions tied to tragedy – particularly the feelings of grief and the desire for revenge. The so-called ‘elegies’, concerning Guðrún’s grief over the death of Sigurðr, powerfully demonstrate the capacity for this style of language to reflect internal feeling while the narrator remains external to Guðrún’s inner life and emotional experiences. While some poems seem comparatively less demonstrative, for example *Atlakviða*, Guðrún still exclaims to her doomed brother Gunnarr that it would have been better if he had “sætir þú í sǫðlum / sólheiða daga, / nái naðfǫlva létir nornir grát”.³² Guðrún does not express her feelings by describing the emotion she is experiencing (that she is afraid her brothers will be killed), but it is not difficult to determine her anxiety and fear for Gunnarr and Högni; her speech engenders the desired affect. Through her speech the poet contrasts the imagery of the sun-bright days of what might have been – a princely life of a warrior – against that of pale, doomed corpses and weeping norns. The description of *nái naðfǫlva* (pale corpses) also recalls the somatic responses to emotion often seen in saga texts - extreme physical reactions such as changes in skin colour – the visible affect of emotional life.

³⁰ Derek Attridge, "Once more with feeling: art, affect and performance," *Textual Practice* 25, no. 2 (2011): 330.

³¹ W.P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays of Medieval Literature* (New York: Dover, 1957), 244.

³² Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 376.

“Sat you in the saddle all through sun-bright days, / the norns wept at the pale doomed corpses”

2. Emotion and Affect in Eddic Poetry

One of the most critical aspects of the reading of emotions in medieval works of art is acknowledging that emotions are, in many ways, conditioned by social and cultural constructs that do not necessarily correlate directly with the experiences of modern readers. One way of addressing this problem is to examine which emotions were considered important or central to the view put forward by the Eddic poets and to do so I will provide a brief linguistic summary of the lexemes of emotion that feature in each of the four poems. Considerations will include the frequency with which terms are used, how they relate to the action of the characters involved, as well as the overall structure of the texts. This survey will then be used to support an analysis, in the following chapters, of the ways in which emotion is represented with regard to gender, broadly, and to Guðrún Gjukadóttir specifically.

In the broadest terms the emotional impact in the latter Eddic poems is generated out of direct speech and occasional descriptions of gesture. However, in the case of *Guðrúnarhvot* and *Hamðismál*, we are also presented with rhetorical arguments, in an Aristotelian sense - deploying emotion in argument in order to change an individual's judgement. In arguing, ultimately unsuccessfully, against his mother's incitement to revenge Hamðir recalls the moment in which Guðrún killed her young sons Erpr and Ertill in revenge against Atli.

Urðu þér ...
bræðra hefndir
slíðrar ok sárar,
er þú sonu myrðir
knættim allir
Jormunrekki
samhyggjendr
systur hefna.³³

He attempts to recall the emotional toll of her earlier foray into vengeance in order to resist her present incitement to violence and further revenge.³⁴ It is interesting to note,

³³ Ibid., 403.

“Vengeance for your brothers was wounding and painful / to you when you murdered your sons. / We could all have avenged on Jormunrekkr / our sister, all of the same mind”

³⁴ This scene, to which I will return in Chapter 4, is indicative of the trope with the female participant engaging in the *hvot* and the male relative attempting to resist. See, for example, Carol Clover's detailed analysis of the quasi-legal language and use of the bloody token as a whetting prop in which

however, that references to feelings of grief or mourning are oblique – her vengeance was wounding and painful (*sliðrar ok sárar*) which could possibly be read in only physical terms, rather than in the realm of sentiment or feeling.

2.1 *The emotional lexis of the heroic poetry*

While these instances of emotional intention pepper the poetry it would be incorrect to suggest that the authors of heroic poetry did describe emotions or feelings directly or describe actions which signify interior sentiments not expressed in dialogue. It has become somewhat of a commonplace of literary studies of Old Norse-Icelandic texts that interior emotion must be read carefully by practised readers as characters do not describe their emotions clearly. However it may be more accurate to say that this applies more to the prose texts such as the *Íslendingasögur* than to the heroic poetry.³⁵ And, as Carolyne Larrington describes in her recent article on the transmission and translation practices of Arthurian texts into Scandinavia and Iceland, these texts and the later native romance-genre, the *riddarasögur*, demonstrate complex emotional landscapes in which actors both describe and act out feelings.³⁶ They had, as she describes, “an emotional script” with which the audience was familiar. Medieval Icelandic poets and audiences therefore were practiced at reading and understanding the emotional lexemes, even if they are somewhat opaque or ambiguous to modern audiences. In another recent analysis of the representation of emotion in medieval narratives Sif Ríkhardsdóttir applied critical developments in the cognitive sciences to address the creation of meaning in through the perception of mind and its attendant emotive life. In her study of *Brennu-Njáls saga* and the *Nibelungenlied* she argues that emotions can be considered as semiotic representations intended to mediate meaning with particular narrative frameworks.³⁷

In terms of language usage and frequency the heroic poetry seems to contain more references to actual emotion and sentiment than the saga texts. The heightened emotional discourse of the great tragedies of the heroic poems may have been considered a more appropriate venue for those strong sentiments. The emotional language available in the heroic poetry demonstrates familiarity with the ‘core’

she suggests that the formalised language and hospitality reflects a ritualised insertion of women into the otherwise solely-male political space of the legal system.

³⁵ Carolyne Larrington, "Learning to Feel in the Old Norse Camelot?," *Scandinavian Studies* 87, no. 1 Spring (2015): 88.

³⁷ Sif Ríkhardsdóttir, "Hugræn fræði, tilfinningar og miðaldir," *Ritið* 3 (2012).

human emotions - love, joy, surprise, anger, sadness and fear.³⁸ As will be shown, emotion, in both its description and usage by the poets, is important both to the thematic landscape as well as to the overall structure. However, Carolyn Larrington pointed out in her analysis of the Poetic Edda, as a whole, that more ambiguous or complex feelings are less frequently expressed.

The emotion lexis of the Poetic Edda encompass a very wide range of terms; strikingly absent are terms for more complex emotions such as humiliation, shame, malevolence, and envy, while anger and grief outweigh love and happiness. *Reiði*, *tregi*, *harmr* and *sorg* are the most frequent eddic lexemes.³⁹

How, when and which emotions are expressed also depends, to a certain extent, on the gender of the actor involved. As will be seen in the following summary of the language of each of the poems, the capacity to act in specific emotional ways is proscribed by gender. Female characters, or Guðrún specifically in these poems, have more ‘emotional freedom’ to engage in a greater range of the core emotions, while male characters such as Gunnarr and Högni are limited in their capacity for expression of sentiment.

Atlakviða features fewer instances of emotion lexemes in the early stanzas, although the poet takes great pains to establish a sense of foreboding. The text refers largely to the physical expressions of interior emotional states; *grátendr* (weeping), *hló* (laughed), *gnýr* (roar), *grétu* (wept), *faðmask lint* (embrace gently) however there are also rare references to actual sentiment, *glæðr* (cheerful) and *heiptmóðr* (wrathful). The first reference to emotion, or its expression, is in stanza 12 in which “grátender gunnhvarta ór garði”.⁴⁰ We should note that it is the *valiant troop* of men who are weeping, and although this is not an explicit description of an emotion, the audience is obviously meant to recognise the weeping as an outward expression of grief or sadness. Similarly in stanza 24, which is the next overt reference to an emotional expression, we are told that “Hló þá Högni,” (then Högni laughed) in this case a somewhat suspect expression of cheerfulness or, more likely, a bleak humour in the

³⁸ While there is no complete consensus among researchers with regard to what constitutes the core list of universal human emotions, love, joy surprise, anger, sadness and fear are generally included. See P. Ekman, W.P. Friesen, and P. Ellsworth, "Methodological Decisions," in *Emotion in the Human Face*, ed. P Ekman and H Oster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

³⁹ Larrington, "Learning to Feel in the Old Norse Camelot?," 88.

⁴⁰ Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 375.
“The valiant troop, weeping ... from the young men’s court”

face of death.⁴¹ It is not until stanza 31 in which Gunnarr strikes his harp *heiptmóðr* (furiously, wrathfully) that the poet describes an actual feeling, adjectivally, with regards to Gunnarr's playing of the harp prior to his death in the snake pit. The first half of the poem is somewhat lean when it comes to emotional expression of the participants, however, the death of Gunnarr and Högni serves as a transition point after which there is an increase in lexemes related to emotion – and I think it is important to note that this sudden change of state is linked directly to Guðrún's choice to act against her husband Atli. Female agency and emotion become linked in the poem's midpoint and conclusion.

