

Magic beyond the binary: magic and gender in the *Poetic Edda*

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List of abbreviations

Baldrs draumar (B.)

Fafnismál (Faf.)

Guðrúnarkviða hin forna (Ghf.)

Grípisspá (Gr.)

Gróugaldur (Gró.)

Hárbarðsljóð (Hárb.)

Hávamál (Háv.)

Hyndluljóð (Hynd.)

Lokasenna (Ls.)

Oddrúnargrátr (Odd.)

Sigrdrífomál (Sgd.)

Skírnismál (Skírn.)

Vafþrúðnismál (Vm.)

Völuspá (Völ.)

Glossary

ergi (also *argr*, *ragr*): unmanliness, connoting the penetrated homosexual partner, with strong negative connotations; invoked by the use of *seiðr*

fála (also *hála*): evil witch

fjolkunnig: a magician; strong implications of wisdom

fordæða: evil witch

galdr (also *galdra*): a form of magic, perceived as masculine

galdramaðr: sorcerer, implies male

gambantein: a magic wand

heið (also *heiðr*): witch, with negative connotations; root word for ‘heathen’

seiðberendr: a magician that uses *seiðr*, with strong negative connotations; may imply third gender

seiðmaðr: a magician that uses *seiðr*, with negative connotations; implies male

seiðr: a form of magic, perceived as feminine or anti-masculine

spá: a form of prophetic magic, usually used by the *vǫlur*

spákona: a woman who uses *spá*

spámaðr: someone who uses *spá*, implies male

vitki (also *vitka*): a magician that specialises in rune magic

vǫlva (plural *vǫlur*): female magician specialising in prophecy

1: Introduction

Magic and gender are two of the constructs created by human societies in order to organize the world they inhabit – the latter arranges social behaviour and interactions while the former provides ‘an explanation of world and cosmos in terms of superhuman agency and by extension a religious/magical technology’ with which to influence the world.¹ Unsurprisingly, these two concepts often influence one another and for decades historians and anthropologists alike have studied the intersection of the magic and gender in given societies; indeed, a great deal of work has already been done on Old Norse magic and gender. Unfortunately, the majority of this work is binarist, organizing magic into strictly masculine or strictly feminine, which obscures the complex relationship between Norse magic and gender by forcing the available data into ill-fitting categories. Take, for instance, this quote by Margaret Clunies Ross:

‘I have found that there are three pairs of terms that are implicated in one way or another in all Old Norse myths and form basic organisational structures for them. These pairs are nature and culture, female and male and order and disorder. I do not claim that these modern terms correspond exactly to any indigenous Old Norse terms...’²

In short, Ross argues that these binarist patterns are present in all Norse myths and her proof is her ability to see these patterns. The data from the sources she analyzes, however, doesn’t fit into the binary structure she adheres to – the giants and others like Sinfiotli the werewolf pass between civilization and nature; forces which create chaos are often used to re-establish order (primarily Loki) and forces that ought to create order cause disorder (unruly valkyries). Most strikingly, gender transgressing behaviour is fairly common in Norse myths: cross-dressing is fairly common in the Norse texts, and while it’s sometimes comedic and humiliating (*Brymskviða*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*), it also appears as a clever trick (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana önnor*); further, Loki crosses between genders frequently and may be read as genderfluid, unrestricted to any gender in particular. Binarist analysis of gender and Norse magic doesn’t hold up to scrutiny because ‘multiple gender conceptions and same-sex relations... are cross-culturally consistent [which defies and] deconstructs the simplistic Western conflation of

¹Kevin Avruch, ‘Melford Spiro and the Scientific Study of Culture’ in David K. Jordan and Marc J. Swartz (eds), *Personality and the Cultural Construction of Society* (Tuscaloosa, 1990), pp. 15-59, p. 44.

² Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in medieval Northern Society* (Melbourne, 1994), p. 82.

gender and sex’ as simply male/man and female/woman; the binary being forced onto the data is a construct that did not exist in the society being analyzed.³ As such, analysis of the relation of gender to magic should discard the gender binary in order to provide a more accurate, if somewhat less orderly, depiction of the cultural forces in question. In this light, the following chapters will analyze the cultural and literary tropes of magic and gender as they are found in a specific Old Norse compilation of texts, the *Poetic Edda*;⁴ mostly drawn from the *Codex Regius* manuscript. However, *Baldrs draumar*, *Rígsþula*, *Hyndluljóð*, and *Gróugaldur*, all considered part of the canon of the *Poetic Edda* for their poetic form and their mythic content, are found in other manuscripts such as the *Codex Wormianus* and the *Flatey book*.

One of the most difficult aspects of studying magic is defining what magic is (and what isn’t) magic. Often, magic has to be extracted from religion; with Norse magic, this distinction is pointless, as several deities are noted as magicians themselves. There is also often a sense that magic is a set of illogical actions meant to influence the magician’s circumstance or surroundings – Geertz, for instance, defines magical thinking as ‘a way of orienting oneself toward the facts of one’s experience in an unrealistic and ineffective way’ and that magic itself is behaving on those ‘unrealistic’ thoughts.⁵ Arguably, though, magic placed in its proper social, cultural, and historical context is *not* illogical as it follows the rules or patterns set out by its culture and does not make for a good defining factor. Instead, for the purpose of this paper, magic is defined as ‘purposeful and/or symbolic action which intends to induce change the mental or physical world’ – the key word here being ‘action’. For instance, Freyja’s feather-cloak grants its wearer the form of a falcon due to its intrinsic magic rather than any effort or action made by the wearer. An active form of transformation magic can be seen in *Hyndluljóð*, where Freyja uses seiðr to transform Ottar into a boar. The activity of the magician is important to note because vast majority of magic which appears in the *Poetic Edda*, whether individual spells or magical ability on the whole, is described in terms of consequences of a magician’s actions rather than methods.

³ Robert J. Wallis, ‘Waking Ancestor Spirits: Neo-shamanic engagements with archaeology’ in Neil Price (ed), *The Archaeology of Shamanism* (London, 2001), pp. 213-230, p. 223.

⁴ All Old Norse quotes from the *Poetic Edda* in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Jost Gippert, *TITUS Text Collection: Edda*, 2001 <<http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/germ/anord/edda/edda.htm>> [12 October 2013]; all English quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Carolyne Larrington (New York, 1996).

⁵ Hildred Geertz, ‘An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, I’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6 (1975), pp. 71-89, p. 82.

Even with a working definition of magic, the description by results style of the *Poetic Edda* makes it somewhat difficult to distinguish between the different types of magic being used. The major categories of magic that can be parsed out are, in order roughly from feminine to neutral to masculine: spá, the purely prophetic magic; seiðr, the shamanic boundary-crossing magic; runic magic, based on inscribing spells or symbols; and galdr, the chanting magic. There are clear indications in the texts that a great difference was perceived between some types of magic, most notably spá and seiðr, despite the fact that both may be used by the main class of seers, the vǫlur (singular vǫlva) and probably even by the same vǫlva. In fact, magicians are frequently possessing multiple forms of magic – Odin knows galdr, runic magic, and the shamanistic seiðr; Skírnir knows galdr and runic magic; the vǫlva Gróa knows both seiðr and galdr. Some magic acts cannot be classed into any of these categories with the given information, and so remain unlabelled; such is the case with the necromancy in the *Poetic Edda*, which occurs in *Baldur's Draumar* and *Gróugaldur*, in which dead vǫlur are asked to assist the living. Though *Hávamál* describes Odin using runic magic to make a hanged man speak, there are depictions of seiðr working with the spirits of the dead,⁶ and neither magic can be reasonably ruled out or be definitely named as the magic used in those poems. This type of obscurity is an unfortunate side effect of the style used to describe magic in the *Poetic Edda*, which focuses on the results rather than the process.