The emotions described from this point in the narrative are a complex group of expressions of the core sentiments as well as more complex cultural concerns such as shame. The emotional tide turns with Guðrún's duplicity in offering Atli refreshment, “gladly from Guðrún, little creatures gone into darkness” (*glaðr af Guðrúnu gnadda niflarna*), the morsels later revealed to be the flesh of Erpr and Ertill. Guðrún takes great delight when she “níð sagði Atla” (told the shame of Atli). In making this statement Guðrún performs a perlocutionary speech act, which has the effect of altering the understanding of both Atli and the poem's audience, and the response is roaring and weeping (*gnyr, grétu*) among the court as a whole. With the exception of Guðrún, that is; the poet goes so far as to point out specifically that everyone weeps “nema ein Guðrún, hon æva grét” (except Guðrún alone, she never wept).⁴²

Atlamál, by contrast, has a far more varied array of lexemes and the poet of this version of the tale seems to emphasise centrality of feelings and interior sentiments in a way that seems somewhat foreign to the poet of *Atlakviða*. The language here uses many synonyms for similar feelings or related emotions: *ygg* (terror), *aldregi* (afraid), *hrædd* (afraid), *bliðr* (cheer), *óðir* (fury), *qtul* (angry), *reiðir* (enraged), *harmr* (sorrow), *ynðit* (joy), *glaðr* (glad), *vilir* (desire) *sorg* (sorrow), *grimmr* (loathing), and *stríðr* (distress or grief). There are also numerous references to actions born out of emotion such as weeping (*gráta*) and laughing (*hlæja*). Although the poet foregrounds terror (*ygg var þeim síðan*) in the opening stanza, the following scenes portray seemingly normal familial emotions such as joy and cheerfulness at Gunnarr and Högni's dwelling. This foregrounding serves to heighten the drama and tragedy for the Niflungs once they arrive at Atli's settlement. Unlike in *Atlakviða*

⁴¹ Ibid., 377.

⁴² Ibid., 381.

characters in the poem make specific references to feeling emotions as shown by Kostbera; “eitt ek mest undrumk” (one thing most surprised me) while in stanza 33 cheerfulness is reported but not in direct speech. “Bera kvað at orði, blíð í hug sínum” (Bera said in words, cheer in mind).⁴³

However, once the party departs there comes a transition into negative emotions – rowing becomes “furious” and they destroy the boat upon arrival at Atli’s shore; this indicates the descent into destructive familial interactions once Vingi’s treachery is revealed. The next reference to feeling and emotion is rather a reference to its lack when Hogni tells Vingi that his speech is pointless because they are not afraid. Gender is complicit in this transition – this is a male-only space and the emotions that remain are fury, and the lack of fear. The deployment of and engagement with emotions seems then to be closely linked to gender in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus, the poetry being no exception to the rule generally understood to apply to the sagas. The transition into the final cycle of the poem coincides with the description of the death of the ‘dear ones’ – Gunnarr and Hogni, and the action-oriented focus of the poems shifts to the intensely personal and domestic. There are, however, few overt references to emotions in these final scenes and Guðrún’s cheerfulness is in fact a deceit in service of the final treachery. The final reference to any sentiment is part of a speech by Guðrún in which she describes her marriage into Atli’s house as *kvöl* (torment).

Much like *Atlakviða* which it follows directly, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, engages the audience with the emotional landscape of grief in the very first stanza. The range of emotional lexemes present in the text is not quite as wide ranging as that of *Atlamál*, however it does include some words and phrases that do not appear in any of the other three poems. While variations of ever-present *gráta* and *hlæaja* appear throughout *Guðrúnarhvöt* the poet also uses verbs such as *trega* (to grieve), or words such as *stríða* (distress or affliction) and *sorg* (sorrow). Guðrún’s initial *hvöt* of the title over the death of Svanhildr shades into a female lament, in which she describes her various grievances and her *tregróf* (chain of woes). These grievances are also described as wounds (*svára sára*) individually painful, and ranked; the death of Sigurðr is her most agonising grief (*sárastr*) while the grimmest is the death of her brother Gunnarr (*grimmastr*).

⁴³ Ibid., 388.

Hamðismál features very few lexemes related to the expression of emotion - second only to *Atlakviða*. This fact, as well as other structural elements, contributed to Heusler's argument that these two poems were more ancient than *Atlamál* and *Guðrúnarhvöt*. As the list of lexemes is so brief I will list each instance here: *græti*, *sorg*, *stríða*, *gráta*, *grát*, *eiskra*, *glaumr*, *hló*. As per Larrington's analysis of emotions described in the Eddic poetry, there is little evidence of an interest here in the more granulated or complex emotional states even though the poem includes situations that could certainly have expressed more faceted sentiment. The brief appearance of the somewhat confusingly named half-brother Erpr, only grazes the surface of what might have been a more nuanced sibling interaction.⁴⁴ There remains, however, the shade of insult in Erpr's riddling offer of assistance to his half-brothers, which Hamðir and Sqrli misunderstand, and results in his death. While the exchange is brief and somewhat opaque, it describes again the difficult sibling relationships that recur in this narrative. Guðrún privileges particular familial relationships (and so, too, do Hamðir and Sqrli when faced with a half-brother) when attempting to avenge a half-sister.

It becomes apparent that although the poems each contain references to specific lexemes of emotion there are significant linguistic differences in range and frequency of the sentiments described or implied. Across the four poems we find emotion words that correlate to a majority of the core emotions: love, joy, anger, sadness and fear. When grouped together into broad categories of positive (love, joy), negative (anger, sadness, fear) or neutral or ambiguous (surprise) it becomes obvious that negative emotions far outweigh positive or neutral emotions combined. *Atlakviða* contains references to six negative emotions, two positive and one neutral. *Atlamál*; twenty negative emotions, five positive and two neutral. *Guðrúnarhvöt*; eleven negative, no positive, one neutral. *Hamðismál*; six negative, one positive and one neutral. By way of comparison *Guðrúnarkviða I*, which is numbered among the 'women's lament' category designated by Heusler, contains the following count of emotion lexemes; 21 negative, three positive and one neutral. It is obvious that *Guðrúnarkviða I* has a similar linguistic quality to *Atlamál* with regard to the high number of words pertaining to emotion compared to *Atlakviða* and *Hamðismál*.

⁴⁴ The poem notes that the Erpr who appears in *Hamðismál* is *inn sundrmæðri* (stanza 14), that he is their half-brother by a different mother, and not another incarnation of Guðrún's son Erpr of the Jörmunrekkr Lays.

However I think it is important to note that all five poems, including *Guðrúnarkviða I*, reflect the same tendency towards high representation of words pertaining to negative emotions, significantly fewer related to positive emotions, and the ambiguous or neutral emotions being represented least. Of the core emotions, surprise is the only one which is not represented with particular strength – somewhat remarkable given the elements of betrayal and treachery that feature in the *Atli Lays*, but can probably be ascribed to Icelandic stoicism as well as stylistic concerns of the form.

2.2 *Emotive gestures: Weeping and Laughing*

In many medieval literatures the use of gesture is significant, to use the term in its most semiotic sense. Gestures and looks were meant to signify important aspects of the narrative or character and therefore were coded in such a way as to be understood by medieval audiences. They were thus deliberate actions akin to utterance of expression. Modern semioticians, such as Adam Kendon, have defined gesture in this way: gesture is “any distinct bodily action that is regarded as part of the process of deliberate utterance or expression.”⁴⁵ For the purposes of this study bodily performances of our characters might seem too slight and unrepresented to be understood in this way. There are no instances of gesture that might be seen in other genres – bowing or kneeling, or many descriptions of significant gazes – and so we are left with expressive actions of weeping and laughing, both of which appear at pivotal and transitional scenes in the narratives.

It would be apparent at this point that both weeping and laughter are important expressive gestures that are used throughout each of the four poems in this study. It should also be apparent the gender of the performer is a consideration – while women and men might express an emotion through laughter, it is more often female characters that weep in the Edda as a whole, although there are exceptions. Episodes of weeping are also presented as performances because they are so linked to the *hvot*, an act designed to engender a particular outcome. They are purposeful rather than spontaneous, as Tracey-Anne Cooper has described the act of weeping in Germanic poetry. The performance is “an organized and controlled release of emotion – not a

⁴⁵ Adam Kendon, "Geography of Gesture," *Semiotica* 37 (1981): 134-5.

chaotic and uncontrolled response”.⁴⁶ For example, in Kathryn Starkey’s analysis of performative emotions in the *Nibelungenlied*, Brunhild’s smile is described as “a pivotal and highly charged moment in the narrative”.⁴⁷ Starkey’s conclusion is that Brunhild’s smile is meant to demonstrate that she is in control; it is a performative gesture that indicates lordship and not a natural or involuntary expression of happiness. In the Eddic poems laughter itself might initially seem to be somewhat problematic, as with smiling or laughter in the sagas, wherein characters sometimes respond to violent acts with, at least to modern eyes, inappropriate expressions. M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij categorises these outbursts of laughter as ‘heroic laughter’ that “expresses a triumph over death or over what, as an irretrievable loss, is equivalent to death”.⁴⁸ As will be shown, all of the few instances of laughter in these poems conform to this view.