The *Poetic Edda* is, notably, a culturally bound literary construction, not an exact replica of Old Norse society. There is, for instance, a notable difference between the behaviour of the historic vǫlur and the vǫlur in these texts; the historical vǫlur were itinerant sorceresses who served communities by prophesying and casting spells; in the *Poetic Edda*, the vǫlur are stationary figures who are approached for advice – the proactive nature of the role of the vǫlur is discarded in the poems. Further, there is the literary construction of the runic alphabet, which was used for a wide variety of mundane purposes in real life, as a purely magical script, both by their source (they are the norms' script, according to *Hávamál*) and by their use; in the *Poetic Edda*, runes are only magic, never mundane. Ergi, the shame or taboo of unmanliness or receptive homosexuality, is also mostly found in the texts in reference to seiðr, although it could be incurred in a variety of mundane way in Old Norse society and was legislated against in Old

⁶ Gunnora Hallakarva, *Women and Magic in the Sagas: Seiðr and Spá*, <<http://vikinganswerlady.com/seidhr.shtml>> [5 September 2013].

Norse law codes. The *Poetic Edda*, then, is a literary construction of cultural constructions; in examining it, a filtered or edited version of Old Norse society and customs become apparent.

It should be noted, of course, that magic and gender, even in literature, are hardly stable – over the course of the composition of the Old Norse corpus, the number of male magicians rises dramatically, while the number of female magicians dwindle and third-gender or genderfluid magicians seem to disappear, a progression that happens roughly chronologically, with male magicians growing more prominent in younger texts written later in the middle ages.⁷ The analysis in this thesis applies only to the *Poetic Edda*.

2: *Spá*: Vituð ér enn eða hvat? [Do you understand yet, or what more?]⁸

Spá magic is the most easily defined magic; *spá* is prophecy, usually used by the *vǫlur*, as seen even in the titles of the poems *Vǫluspá*, *Gripisspá*, and the section of *Hyndluljóð* that has been identified as *Voluspá in skamma*. However, *spá* is more than simply the prophetic magic of the *vǫlur*. Firstly, the *vǫlur* use a variety of magic, of which *spá* is only one; *spá* is not even the only prophetic magic the *vǫlur* may use, as *seiðr* and runic magic can both be used for predicting the future. Secondly, even though the title ‘*vǫlva*’ is reserved for women in Norse society⁹ – and there is only one instance of a male being called ‘*vǫlva*’ in the texts (and that as an insult, during the flyting in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana hin fyrri*, stanza 37) – at least some men clearly could use *spá*, as Gripir does, as well as women who are not *vǫlva* who know *spá*, such as Frigg. Odin, who boasts in *Hávamál* that he knows magic which no one else knows (*Háv.*, st. 146), does not appear to use *spá* himself and must consult the *vǫlur* for their prophecies in *Vǫluspá* and *Baldrs draumar*. Even if a man can use *spá*, it is clearly a very restricted sort of magic if Odin does not or cannot learn it. In addition to this, there is the clear implication in *Vǫluspá* that *spá* is a higher or more respectable form of magic than *seiðr*, despite the prophetic abilities of the two forms of magic being roughly equal in the *Poetic Edda*: *seiðr* is the magic of ‘*illrar brúðar*’ [‘wicked women’] which produces ‘*völu velspá*’ [‘pleasing prophecies’] (*Vǫl.*, st. 22), which is sharply contrasted to the *vǫlva*’s disheartening account of Ragnarok. Further, despite his own prophetic ability, Odin turns to the *vǫlur* for *spá* prophecies in the texts, again implying that *spá* is the

⁷ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia, 1996), pp. 124-126.

⁸ *Vǫluspá*, refrain.

⁹ Jochens, *Images of Women*, p 120.

stronger or preferred form of prophecy. Hallakarva points out that spá is related to ørlög, ‘primeval law’ and thus semantically tied to the norms (mostly Urðr) and that spá may be perceived as going straight to the source in order to predict the future while seið-workers likely worked through a spirit medium to make predictions rather than working with ørlög itself.¹⁰ However, given the general lack of information on the actual practice of magic in the *Poetic Edda*, there is nothing in the text to confirm this methodical distinction; the few references to working with ørlög come in *Lokasenna*, in reference to Gefion and Frigg’s knowledge of fate; Gefion does not appear anywhere else in the *Poetic Edda* and Frigg specifically does not reveal her knowledge of the future. Neither are there direct references to seið-workers using spirits. The implied hierarchy of these two forms of magic might also be attributed to the difference of prestige between a ‘native’ Nordic magic and an introduced shamanic Sámi magic that has been attributed to the Vanir in the mythology.¹¹ Both of these may factor into the distinction made between spá and seiðr and the distinction made may be a lingering, literary clue to an actual distinction – and possible hierarchy – made by the Norse with regards to the varieties of magic available to them.