When focussing on the four poems in this thesis, the portrayal of the two main emotive acts, laughing and weeping, is somewhat surprising. Much like the somewhat limited use of emotive lexemes, generally, the description of both laughter and weeping, as an act, is sparse. I refer here to actual description of characters weeping or laughing in the narrative space of the poem, rather than oblique references to these acts. Although they function somewhat differently both emotive acts seem to have structural implications in that they appear at pivotal moments in which the narratives transition from one scene to another and gender, once again, is instrumental in who performs what kind of act. There are, in all, five instances of weeping and four of laughing in our four poems. Laughter in the poems is an act performed by an individual, usually male. Although Guðrún laughs in *Guðrúnarhvöt* weeping quickly follows, and the *hvöt* soon transforms into a lament⁴⁹. In all other instances heroic laughter is a masculine endeavour.

Laughter occurs once in each of the four poems. In *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál* they reflect the same event. *Atlakviða* stanza 24 states “hló þá Hogni er til hjarta skáru kvikvan kumblasmið”, while *Atlamál* has “hló þá Hogni, heyrðu dagmegir, keppa

⁴⁶ Tracey-Anne Cooper, "The Shedding of Tears in Late Anglo-Saxon England," in *Crying in the Middle Ages*, ed. Elina Gertsman (New York: Routledge, 2012), 177.

⁴⁷ Kathryn Starkey, "Performative Emotion and the Politics of Gender in the Nibelunglied," in *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre and the Limits of Epic Masculinity*, ed. Sara S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 255.

⁴⁸ M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij, "Valkyries and Heroes," *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 87 (1987): 84.

⁴⁹ For a detailed analysis of this transition see Carol Clover’s discussion in Carol J. Clover, "Hildigunnr's Lament," in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge, 2002).

hann svá kunni, kvol hann vel þolði”.⁵⁰ The only other instance of masculine laughter is one performed by Jǫrmunrekkr stanza 20 of *Hamðismál*. “Hló þá Jǫrmunrekkr, hendi drap á kampa, beiddisk at bröngu böðvaðisk at víni”.⁵¹ In each of these instances the performance of heroic laughter is followed very quickly by a death. Högni, of course, has his heart cut out and mocks his approaching death as well as his enemies. Jǫrmunrekkr uses laughter to express his feelings of superiority and control over the brothers once they are in his hall. It avails him not, however, as he is dismembered and killed just a few stanzas later. While Guðrún’s laughter in *Guðrúnarhvöt* does not result in her own death Hamðir and Sǫrli die soon after, thanks to the complicated whetting process described earlier in this chapter. In the Atli and Jǫrmunrekkr lays, and the Eddic poetry more generally, this suggests that laughter can only be used to express the ‘contempt for death’ noted by Steblin-Kamenskij.

Acts of weeping are only slightly more common in the selected poems, however they are still performed more often by men than by women. While there are oblique references to Guðrún’s grief and tears she only weeps in *Guðrúnarhvöt* as the poem transitions from *hvöt* to lament and she recounts her ‘chain of woes’ (*trégróf*). Men’s weeping is a more interesting event particularly when compared to the use of laughter. In each of the poems where male weeping occurs, *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál*, it is performed in groups. Men do not weep alone, but communally – their deaths, however, are a solitary affair presaged by heroic laughter. Both instances reflect the emotion in the hall when the murder of Erpr and Ertill is revealed to Atli and the *jarlar*. This suggests that mourning is a communal activity and it is performed, in this instance, by men as a reflection of the loss of Atli’s heirs and successors. Carolynne Larrington has suggested that the horror of the children’s deaths is, in part at least, related to patriarchal concerns of female encroachment into the masculine sphere of sacrifice and religious ritual.⁵²

⁵⁰ Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 377 and 94.

⁵¹ “Then Högni laughed, as they cut to his heart, that living maker of mutilations” and “Högni laughed then so that the day-labourers heard it, he knew how to show his mettle and endured the torture well” “Jormunrekk laughed then, he smoothed his beard, he looked forward to violence, made battle-bold by wine.”

⁵² Larrington, “‘Long Have I Desired to Cure You of Old Age’: Sibling Drama in the Later Heroic Poems of the Edda,” 148-49.

In the face of such a monumental expression of negative emotions one might ask what the authorial intention might have been in these tales of death. Attridge links the pleasure of experiencing negative emotions via literature to the notion of ‘otherness’, of separating out experience between ‘people like us’ and ‘others’ through which an audience can indulge in negative emotions without real danger. “One kind of element in the complex of feelings generated by the work of art is some kind of *pleasure* ... it has provoked much discussion among philosophers worrying about the paradox presented by pleasurable experiences of negative emotions such as, classically, pity and fear.”⁵³ I think it is clear to see that as far as the enjoyment is concerned, medieval audiences engaged directly with this kind of pleasure in the heroic poems. Both pity and fear, which Attridge notes specifically, are an integral component of the emotional structures that form the basis of heroic narrative. The tragedy of Germanic heroes engenders both pity and awe, as does the grief of wives or widows such as Guðrún. The value in that enjoyment of these uncheerful narratives means that they are likely to be retained, reworked and re-examined by later Germanic and Scandinavian societies. They must also have been a rich hoard of imagery through which authors could approach various complex social issues - such as the values of the mythic heroic ideal and the roles of both men and women in medieval society – interpretations of which I will discuss in the following chapters.

⁵³ Attridge, "Once more with feeling: art, affect and performance," 332.

3. ‘Varðit hefir þú at vígi’: Shield-maidens as avengers

3.1 *Vengeance as a gendered, social action*

Honour and shame are concepts that were absolutely integral to the literature of medieval Iceland and the heroic poetry of the *Elder Edda* is no exception to this broad rule. The greatest heroes of these poems, such as Sigurðr or Helgi Hundingsbani, are in many cases preoccupied with the ways in which they might increase their honour and renown and avoid ridicule and shame at nearly any cost. However prominently these male heroic characters are positioned in the narratives the same values, to a certain extent, were also applied to female characters, such as Guðrún or Brynhildr in the poems of the *Völsung* or Sigrún in *Helgi Hundingsbani I*. The ideals of honour were however in many cases complicated and problematised by their intersection with gender.

In this chapter I intend to investigate some of the issues surrounding honour and vengeance and their associated emotional complexes with specific regard to gender. My approach will be to examine two related aspects of the latter heroic poems; how ‘feminine’ characteristics are articulated through the traits of the shield-maiden and valkyrie archetypes; and how the performance of emotion (through language and gesture) is used to delineate Guðrún’s identity and ascertain how the contemporary medieval audience might have responded to the concept of the violent, avenging woman. It is important to note that in the two *Atli* poems, Guðrún is drawn primarily as an avenging shield-maiden, engaging in normatively masculine attributes in order to undertake vengeance for her co-sanguineous kin. I intend to show that, rather than a purely positive reading of Guðrún’s actions, poems such as *Atlamál* articulate, through the heightened emotional interplay, an anxiety with the performance of violent vengeance by women.⁵⁴ The primary texts for this analysis will be *Atlamál in grænlenzku* and *Atlakviða*, both of which relate the death of Gunnarr and Högni at the hands of Atli, Guðrún’s second husband, and her revenge for this act.

⁵⁴ It should be noted, also, that oral-formulaic theory suggests that these narratives were likely developed over an extended time frame, from the Germanic ‘lays’ which grew out of the Migration Age in Western Europe circa 400-700CE. As such the narratives must have accreted meaning and motif and the forms which have come down to modern readers are likely to be just one variant in a long tradition of experimentation, improvisation and performance amongst performers of the tales.

3.2 Female vengeance in Old Norse-Icelandic literature

As stated above, while women in the sagas and poetry were seen to have the same desire for honour their avenues to ensure it were more limited than that of their male counterparts - their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. While the medieval Icelandic law text *Grágás* indicates that a woman might pursue a claim for injury were she over twenty years old or a widow, it is otherwise mostly opaque as to how and when women could pursue legal action given that they were generally considered not legally responsible.⁵⁵ In medieval Iceland were a woman's reputation, or that of her family, damaged she would likely not be legally able to engage in cases at the *Alþingi*. These limitations are generally reflected in the literature of the *Íslendingasögur* where female characters resort to inciting violent response in their husbands, sons or other appropriate male relatives. Where women are shown to actually attempt physical vengeance themselves it is generally not successful but the texts occasionally also demonstrate a certain admiration for those who do attempt it.

See, for example, Þórdís in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, who attempts to avenge the killing of her outlawed brother Gísli in the saga's concluding chapters. Þórdís' situation is also complicated by her kinship to Eyjólfur's family through her marriage to Þorgrímr, whom Gísli killed and for which reason he was outlawed. "Eyjólfur hafði lagt sverð þat í milli stokks ok fóta sér, er Gísli hafði átt. Þórdís kennir sverðit, ok er hon lýtr niðr eptir spánunum, þreif hon meðalkaflann á sverðinu ok leggr til Eyjólfss ok vildi leggja á honum miðjum."⁵⁶ She was unsuccessful in killing him, but wounded him significantly. While the saga author does not explicitly praise her behaviour, there is little to suggest that the audience might view her attempting vengeance for kin as inappropriate. Her actions might even be seen as a remediation of previous behaviour as Gísli was made an outlaw after Þórdís interpreted a verse he composed as indicative of his guilt. On discovering this Gísli composed another verse comparing Þórdís unfavourably against Guðrún's loyalty to her natal family.

⁵⁵ Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, eds., *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I*, vol. I (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2000), 158.

⁵⁶ Björn K Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, Íslensk fornrit (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1953), 116.

"Eyjólfur had laid the sword between the bench and his feet, which Gísli had owned. Þórdís knows the sword, and when she bent down after a spoon, she grabs the sword hilt and thrust at Eyjólfur to hit him in the middle."

Gatat sól fastrar systir,
 sveigar, mín at eiga,
 gætin, Gjúka dóttur
 Goðrúnar hugtúnum;
 pás log-Sága lægis
 lét sinn, af hug stinum
 svá rak snjalla bræðra
 sör-Freyja, ver deyja⁵⁷

These two passages articulate two familial relationships – siblings and spouses – a wife and a sister either defending or attempting to avenge a male relative. They are also reflected in the two Atli poems of the Edda wherein Guðrún defends her brothers and fights alongside them in *Atlamál* as well as later avenging their deaths, or eschewing the combat yet getting vengeance on her husband in *Atlakviða*.

3.3 *The Archetypes: avengers, whetters and inciters*

The depiction of women in both medieval poetry and prose tended to follow very particular paths, and this is even more notable in the case of the avenging characters such as Guðrún. In her analysis of female archetypes in Old Norse-Icelandic texts Jenny Jochens described a clear delineation between two categories of characters in search of revenge – the ‘whetter’ (*hvetjandi*) and the ‘avenger’. There may also be some overlap between the ‘avenger’ type, and the ‘warrior woman’ according to her classification. She states that the “activities of the avenger and the whetter can be separated into physical action – bodily revenge – and the cerebral activity of whetting, mainly with words.”⁵⁸ Rolf Heller also marked out the inciter as a significant character type in his study of women in the sagas. “Nicht weniger als 51 Fälle können wir verzeichnen, in denen eine Frau zur Rache hetzt oder den Mann zur Tat treibt. Sie erreicht fast immer ihren Zweck.”⁵⁹ The whetter or inciter would use highly emotional language to goad an appropriate male relative into performing the physical, and usually violent, action in response, however the avenger would take up arms

⁵⁷ Ibid., 62.

“My sister too taken / with her fine clothes, / lacks the firm-rooted spirit / of Guðrún, Gjuki’s daughter, / that sea-fire’s goddess, / adorned with pearls, who killed / her husband with undaunted courage / to avenge her brothers”

This translation is taken from Örnólfr Thorsson, ed. *The Sagas of Icelanders* (New York: Penguin Group, 2000), 526.

⁵⁸ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 132.

⁵⁹ Rolf Heller, *Die Literarische Darstellung Der Frau in Den Isländingersagas* (Halle (Saale): Niemayer, 1958), 98. “We are recording no less than 51 cases in which a woman incites revenge or agitates the man into action. She almost always achieves her goal.”

themselves in order to avenge the perceived wrongdoing. Women taking up arms and engaging in the martial pursuits usually only open to men is not unknown in Old-Norse Icelandic literature. In the four major poems under discussion here Guðrún is articulated as both avenger and whetter, however she tends towards physical vengeance in *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál*. The emotional rhetoric deployed in the whetting poems, *Hamðismál* and *Guðrúnarhvöt*, is subverted into highly emotional verbal battle between Guðrún and Atli, as well as her interactions with her sons Erpr and Ertill. In the initial two poems her vengeance is achieved physically and extremely personally.

Female avenger characters appear throughout Old Norse-Icelandic literature, in the form of shield-maidens and valkyries (*valkyrjur*), which often appeared in the *fornaldarsögur*, while maiden-kings (*meykongur*) appeared in *riddarasögur*. The *valkyrjur* are mentioned in both the mythological and heroic poetry of the Edda and characters such as Brynhildr, one of the two major female characters of the *Völsunga* narrative, occupies a somewhat uneasy role that likely spans the human-supernatural spectrum, which positions shield-maidens at one end and *valkyrjur* at the other. Overall the shield-maiden archetype, if such a category can be said to exist as a properly separate distinction, generally seems to have applied to human women, rather than the mythological category of *valkyrja*, which might have had some spiritual or mythological function related to the battlefield and war.

Kathleen M. Self summarises the positioning of *valkyrjur* and shield-maidens thus: “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 maiden kings (*meykongr*) and to other women who, in exceptional circumstances, take up arms to fight”.⁶⁰ Self goes on to argue that these women who were categorised as warriors are “met with admiration, though not as paragons of femininity”.⁶¹ As I will show in the following study of Guðrún Gjukadóttir this sense of admiration may be present in the heroic poetry in which she is framed as a shield maiden, taking up arms for revenge, however it is also ultimately subverted. The ‘admirable’ role is, problematised by her gender and her status as a wife and mother. With regard to this issue of gender Jenny Jochens has suggested that they should be considered as images

⁶⁰ Kathleen M Self, "The Valkyries Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender," *Feminist Formations* 26, no. 1 (2014): 144.

⁶¹ Ibid.

and that they are ultimately “embodiments of masculine perceptions of feminine roles articulated by male authors. As such they pertain to gender and not to woman’s history”.⁶² Integral to this discussion of shield-maiden’s gender is the texts’ approach to their sexual and intimate lives and which also relates, in my view, to how and whether Guðrún should be viewed as a physical avenger, a shield-maiden proper, in the two Atli poems at all.

In her analysis of the manner in which shield-maidens are gendered in the texts Self argues that rather than take either male or female positions in a binary system they occupy a third gender. This gender is fluid in that it allows single direction transitions between specific categories dependent on certain conditions. Those conditions relate specifically to marriage and contrast against the usual practice of women being married into other families with little control of the choice of husband. “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” Self goes on to cite the relationship between Sigrún and Helgi in *Helgi Hundingsbani I* as an example of this kind of relationship. She states that “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.”⁶³ While there is certainly evidence of this kind of one-way transition from one kind of behaviour to another, I would suggest that it is part of a larger discussion around the variable nature of women in medieval Scandinavian society, or perhaps the Germanic cultures from which the lays may have originated.⁶⁴

Guðrún describes her life as that of a warrior and raider in her youth that might initially seem to qualify her for inclusion in the third gender category. However her marriage to Sigurðr does not conform to the pattern Self outlines. Guðrún was ‘given’ to Sigurðr because he was seen to be an outstanding man and he would be a good match for the daughter of a king. Although Guðrún does not otherwise conform to the archetype in the same way as Brynhildr or Sigrún, in *Atlamál* she describes a slight variation on the theme. She marries Sigurðr and subsequently goes raiding with

⁶² Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*.

⁶³ Self, “The Valkyries Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender,” 148.

⁶⁴ Self makes a detailed examination of the moment of transition from the ‘third’ gender into fully ‘female’. In her analysis she notes, for example, that Sigurðr cuts the byrnie from Sigurdrifa’s body as she sleeps. This not only has the effect of waking her, it renders her armour, a tool of and symbol of her masculine attributes, completely useless, thus representing, in part, her capacity to marry.

the otherwise-male group. During *Atlamál*'s extended spiteful argument she recalls "Þrjú várum systkin, / þóttum óvægin, / fórum af landi, / fylgðum Sigurði".⁶⁵ However, she is not able to avenge Sigurðr when he has been killed and this element at least is articulated in a similar fashion to the difficulties faced by Sigrún or Sváva – once they have left the warrior-life, they do not return to it, even to avenge a dead husband. These identities are however somewhat malleable and changeable – Guðrún's identity transitions between bride, shield-maiden, mourning widow and to whetter or inciter throughout the extended narrative.

3.4 *Atlamál in grænlensku, Atlakviða, Guðrúnarhvöt*

At this point I will turn to *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál* and *Guðrúnarhvöt* in order to examine how these issues are articulated through the character's emotional expression and development. Briefly, while the two Atli poems both demonstrate a seemingly casual regard for Guðrún's transition into a shield-maiden character-type there is a distinct difference between the emotional complexes demonstrated in each. *Guðrúnarhvöt*, in sharp contrast, reverts the narrative to a feminine-whetting and elegy style.