There are three women specifically identified as vǫlur in the *Poetic Edda*, Gróa and two nameless vǫlur (*Vǫluspá*, *Baldrs draumar*); in addition to these three, one might add Hyndla, who gives voice to the *Vǫluspá in skamma* in her lay when Freyja consults her, a close parallel to Odin consulting the vǫlur in *Vǫluspá* and *Baldrs draumar*. Of these four women, two of the vǫlur are resurrected to give aid or counsel to petitioners (*Baldrs draumar*, *Gróugaldur*); two are afforded high rank until they say something that the petitioner takes offense at (*Baldrs draumar*, *Hyndluljóð*); two are giantesses (*Vǫluspá*, *Hyndluljóð*); two have petitioners asking on another’s behalf (*Baldrs draumar*, *Hyndluljóð*); only one vǫlva seems to be prophesying for a large audience (*Vǫluspá*). All are approached and asked for help; none offer it unprompted and only one offers assistance willingly – Gróa, who gives aid to her son. As Gróa uses galdr rather than spá, she will be discussed later, alongside other galdr magicians; we should note that she is a vǫlva using magic that is neither spá nor seiðr and she is the seer who aids Thor in the *Prose*

¹⁰ Hallakarva, *Women and Magic*.

¹¹ Else Mundal, *Coexistence of Saami and Norse culture – reflected in and interpreted by Old Norse myths*, 2000, <<http://rp-www.arts.usyd.edu.au/medieval/saga/pdf/346-mundal.pdf>> [20 October 2013], pp. 348-352.

Edda.¹² To return to the other vǫlur, their narratives imply that they are of high rank, as advisers to even the gods, but not unwaveringly so, as the vǫlur in *Baldrs draumar* and *Hyndluljóð* are open to abuse from Odin and Freyja; Odin tries to revoke the title of vǫlva from the deceased seer in *Baldrs draumar*, calling her the mother of giants ‘þursa móðir’ (*B. d.*, st. 13), after she realises that he is Odin in disguise and presumably refuses to continue prophesying for him, given his insulting response to being unmasked, though he no longer asks her for more information. Freyja, on the other hand, outright threatens Hyndla with forceful magic when the giantess refuses her request for memory-aiding ale for Ottar; Freyja threatens to trap Hyndla in her cave with magic fire and brushes off Hyndla’s curse against Ottar as too weak to stand against the goddess’s will: ‘Ordheill þin / skal engu rada, / þottu, brudr iotuns! / baulfui heitir; / hann skal drecka / dyrar veigar, / bid ek Ottari / aull god duga’ (*Hynd.*, st. 50). It is interesting that both these unfriendly encounters occur between spá-using vǫlur and noted seið-practitioners; the exchanges between Freyja and Hyndla are acerbic from the beginning and degenerate into violence while the exchange between Odin and the nameless vǫlva ends in him insulting her. On the other hand, the vǫlva in *Vǫluspá* bears significantly less pleasant news but delivers it unchallenged. Jochens calls this specific vǫlva ‘the most powerful articulation of female wisdom’ and she points out that the vǫlva boasts knowledge of everything – and indeed seems to have it, given that she knows such secrets as the location of Odin’s sacrificed eye and outperforms the other wise people interrogated by Odin, including the vǫlva in *Baldrs draumar* and the wise giant Vafþrúðnir in *Vafþrúðnismál*.¹³ As Odin bests these wise folk, among others, in matching wits and the vǫlva in *Vǫluspá* proves that she knows more than Odin and is wiser than he, we may take her as the ultimate prophet in Norse mythology. Her magic may not be as strong in terms of results as Freyja’s or Loki’s or Odin’s, but her spá gives her access to all knowledge and the influence it has on the gods is considerable.