Atlamál in grænlensku is the second of the two poems discussing Guðrún's marriage to Atli. In both the *Codex Regius* and *Hauksbók* manuscripts of the *Edda* it follows from its predecessor *Atlakviða* directly, telling the same story in a different context, the emphasis falling on ravages of ill-feeling among close kin. It differs from *Atlakviða*, also, in the manner in which Guðrún is portrayed – here she is a woman willing to directly throw off the bonds of marriage in order to protect, and later avenge, her brothers. The poet repositions the story by setting it in Scandinavia rather than the original southern German location, which is retained in *Atlakviða*. *Atlamál* differs drastically in style and in tone to *Atlakviða* – Guðrún's relationship with Atli is demonstrably strained and at breaking point; it is a household in which "coldblooded rage and an exultant joy in humiliation are the dominant emotions".⁶⁶ The scene in which Guðrún murders her two sons with Atli, in revenge for her brother's deaths, is drawn out and lingered over with a certain languorous morbidity. In short, while the events are largely similar, and the development of deception, revelation and revenge

⁶⁵ "We were three brothers and a sister, we seemed to be unconquerable / we left our country and went with Sigurd"

⁶⁶ Larrington, "'Long Have I Desired to Cure You of Old Age': Sibling Drama in the Later Heroic Poems of the Edda," 145.

follow the same pattern across both poems, Guðrún's emotional responses are so different as to be startling. In her fundamental analysis of the heroic poems Ursula Dronke suggested that the poet of *Atlamál* was attempting a kind of synthesis of the character, drawing on a variety of sources.

He wished to reconcile the two portraits of Guðrún in the sources he knew: on one side of the picture is the heroic queen of *Atlakviða*, struggling to suppress her feelings of tenderness so that she may fulfil the greater demand of revenge; on the other, the monstrous virago, harsh and easily cruel, who thrusts a burning torch into her brother's mouths to see if they are dead.⁶⁷

In order to accept this assessment of the *Atlamál* poet's intent we must accept that there is, in fact, a difference between Guðrún's reorientations – that there is in fact 'suppressed feeling' in her interaction with Atli and that the suppression of these feelings is so intense that it enables her to murder offspring whom she actually loves, rather than despises. While I accept this reading of Guðrún in *Atlamál*, and therefore, the alternative reading of the heroic queen in *Atlakviða*, I would add that the shield-maiden archetype is applied to her character as an expression of the 'monstrous virago' which Dronke described.

The poem's early scenes are dominated by interactions between husbands and wives, as Kostbera and Glaumvǫr attempt to dissuade Gunnarr and Hǫgni from accepting Atli's invitation. Both women experience foreboding dreams featuring dangerous and destructive animals such as bears (perhaps a nod to the poem's supposed Greenlandic setting) and eagles within the farmstead's hall. Eagles and bears are creatures that are closely linked to battle and death, however neither Gunnarr nor Hǫgni allow for an interpretation of the dreams as anything but simple farm life or meteorology. Kostbera's warnings that Guðrún's message in runes has been tampered with are met, finally, with accusations that "allar ro illúðgar" (all women are evil-boding).⁶⁸ The audience is thus primed for a narrative in which spouses are at odds. It is deceit, however, which forms the basis of many of the relationships enacted in *Atlamál*; Atli and Vingi deceive the Niflungs; Gunnarr deceives Atli over the death of Hǫgni; Guðrún deceives her husband in order to better

⁶⁷ Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda: Heroic Poems*, III vols., vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 102.

⁶⁸ Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 385.

gain revenge against him. The process of deception, revelation and revenge is a cycle that operates through the three major acts of the poem, each of which culminates in at least one death.⁶⁹

This is obviously not a healthy extended familial environment and the intimacy of the setting of *Atlamál*, as opposed to *Atlakviða*'s setting between kings and tribes, accounts for its extremity of emotion. This is most clearly seen in Guðrún's behaviour when Atli's deception is revealed. The arrival of Gunnarr and Högni at the homestead of Atli triggers the betrayal as they are for all intents and purposes ambushed, when Guðrún chooses her brothers over Atli and raises arms against her marital family and sheds their blood Atli pronounces "vaðit hefir þú á vígi, þótt værit skapligt"⁷⁰. Guðrún's anger when she hears of the arrival of her brothers and the jarls' talk about their attack is palpable – she shakes with rage and casts off her necklace – one very obvious feminine accoutrement.

Qtul var þá Guðrún,
er hon ekki heyrði,
hlaðin hálsmenjum,
hreytti hon þeim gervollum,
slongði svá silfri
at í sundr hrutu baugar.⁷¹

This action is not solely a physical performance of anger. In every movement she is violently expressive; "hrauzk ór skikkju" (flung off her cloak), "yppðit lítt hurðum" (flinging open the doors).⁷² The casting off of the female accoutrements, such as the necklace in particular, triggers a transition from the role of wife, back to the role of warrior. Judith Butler has suggested that gender, sexuality and sex are social and cultural constructions rather than a fact of the physiological body, where the body itself is "figured as a surface and the scene of a cultural inscription."⁷³ She states "... if gender is something that one becomes ... then gender itself is a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a

⁶⁹ Dronke, *The Poetic Edda: Heroic Poems*, I, 14.

⁷⁰ Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 398.

"You have waded deep into killing, though it was not right"

⁷¹ Ibid., 390.

"Then Guðrún was wildly angry when she heard this terrible thing / the necklaces on her throat she hurled away from her entirely / flung down the silver chain so all the links broke apart"

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 129.

substantial thing”.⁷⁴ Guðrún is inscribing a different kind of gender performance in these moments and, although her actions are linked closely to archetypes recognised from throughout the Old Norse–Icelandic literary corpus, she also falls outside or across categories; although identifying herself as a warrior Guðrún does not follow the norm for ‘shield-maiden’ characters, as described previously. Crucially, she also defies Self’s one-way transition from shield-maiden to married woman: “nøkðan tók hon mæki / ok niðja fjör varði, / hæg varat hjaldri / hvars hon hendr festi”.⁷⁵ Although Guðrún moves out of the sphere of ‘wife’ in this moment she moves back into that role when she marries King Jónakr, if we accept some level of continuous characterisation across the broader narrative stream of the heroic poetry.

The action of casting off the necklace is also reminiscent of another story of powerful feminine anger in the Edda. In *Þrymskviða*, Þórr and Loki’s attempts to convince Freyja to offer herself as bride to the giant Þrymr so that Þórr can retrieve his stolen hammer is met with a resounding no. In her fury the *Brisingamen*, a treasure linked closely with the goddess, is broken and falls in pieces to the floor. A kind of ‘gender trouble’ is at play in both of these scenes – while Freyja’s gender is not in flux in this poem, Þórr’s is – at the very least his performance of masculinity is compromised. Guðrún, however, actively and willingly undertakes a transformation of her role as out of ‘wife’ and into ‘shield maiden’ or ‘warrior’ which, arguably, has implications for the expression of her gender as woman. We might also compare the use of gesture here – the casting off of cloak and necklace – against the use physical gesture in *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* wherein the clap of hands and cascade of hair indicates grief and is one of the outward expressions of mourning. That Guðrún is not able to express her grief in a normatively gendered manner might be understood as indication of her non-compliance with gender roles in the two Atli poems.

It should be noted that Guðrún is not the only female character who seems to operate in the male sphere in *Atlamál*; Guðrún specifically refers to her mother Grímhildr, during the extended, spiteful exchange with Atli prior to his death. Tellingly she refers to herself as ‘dóttir Grímhildar’ more than once; her father Gjúki earns fewer mentions in this regard.⁷⁶ Referring back to her childhood she says that

⁷⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁵ Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 390.

“She took a naked sword and fought for her kinsmen’s lives, / she was handy at fighting, wherever she aimed her blows”

⁷⁶ Ibid., 396.

“gæddi okkr Grímhildr / gulli ok hálsmenjum”.⁷⁷ In this remembrance of Guðrún’s childhood, it is the queen Grímhildr who gives out gifts of gold to her children, much in the way that a king would with jarls or retainers. While I think it would be going too far to suggest that Grímhildr has in fact taken on the role of gold-giving king in Guðrún’s historic account in *Atlamál*, I think it is worthwhile exploring the idea that the poet of *Atlamál* was interested in creating an image of forceful female characters who took on roles generally appropriate only to the male sphere.

David Clark has argued that the representation of Guðrún in these later poems in particular should not be read as a positive expression of female agency. Rather, that the manner in which the poems are framed as belonging to a previous age, combined with the violent expressions and actions of revenge undertaken by women should be read as, essentially, anti-feminists statements. “I want to argue here, however, for the perception that the ‘heroic ideal’ (as embodied in texts such as the Helgi-poems) *belongs* in the past, a perception observable in several Eddic poems – even some of those ostensibly most ancient.”⁷⁸ The extremity of emotion, demonstrated not only in the Atli poems but also in *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál*, defines an ancient heroic world in which women’s demands for vengeance sacrifice family and destroy communal bonds. “Certainly, women were and are still often associated with emotional and mental instability, contrasted with male rationality – an association that renders possible the representation of female literary characters as mentally ill and/or dangerously violent in relation to men.”⁷⁹ The ‘cold counsel’ referenced in the sagas is rather articulated in the heroic poems through the irrationality of emotion.

How and when feelings were expressed in these texts is conspicuously linked to gender. Controlled and un-controlled emotion is signified in Old Norse Icelandic literature in a variety of ways, while few male characters are described as being overtly ‘emotional’ their feelings are often revealed via somatic, physiological effects and through action; which reflect excessive emotion but without expressions of grief or rage. Women’s emotions, however, are often described by saga characters as extreme, volatile and the cause of trouble, which cooler-headed men would otherwise avoid. In *Brennu-Njals saga*, for example, Skarpheðinn says of men: “Ekki höfu ver

⁷⁷ Ibid., 395.