Then there is the matter of Gripir, the only male spá-worker in the *Poetic Edda*; one of the first things we should note is that there is no evidence that Gripir brings on ergi or breaks any taboo by knowing and using spá, despite being the lone male in an otherwise exclusively female group of prophets. In several ways, Gripir is like the vǫlur. For instance, he is approached for his aid rather than proactively offering it: Sigurðr seeks him out for being ‘allra manna vitrastr oc

¹² Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse Byock (New York, 2005), p 89.

¹³ Jochens, *Images of Women*, pp 42-43.

framvísst’, wisest of men and prophetic (*Gr.*, prose prologue). Gripir’s prophecy is helpful to Sigurðr – for instance, it’s Gripir who tells Sigurðr how to wake Sigrdrífa – but he attempts to stop giving information when Sigurðr’s fortune turns for the worse. He tells Sigurðr to stop asking him of the future and denies that he has prophetic ability and must be coaxed by Sigurðr to reluctantly reveal the unpleasant aspects of his future (*Gr.*, st. 19-22). On the one hand, this reluctance and grim fortune places Gripir in the position of unwilling prophet like some vǫlur, albeit with a much better reaction from his client, and may be intentionally evoking that specific trope. On the other hand, Gripir attempts to stop his prophecy and omit his knowledge of the misfortune that lies ahead of Sigurðr. This attempted cessation replicates the reason that the *Vǫluspá* vǫlva gives for looking down on Freyja and her seiðr as well as Odin’s caution in *Hávamál* against a seer that only prophesies good things (‘vǫlo vilmæli’, *Háv.*, st. 87). In other words, Gripir acts very poorly as a spá-worker in order to take on the reluctant prophet role. Whether or not this bad behaviour is negated by his capitulation is debateable. Of all the prophets in the *Poetic Edda*, he is the only one who attempts to keep his prophecy to only good things. As the poem ends with Sigurðr’s comments about the inevitability of fate, one wonders if the point might be to show that Gripir is fated to give the whole prophecy in order to forewarn Sigurðr, with the added benefit of fitting Gripir into the established position of reluctant prophet.

There are, then, a few recurring tropes in the *Poetic Edda* regarding the spá-workers, particularly the vǫlur: most spá-workers are female; some prestige is attached to spá that may not apply to other forms of magic; despite being a predominantly ‘female’ magic and being closely associated with the vǫlur, there does not seem to be any shame or loss of face for the man who uses spá. Spá seems to be regarded as the most accurate form of prophecy but it is limited to only prophecy. Spá-workers are sought after for advice, which the spá-worker may be reluctant to give but sometimes can be cajoled into giving despite their reluctance. Of course, the most reluctant prophet of all must be Frigg, for she knows all and says nothing (‘ørlog Frigg hug ec at oll viti, / þótt hon síálfgi segi’, *Ls.*, st. 29). At no point does she prophesise and while Odin asks for her counsel at the beginning of *Vafþrúðnismál*, he ignores it and goes to challenge Vafþrúðnir against Frigg’s advice. Notably, the language in that exchange is devoid of references to magic; the word used, ‘ráð’, is rather ordinary and means merely ‘advice or counsel’ without the more mystical connotations found in other words, such as ‘mjǫtuðr’, ‘dispenser of fate, give advice’

(*Vm.*, st 1).¹⁴ All others related to spá may be persuaded to disclose some of their wisdom, even after death; not so for stoic Frigg. In general, spá seems to be the most passive Norse magic, more akin to knowing than to seeking, but that may be a false impression stemming from the spá-worker's position as sought-after consultant and the utter lack of description of the rites and practice of magic in the *Poetic Edda*.

3: *Seiðr*: Seið hon, hvars hon kunni, seið hon hug leikinn [She made magic wherever she could, with magic she played with minds]¹⁵

Of the various forms Norse magic takes, the most scrutinized must be seiðr; as Price notes, on the topic of the possible connection between seiðr and shamanism alone ‘more than 300 published works have appeared on this subject, representing the work of some 150 scholars...’¹⁶ Examining seiðr means examining the texts carefully and attempting to tease out this particular magic from other types of magic and detect possible circumlocutions used to avoid attaching the negative connotations of seiðr to a given magician;¹⁷ it also means taking on decades of academic debate embroiled in politics, particularly with regards to race relations between the Norse and the Sámi and the possible homosexuality or gender variation implied in the term ergi, which is inextricable from the subject of seiðr.¹⁸ Furthermore, seiðr, unlike spá, is a very broad category for magic; it includes battle magic, causing storms, prophecy, creating illusions, shape-shifting, and potion brewing, among other things. Seiðr appears to be a very mental magic, acting on the consciousness (which reflects the shamanistic aspects of this magic) and the physical aspects of the magic, such as storm-calling, can be understood as working in the same manner, as ‘consciousness is perceived to be an inherent quality of the entire world’ in animistic, shamanic belief systems.¹⁹ Perhaps rooted in its use of illusions, seiðr and deception are often intertwined in the texts; it also has a reputation of being malicious or ‘evil’, both in modern studies and Old Norse texts. The suspicion against seiðr may stem from its marginalised

¹⁴ Krause, Todd B. and Slocum, Jonathan, Old Norse Online: Base Form Dictionary, <<http://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/lrc/eieol/norol-BF-X.html>> [12 October 2013].

¹⁵ *Völuspá*, stanza 22.

¹⁶ Neil Price, *The Archaeology of Seiðr: Circumpolar Traditions in Viking Pre-Christian Religion*, 2004, <ppg.revistas.uema.br/index.php/brathair/article/view/616/53> [15 October 2013].

¹⁷ Hallakrva, *Women and Magic*.

¹⁸ Stefanie v. Schnurbein, ‘Shamanism in the Old Norse Tradition: A Theory between Ideological Camps’, *History of Religions* 43 (2003), pp. 116-138, pp. 121-129.

¹⁹ Dan McCoy, *Magic*, 2012, <<http://norse-mythology.org/concepts/magic/>> [15 October 2013].

origins, both as a magic that is practiced by women and gender-nonconformists and as a magic imported into Norse society from the Sámi.²⁰ The *Poetic Edda* supports this marginalised aspect of seiðr, assigning seiðr Vanir origins, introduced to the Æsir by Freyja, and as primarily the magic of the oft-maligned magicians Freyja and Loki.

As the mythological origin of seiðr, Freyja should be the first seiðr-worker examined. There are two further reasons to study her particularly. Firstly, Freyja works *only* with seiðr, so whenever she works magic, we know what type we are dealing with;²¹ secondly, there is evidence that the goddesses were more widely worshipped and important than the texts would make them seem;²² she may, therefore, be the divine model of the seiðr-worker and subsequently we should approach Freyja as the main divine seiðr-worker, rather than Odin. Unfortunately, Freyja – along with the other goddesses – are somewhat obscured in the Old Norse texts due to their androcentrism; she appears herself in only *Lokasenna*, *Prymskviða*, and *Hyndluljóð*; of these three texts, she actively works magic only in *Hyndluljóð*, though *Lokasenna* contains some information on her seiðr and Freyja as Gullveig is implied to have used seiðr against the Æsir in *Völuspá*, during the vǫlva's recounting of the war between the Æsir and the Vanir. What we have, however, is rather illuminating: in *Hyndluljóð*, Freyja transforms Ottar into a battle-boar to disguise him; Freyja summons mystic fire and traps Hyndla in her cave; she deflects Hyndla's ill-will by purging a drink of poison ('eitri' taints the drink; it will have no effect, 'engo ráða', *Hynd.*, st. 49-50); finally, she apparently blesses Ottar. Over the course of the poem she also asks for beer that will aid Ottar's memory; this memory-altering drink is a seiðr potion; as with other aspects of seiðr, potions or herbal magic is regarded suspiciously, as something that can heal or poison.²³ Other memory-affecting drinks in the *Poetic Edda* are found in *Sigrdrifumál*, when Sigrdrífa gives Sigurðr a drink to enhance his memory before teaching him runes and in *Guðrúnarkviða hin forna*, when Grimhild gives Guðrún a drink to erase her memory.