“Grimhildr enriched us with gold and with neckrings”

⁷⁸ Clark, “Undermining and En-Gendering Violence: Distancing and Anti-Feminism in the Poetic Edda,” 176.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 190.

kvenna skap ... at ver reiðimsk við öllu”.⁸⁰ Skarpheðinn’s statement, like others in the a variety of texts from the corpus, positions women’s anger as an illogical thing in which any slight is a matter for fury and that, by extension, their reactions cannot be trusted. Guðrún’s volatility in her anger at Atli’s attack on her brothers should be read in light of the ways in which Old Norse-Icelandic texts codify emotion and affect as highly gendered expressions of social interaction and response.

This complicated and occasionally contradictory view of women’s emotional relationships is particularly relevant to the discussion of motherhood in the heroic poetry. While in *Atlakviða* the emphasis is on the act of revenge itself, that is the destruction of Atli’s children in order to avenge Gunnarr and Högni, *Atlamál* brings into the focus the relationship between Guðrún and the two boys. Ursula Dronke asserts that it is in Guðrún’s description of Atli’s feelings that we are able to discern her own grief at having killed two of her children.⁸¹ The fervour with which Guðrún takes up weapons in earlier stanzas is reflected here by the detail that the poet inscribes between parent and child. Guðrún entices the children to her (*lokkaði hon litla*), yet they respond in the suitably heroic (and masculine) fashion of bearing their fate with stoicism. The horror of their deaths and the later cannibalism is reserved for Atli who, in Guðrún’s words “ekki réttu leifa, / toggtu tiðliga, / trúðir vel jöxlum”.⁸² The evocative description of Atli gluttony of the ‘calf-hearts’, chewing greedily with his back teeth is affecting in a way in which Guðrún’s quick work with the knife is not. The emphasis falls on Atli and his growing sense of horror. Guðrún’s murder of Erpr and Eitill echoes Sígny’s murder of her children with Siggeir in *Volsunga saga*. The cycles of a mother’s violence against children may have been a particular and well-known trope of heroic poetry and prose. Anticipation and foreknowledge of the coming action generate in the audience an enjoyable anticipation of the emotional impact. Derek Attridge’s analysis of affect in art and literature outlines this particular concern about emotion and feeling in texts. “One kind of element in the complex of feelings generated by the work of art is some kind of *pleasure* ... it has provoked much discussion among philosophers worrying about the paradox presented by

⁸⁰ Einar Ól Sveinsson, ed. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Íslensk fornrit (Reykjavík: Hið íslensk fornritafélag, 1954), 114.

“We are not made like women ... that we become furious over everything”

⁸¹ Dronke, *The Poetic Edda: Heroic Poems*, I, 16.

⁸² Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 396.

“... you wouldn’t leave any scraps, / chewed it up greedily, relying on your back teeth”

pleasurable experiences of negative emotions such as, classically, pity and fear.”⁸³ The question remains why Guðrún is so intent on ending the lives of the two boys: “Spyrið lítt eptir, / spilla ætla ek báðum / lyst várumk þess lengi / at lyfja ykkir elli” ignoring, as they rightly point out, that their deaths will not give her happiness for long.⁸⁴ However as David Clark points out, Guðrún’s actions here follow a prescribed pattern of behaviour. “As in the trope of the Norse shield maidens, who reject their gender and sexuality in favor of the male pursuit of war, so Guðrún rejects her children and husbands in favor of the pursuit of revenge.”⁸⁵

Women’s agency in Old Norse-Icelandic texts is a complicated issue. While valkyrie and shield-maiden archetypes might seem to suggest a very ‘modern’ type of agency available to saga heroines, on closer examination their behaviour and sexuality is often rigidly enforced. Shield-maidens were only active in the masculine sphere of war and battle until entering sexual relations with men, at which point they transitioned into purely feminine roles. Guðrún Gjúkadóttir initially seems to circumvent this restriction, by avenging her brothers but, in doing so, she casts off moderate emotional interaction and feeling. Her new identity is not simply a return to the shield-maiden type, in order to engage in the masculine sphere of life for the sake of vengeance. Rather the demonstration of emotion ties into a greater literary complex that regards women’s feelings as excessive and dangerous and draws Guðrún’s character as monstrous.

⁸³ Attridge, "Once more with feeling: art, affect and performance," 332.

⁸⁴ Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 396.

“Don’t ask anymore! I’m going to destroy you both, / I’ve long wanted to cure you of old age”

⁸⁵ Clark, "Undermining and En-Gendering Violence: Distancing and Anti-Feminism in the Poetic Edda," 192.

4. 'Vildir ávallt vægja': Subverting masculine ideals

4.1 *Bloody coverlets as 'bloody token'*

In the previous chapter I demonstrated how emotion was complicit in the negative representation of women as physical avengers, those who took up arms and participated in violence in order to restore honour. However, as scholars such as Carol Clover and Jenny Jochens have shown, even when female characters limit their agency to provoking or inciting vengeance by male relatives they are still held responsible for the ensuing violence. Thus while male characters might desire vengeance the use of the *hvot* as a narrative device allows for a scapegoating process in which female characters instigate vengeance and are later blamed for the ensuing bloodshed. In this chapter I will examine the ways in which masculine behaviour is both articulated and interrogated by examining crucial scenes in *Hamðismál* and *Atlamál*. In each case I will argue that the gendered male performances of Hamðir and Atli subvert the heroic ideal in a similar manner to the undermining of Guðrún's heroism as discussed in Chapter 3. I argue here that both Hamðir's participation in the *hvot*, and Atli's failures of kingship constitute a critique of the masculine role in the heroic ideal.

I will first return to and extend Carol Clover's argument on the scapegoating of whetters and posit that in some instances, such as the pivotal whetting scene in *Hamðismál*, the 'incitee' actively participates in the whetting process, thus ensuring that the family chooses the most violent path to reclaim their honour. The *hvot* is so entangled in the emotive interplay between Hamðir and his mother Guðrún that Hamðir, perhaps inadvertently, performs his own whetting against Guðrún – the result being that the sons both leave home to avenge their sister Svanhildr. I will argue that, just as with female characters, male characters in heroic poetry privilege the emotive function of the *hvot* in order to engage in formalised and ritualised violence in the form of vengeance in blood feud. The whetting scene occurs in both *Guðrúnarhvot* and *Hamðismál* in nearly identical format and language. The poems' narratives diverge immediately after; *Guðrúnarhvot* focuses on Guðrún's lamentation and grief, while *Hamðismál* follows the sons to Jǫrmunrekkr's hall. I will focus primarily on *Guðrúnarhvot* noting deviations in *Hamðismál* where significant.

Guðrúnarhvot begins with Guðrún engaging in what seems to be a standard whetting approach, that is, questioning the emotions and feelings of her two sons,

who are her intended avengers.⁸⁶ Her question “hví sitið, hví sofið lífi?” (why do you sit, why sleep away your life?) is intended to shame the brothers for not displaying explicitly the requisite emotions of mourning or anger at the perpetrator of the murder. Barring the prose introduction there is no warning of oncoming tragedy as with the two Atli poems in which the sense of dread is escalated through structural sequences of increasing emotion and violence. The tragedy has already occurred and the house resounds with “mál talið af trega stórum” (laments uttered from great grief)⁸⁷. It was more than emotion that called men to avenge kin - it was duty and, as Carol Clover points out, “it was no less the duty of women to remember and remind”.⁸⁸ The scene conforms to the commonplace of whetting scenes that exist across the length and breadth of Old Icelandic literature, but most particularly the *Íslendingasögur*. Guðrún goes on to compare her sons unfavourably to her brothers Gunnarr and Högni who, as great heroes, would invariably have attained vengeance for Svanhildr had they lived. “Urðua it glíkir / þeim Gunnari, / né in heldr hugðir / sem var Högni / hennar mynduð it / hefna leita, / ef it móð ættið / minna bræðra / eða harðan hug / Húnkonunga”.⁸⁹

Her goading words are designed to support and prop up the call for vengeance for the deceased loved one that, in some instances, uses a token to recall the deceased. According to Clover this could be bloodied clothing, a weapon, or even the body of the victim propped up for display. Without any of these Guðrún is forced to revert to words – describing in gory detail Svanhildr’s death: “yððr systur, / unga at aldri, / jóm of traddi, / hvítum ok svörtum, / á hervegi, / gram gangtómum, / Gotna hrossum”.⁹⁰ I would suggest that Guðrún’s return to the trampling, and describing the slow tread of the horses, trained to pace, is designed to be understood as a bloody token – the call to arms and vengeance – in lieu of physical article.⁹¹ It is designed to function in the

⁸⁶ See, William Ian Miller, "Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England," *Law and History Review* 1, no. 2 (1983).

⁸⁷ Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 402.

⁸⁸ Clover, "Hildigunnr's Lament," 17.