Beyond these examples of Freyja working magic or requesting potions, we have in *Lokasenna* a glimpse of the perception of seiðr-workers. Loki says to Freyja 'þú ert fordæða / oc meini

²⁰ Mundal, *Coexistence of Saami and Norse culture*, p 347.

²¹ Britt-Marie Näström, *Freyja – the great goddess of the North* (Stockholm, 1995), p 82.

²² Else Mundal, 'The Position of the Individual Gods and Goddesses in Various Types of Sources – with Special Reference to the Female Divinities', in T. Ahlbäck (ed), *Old Nordic and Finnish Religions and Cultic Place Names* (Åbo, 1990), pp 294-315, p 300.

²³ Katherine Morris, *Sorceress or Witch? The Image of Gender in Medieval Iceland and Northern Europe* (Lantham, 1991), p 65.

blandin mioc’ [‘you’re a witch / and much imbued with malice’]; ‘fordæða’ is one of a number of insulting ways to refer to magic workers, and one that implies evil; others include ‘seiðberendr’ and ‘heið’. We should note that ‘berendr’ is a crude reference to genitalia, likely the vagina,²⁴ which explicitly links seiðr to sex. Further, in *Völuspá*, Gullveig, (a pseudonym for Freyja, who ‘has many names’)²⁵ the woman who survives being burnt three times by the Æsir during the war against the Vanir, is called ‘heið’ (*Vol.*, st 21-22), a rather generic but negative word for witch – particularly in conjunction with ‘Gullveig’, which connotes obsession with gold. These names and pejoratives, then, accuse Freyja of being not only the source of seiðr but also of greed for gold (which Freyja is well known for, being the woman who cries gold tears and owns Brísingamen); she is magical and threatening, beyond control or death, and the insults used against her reflect this. In other words, Freyja, goddess herself, is not immune to the negative connotations of seiðr, which are attached to her from her introduction in the mythology (particularly in *Völuspá*), not just in the flyting in *Lokasenna*. Some of the negativity Freyja receives in the texts might be derived from the severely negative reaction of Christians who transcribed the poems to the lusty Vanir sorceress as well as her position as original seið-worker of the Norse pantheon.

Loki ‘is also repeatedly linked to shamanism’²⁶ i.e., seiðr; his main use for magic seems to be shape-shifting. In *Þrymskviða* alone he has three forms: his usual giant male form; the falcon feather-shape (‘fiaðrhamr’, *Þr.*, st. 5, usually translated as feather-cloak); and the bondswoman (‘ambót’). In bringing about Baldr’s death, Loki takes on the form of a woman who consults with Frigg, the giantess who would not weep, and a salmon in addition to his normal giant shape, which he uses when talking to Höðr.²⁷ He infamously spends months as a mare before giving birth to Sleipnir. He is mostly portrayed as malicious in the *Poetic Edda* (as in *Völuspá*, *Lokasenna*, and the reference to him in *Hyndluljóð*); we may view this malice as placing these stories closer to Ragnarök or as part of setting Ragnarök in motion – *Lokasenna* in particular bridges Loki murdering Baldr to Ragnarök, as the poem ends in his captivity, where he will languish until he returns to fight the Æsir during Ragnarök. The exception in the *Poetic*

²⁴ Sami Raninen, *Queer Vikings? Transgression of gender and same-sex encounters in The Late Iron Age and early medieval Scandinavia*, 2008, <http://www.helsinki.fi/jarj/sqs/sqs2_08/sqs2_2008raninen.pdf> [9 October 2013], p 7.

²⁵ Snorri, *Prose Edda*, p 43.

²⁶ Schnurbein, ‘Shamanism in the Old Norse Tradition’, p 118.

²⁷ Snorri, *Prose Edda*, p 65-69.