⁸⁹ Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 403.

“You haven’t become like Gunnar and his brother, / nor any the more been brave as Högni was - / they would have tried to avenge her, / if you had the temperance of my brothers or the fierce spirit of the kings of the Huns”

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 402-03.

“... your sister, / still so young, trampled with horses, white and black, on the paved road, / with the grey horses of the Goths, trained to pace slowly.”

⁹¹ William Miller describes the presence of the token as the symbolic presence of the corpse, that is, the victim, charging a relative with the legal case. Referring to the presentation by Þórgerðr of Vígfus’ head as bloody token in *Eyrbyggja saga* Miller states that: “The incident suggests the existence of a

same manner as the torn piece of towel or Hǫskuldr's bloody cloak, which rained down dried blood on Flosi in Hildigunnr's pivotal inciting scene in *Njáls saga*.⁹² Guðrún's words as bloody token would then, as per Miller's analysis, impart a somewhat legal sense to the proceedings – in which Guðrún is identifying Hamðir and Sǫrli as *aðili*, that is, proper plaintiffs in the legal sense, and therefore also appropriate avengers. It should not be forgotten that Svanhildr is a daughter, and a sister – that is, she is a woman and would therefore not normally have been considered a target for violence had this narrative occurred within the confines of saga rather than epic poetry. She belongs to the category that signified anyone who was not a man in his prime – old men, women and children.

Hamðir's response is initially a straight-forward repudiation of his mother's exhortation. "Lítt myndir þú / leyfa dáð Hǫgna / þá er Sigurð vǫkðu / svefni ór / bækr váru þínar / inar bláhvítu / roðnar í vers dreyra, / fólgnar í valblóði".⁹³ However I suggest that Hamðir's response, describing the bloodied bed coverlets in which Sigurðr died, functions in much the same way as Guðrún's references to the slow-pacing horses. It is a reference to an erstwhile bloody token, in this case, the bed coverings which soaked up Sigurðr's blood. One might wonder why Hamðir intends to turn his mother's mind to the loss of her first husband Sigurðr, a relationship that, it could be argued, she preferred and privileged over all others. It should be noted that the loss of Sigurðr is the one loss that Guðrún has never been compensated for or been capable of avenging herself. While the poetic sources go into little detail, thanks partly to the great lacuna in the manuscript, the prose version describes Guðrún mourning Sigurðr's death for an extended period, the mourning only ending when she is given another magical draught with conveniently amnesiac properties, after which she is married to Atli, and thoughts of vengeance against her brothers are neatly sidestepped.

It seems reasonable to suggest that while Hamðir's response here could be understood as an attempt to shift her thoughts away from revenge by reminding her of the emotional pain associated with it. However I would argue that Hamðir's response

formal ceremony that required certain symbols - as, for instance, the corpse's head or his bloody clothing-in order to be efficacious. Law is filled with such symbolic action". See Miller, "Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England," 179.

⁹² See *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Chapter 116

⁹³ Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 403.

"Little did you praise the achievements of Hǫgni, / when they awakened Sigurd from his sleep. / Your embroidered coverlets, the blue and white ones, were red with your husband's blood".

is in fact a *hvot* of his own making which is intended to reinforce her demands for vengeance. He reminds Guðrún of the loss of Sigurðr, invoking the imagery of the *valblóði*, and then goes on to recall how avenging her brothers, by murdering her sons, was wounding and painful. “Urðu þér ... / bræðra hefndir / slíðrar ok sárar, / er þú sonu myrðir / knættim allir / Jormunrekki / samhyggjendr / systur hefna.”⁹⁴ It should be noted that Guðrún does not respond, indeed she is given no opportunity, at least in this version of the narrative. For in stanza six Hamðir simply finishes with “hefir þú okkr hvatta (you have whetted us).”⁹⁵ In *Guðrúnarhvot* Hamðir’s role seems less concerned with deflecting his mother’s attempt to whet, and more with whetting himself, accidentally or not. This scene complicates the issue of the *hvot* and suggests again a level of masculine complicity in the otherwise female sphere of whetting.

While the initial sequence in *Hamðismál* is largely similar, there are some important differences that should be discussed. Although *Guðrúnarhvot* is generally understood to be a whetting poem it does feature an extended female lament from stanza nine until the end of the poem, in which Guðrún lists her woes; “þetta tregróf um talit væri” (this chain of griefs has been recounted). The end of the *hvot* is marked by the use of laughter, “Hlæjandi Guðrún / hvarf til skemmu” (laughing Guðrún went to the store room), while the transition into the lament occurs soon after: “Guðrún grátandi / Gjúka dóttir / gekk hon tregliga” (Guðrún weeping, Gjuki’s daughter, went she sorrowfully). That laughter and weeping occur so closely together suggest that these two expressions are deeply linked in the emotional landscape of the heroic poetry. They are, as Clover describes, two sides of the one coin.⁹⁶ *Hamðismál* opens, rather, with Guðrún’s lament for her daughter. The poet lays the foundations for the lament by saying events that cause “græti álfar” (elves to weep) and would “sorg kveykva” (quicken sorrow) have occurred. The call to vengeance is still given significant attention however the *hvot* is less dramatic, less forceful even though it is just as effective.

The major difference here is the interjection from Sqrli, which was completely absent from *Hamðismál* despite a nearly identical response from his brother to Guðrún’s initial *hvot*. Sqrli asks, rather, “hvers biðr nú, Guðrún / er þú at gráti né

⁹⁴ Ibid.

“Vengeance for your brothers was wounding and painful / to you when you murdered your sons. We could all have avenged on Iormunrekk / our sister, all of the same mind”

⁹⁵ Ibid.

“... what are you asking for now, Guðrún, the lack of which makes you weep?”

⁹⁶ Clover, “Hildigunnr’s Lament,” 29.

færat?” (see note 93). This kind of direct question, which foregrounds an emotional need, seems to be largely absent in the parallel examples of whetting scenes in the corpus. Two well-known whetting scenes both refer to the ‘cold counsel’ (og eru köld kvenna ráð) offered by women, particularly with regard to their incitement to revenge.⁹⁷

As has been shown, emotional expression in the later heroic poems of the Edda is a complex system of performances and speech acts which were perhaps consciously deployed in order for the poet to develop a discussion around the roles of men and women in the private and legal processes of grieving and revenge in blood feud societies. While male participants in whetting scenes have traditionally been understood as undertaking a scapegoating process in reaction to the feminine *hvot*, it seems reasonable to me that this performance might, in some cases, be intended to provide only the appearance of resistance.

4.2 *Unmanly Men, Monstrous Women*

If men were sometimes complicit in activities such as the *hvot*, in what other ways could they be engaging with or deviating from the heroic ideal that is supposedly expressed in these poems? Atli’s role as king in his court is dependent not only on his relationship to the *jarlar* and his people, but also on his relationship to his queen Guðrún. Guðrún’s role as queen is, I think, corrupted by the betrayal and murder of her kin. Ursula Dronke suggested that *Atlakviða*’s tripartite structure featured three separate acts, each of which ended with the denouement of a betrayal. The central act begins with Atli’s return to the hall after entombing Gunnarr in the snake pit. Guðrún welcomes him to the hall formally, but greeting him outside.

Út gekk þá Guðrún
Atla í gogn
med gylltum kálki
at reifa gjöld Rognis:
“Þiggja knáttu, þengill,
í þinni hollu
glaðr at Guðrúnu
gnadda niðfarna”⁹⁸

⁹⁷ See *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Chapter 116 and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, Chapter 19

⁹⁸ Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 379.

“Out went Guðrún to meet Atli / with a golden goblet to render the prince his due: / ‘Lord, you may receive in your own hall, gladly from Guðrún, little creatures gone into darkness.’”

Guðrún's language has the formalised sound of ritual "þiggja knáttu, þengill, í þinni hǫllu".⁹⁹ I would argue that she is performing a ritualised welcome from queen to king, meant to formalise the relationships between rulers, retainers and the community. It is similar to the scene laid out in *Beowulf* wherein Wealhtheow formally greets, with drinking cup, Hrothgar the king and then warriors in order of importance and honour from veterans to young untried men. The ritualised presentation of the drinking cup from woman to man seems to have a rich history in Germanic and later Scandinavian peoples from at least the early Middle Ages. Both the textual culture of Germanic people's and archaeological materials suggest that the idea of a 'cup-bearing woman' had some significance for an extended period in the culture of multiple Germanic societies. As well as the detailed description in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* see, for example, references to *valkyrjur* welcoming warriors into Valhǫll; the Tjangvarde image stone from Gotland, Sweden, in which a female figure offers a cup-like object to another figure; the U1163 runestone dated to the 11th century in which a female figure, sometimes argued to be Sigrdrifa, offering a cup to Sigurðr; and the silver figure found in Uppland, Sweden which shows in lateral view a female figure holding a cup. In *Vǫlsunga saga* we find a parallel when the queen Borghildr attempts to gain revenge on Sinfjǫtli by offering him a poisoned cup as part of her role in the hospitality of a feast. Michael J. Enright's study of the role of the *commitatus* includes an analysis of a similar scene in *Beowulf* which situates Heorot as the primary site from which the "kingliness of the king radiates and is most palpably manifest".¹⁰⁰ The ritual, according to Enright, is intended to both confirm the king's position and rule and his relationship to the *commitatus*, here represented by the *jarlar*, through the actions and body of the queen. Enright determines that the queen's actions are not to be understood as a "commonplace act of service".¹⁰¹ Guðrún however, in *Atlakviða*, immediately undermines the sanctity of the proceedings by following her opening statement with a performative speech act that, unfortunately, Atli does not interpret correctly.

Offering the *gnadda niðfarna* as part of the welcoming drinking ceremony desecrates the ritual itself, as well as Atli's position as king, but it also demonstrates

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Michael J. Enright, *Lady With A Mead Cup: Ritual, prophecy and lordship in the European warband from La Tene to The Viking AGE* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), 5.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

his inability to read the emotional state of his wife, and perhaps that of the hall itself. Guðrún's performance is designed to destroy the cohesion of the hall but it also demonstrates Atli's unsuitability for the position of ruler. Despite Guðrún's fairly obvious duplicity, he fails to read her actual desire. By performing the feast Guðrún creates a dangerous setting in which vengeance will be exacted through violence. As I will go on to discuss below Atli's failure to interpret Guðrún's emotional state is indicative of a failure of his kingship and possibly his masculinity. The problems surrounding Guðrún's subjectivity and role as queen are, to a certain extent, mirrored in Atli's own character, which she describes in detail as Atli lays dying in bed during the closing scenes of *Atlamal*.

Komtaðu af því þingi
er ver þat frægim,
at þú sœk sóttir
ne slekðir aðra;
vildir ávallt vægja
en vækti halda
kyrrt um því láta.¹⁰²

There is no equivalent scene in *Atlakviða*, as the poem closes quickly with Guðrún burning down the hall. In *Atlamal*, however, the poet draws out the spiteful emotional exchange between angry spouses. In the previous sub-chapters I discussed the ways in which deviance are drawn out through the performance of particular actions. While the poet does not say directly that Guðrún's statement is spiteful, it seems reasonable to read the situation as spiteful; Atli is dying, his children murdered and consumed. This is part of a long list of grievances, which the couple fling at each other while Atli bleeds to death. I would argue, however, that Guðrún is also listing, to a certain extent, legitimate grievances; Atli has already proven to be a dangerous host at the very least, and so it is possible that he is not *drengr* (valiant) but in fact *níðingr*.

Níð is a complex issue in Old Norse-Icelandic texts. It features in both the literature and in law books such as the *Law of Gulaping*.¹⁰³ In its broadest sense *níð* has to do with insult and shame, and the insults were usually directed at men by other

¹⁰² Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 400.

"You never came back from the Assembly – or so we heard - / having prosecuted a case or crushed and adversary's; you always wanted to yield, you never stand firm in any matter, / you'd quietly let things be."

¹⁰³ Rudolf Meißner, *Norwegisches Recht - Das Rechtsbuch des Gulathings* (Weimar: Verlag, Herm. Böcklaus 1935), 123.

men in the literary corpus. As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen argued, “accusations with sexual import form the core of the meaning”.¹⁰⁴ *Níðingr* may have had wider semantic connotations than that of *níð*, indicating an individual who in some way flouted conventions or ethical rules important to medieval Scandinavian society.¹⁰⁵ Given this interpretation of *níðingr* I suggest that it is reasonable that the poem positions Atli in the role of *níðingr* despite his position as king of the Huns. In the murder of Gunnarr and Högni he breaks rules of hospitality that would otherwise be expected in the mythic-heroic setting. Guðrún’s monstrosity, as an infanticide, then can be read as something that exists in tandem with Atli’s own subversive, deviant and *níðingr* nature.

Guðrún’s accusation, that Atli was never properly active in the masculine sphere of the *þing* is designed to be a wounding jibe, undermining his masculinity and identifying him as an unsuitable spouse. Their relationship is further complicated and problematised by Atli’s death in the marital bed – reflecting and reinterpreting Sigurðr’s death earlier in the cycle. That Atli dies in bed, both passive and penetrated, suggests another link to *níð* and *ergi*, a related concept to do again with sexual deviance.¹⁰⁶ But as David Clark points out, there is no sympathy for Atli in the text; the entire ethic of the heroic past has been deflated.¹⁰⁷ Guðrún’s final promise to have Atli’s funeral arranged with all propriety has the banal sound of two people simply exhausted by each other’s company.

The hall of the Hunnish court depicts a world in which the normal rules of ethical behaviour, in the mythic heroic past, have been suspended. These behavioural deviations are indicated by betrayal and murder of guests for greed and revenge; by infanticide and forced cannibalism; by the subversion of welcoming rituals intended to solidify and reinforce key relationships within the court. Both Guðrún and Atli articulate specific issues with gender, sexuality and performance that are splayed out within the emotionally charged spaces of the Atli lays.

¹⁰⁴ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of sexual defamation in early Northern society*, ed. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen and Gerd Wolfgang Weber, vol. I, The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983), 11.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰⁶ Both Preben Meulengracht Sørensen and Theodore Andersson have approached the issue of sexuality in this scene and also in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* in which Gísli kills his brother in law Þorgrím in bed. David Clark has also provided a critical overview of both arguments.

¹⁰⁷ Clark, *Gender, Violence and the Past in Edda and Saga*, 32.

5. Conclusions

Jǫrlum ǫllum
óðal batni,
snótum ǫllum
sorg at minni
at þetta tregróf
um talit væri¹⁰⁸

One character overshadows and dominates the layered and complex emotional relationships in the latter poems of the Poetic Edda's heroic poetry. As the thread that runs through the tapestry of the Vǫlsung-Niflung narrative Guðrún Gjúkadóttir embodies, at various stages, many of the female archetypes the literature is known for. The centrality of her position and the variety of roles she plays, engenders questions about the ways that women were viewed in the Scandinavian Middle Ages. It is her voice, above others, that exclaims grief and exalts in anger. This thesis was intended to investigate some of the connections between issues such as gender and how they relate to other factors, particularly honour and shame and the place of revenge in fueding societies such as that depicted in the heroic poetry. The study of the representation of emotion in regards to these factors is vital as honour and shame, their loss or acquisition, are central to the development of bloodfued and revenge.

The primary goals of this study of Eddic poetry were two-fold; the first was to engage in a survey of the emotional characteristics of the last four poems of the Poetic Edda, and the second was to perform a literary analysis of the ways in which the emotional landscape described the concerns of the medieval audiences. The role of emotion in Eddic poetry has until recently been an under explored area of research, yet the emotional spaces drawn out by *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál* are fraught zones in which individuals are antagonised by competing relationships. Although characters rarely reveal their interior lives and motives it is apparent that, far from being emotionally sterile, Old Norse-Icelandic heroic poetry constructs a landscape with a rich emotional context.

Linguistically it can be seen that the four poems in our study are broadly consistent in so far as the type of emotions they convey and describe and the

¹⁰⁸ Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði II*, 406.

“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.”

frequency with which they appear. Although language describing positive emotions has occasional frequency, it is significantly overshadowed by language that expresses negative emotions, with lexemes that describe emotions in the sphere of anger and sadness dominating the sentimental landscape in each of the poems. When happier feeling is expressed, if at all, it serves to heighten the sense of tragedy and to provide a kind of demarcation between the ‘normal’ gendered expression of emotion and deviance and subversion.

Gender is particularly fraught and complicated in the emotional reading of these texts. Both masculine and feminine characteristics and behaviours are interrogated through the lens of appropriate emotional performances. Emotional expressions such as laughter and weeping become gendered performative acts in these four poems. Weeping, which largely appears to be a feminine expression in the ‘elegiac’ poems of the Edda is here interpreted as a communal activity in the male sphere of relationships. The boundaries of appropriate feminine performativity is articulated and examined through Guðrún’s expression of masculine characteristics, or through the subversion of female kin relationships such as motherhood. The relationship of both genders to revenge, the core subject matter of these poems, is most interestingly expressed in *Hamðismál*. The well-known *hvetjandi* trope, and resistance to it, can actually be read in the context of Hamðir actively engaging his mother’s grief and using her memory of mourning in order to invent his own version of the *hvot* - which brings us to a re-examination of the avenging male figure in Old Norse-Icelandic narratives.

Research into both the history of emotions and emotion in medieval literature is, in many ways, a new and developing field of study. Further analysis is required into the relationships between these poems, which deal with the end of the narrative, and the cycles’ earlier stages, perhaps, too, the Eddic corpus as a whole. Beyond developing a theoretical framework for the functions of emotions in Eddic poetry, one might also ask what they were *for* in the eyes of their original intended audience. The answer likely lies in Guðrún’s final words, in *Guðrúnarhvot*, her final statement in the cycle as a whole: that we become more wise, in our understanding of those difficult emotions, and less sorrowful having heard her tale.

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