Edda is *Þrymskviða*, where he has an adventure with Thor, just as he does in the *Prose Edda*, where he also works together with the Æsir and against several giants, not the least of which is Utgarða-Loki; he has many more benign stories in the *Prose Edda* than in the *Poetic Edda*. Although *Þrymskviða* comes after *Lokasenna* in the Codex Regius *Poetic Edda* manuscript, the story seems to come before Loki's turn against the Æsir. Clearly, Loki is a boundary-crosser, blurring the lines between giant and Æsir, animal and human or giant, friend and foe; he causes a great deal of disorder in Norse literature, but he is often forced to reorganize what he's unsettled, as when he steals Idunn and her apples and then steals them back. Further, Loki frequently crosses gender boundaries. As Sørensen notes, a sure marker of masculinity in Norse literature is producing sons by impregnating a woman;²⁸ Loki has two sons in this manner by his wife Sigyn, Váli and Narfi; if we take the inverse to be held true, Loki is also surely marked as feminine, being impregnated several times, including, once, being magically impregnated by eating a woman's heart and subsequently giving birth to all witches ('varð Loptr qviðugr af kono illri, / þaðan er á foldo flagð hvert komit', *Hynd.*, st. 41). He apparently fathered his children with Angrboða, but they reflect Loki's boundary-crossing nature, particularly Hel, who is half alive and half dead. In *Lokasenna*, Niorðr's accusation of ergi is rooted directly in Loki's ability to bear young ('hit er undr, er áss ragr er hér inn of kominn, oc hefir sá born of borit', *Ls.*, st. 33); Odin's accusation is that Loki spent eight years as a woman, during which time he gave birth ('átta vetr vartu fyr iorð neðan / kýr mólcandi oc kona, / oc hefir þú þar born borit, / oc hugða ec þat args aðal', *Ls.*, st. 23).

Despite this clear gender-bending behaviour on Loki's part – even at the level of biological reproduction, which is in Western society constructed as the basest element of being one of two sexes²⁹ – discussions on the possible third-gender in Norse society are rarely applied to the literature and, when the idea is applied, not to Loki.³⁰ This blind spot is particularly puzzling because these discussions tend to focus on seiðr as inherently gender challenging and

²⁸ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of sexual defamation in early Northern society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense, 1983), p. 9.

²⁹ This is despite the fact that so-called 'biological sex' occurs on a spectrum in humans rather than occurring in two discrete categories and that such a notion has no basis in actual human physiology.

³⁰ This is particularly vexing, as casual readers of Norse mythology have identified Loki as genderfluid for quite a while, to the extent that Al Ewing, writer of the upcoming Marvel comic *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, received a query on whether he'd carry mythological Loki's gender fluidity into the comic, to which he responded with a decisive 'yes'. Comic book readers and writers are ahead of academic research on gender in Norse mythology on this particular topic.

seið-workers as a possible class of gender variants; these topics seem tailored for examining the quixotic Loki. More than any other character in Old Norse literature, Loki has acted as or is portrayed as three genders, male, female, and ‘ergi-male’³¹ or ‘seidberendr’.³² Loki is usually referred to with male pronouns, but when he has a female shape he’s often referred to by that shape (i.e. ‘ambót’ in *Þrymskviða* and ‘í konu líki’ and ‘konan’ in *Gylfaginning* 49) in lieu of personal pronouns.³³ We might see Loki as genderfluid, neither fully masculine nor feminine nor even that ill-defined third-gender but capable of presenting as any of these genders. (One should note that the third-gender may indicate a mix of masculine and feminine the way genderfluidity would and therefore may be the best name for Loki’s gender presentation; this concept, however, has yet to be fully studied and defined in regards to Norse gender construction. With this data insufficiency, the term genderfluid is used instead.) While gender variation and fluidity are an extension of Loki’s liminal nature, it does not seem endear him to the Æsir or to the reader – his unpredictability and malice against the Æsir are rooted in his liminal character, which is in turn intricately related to his shape-shifting seiðr and his flexible character, which in turn are key to his machinations against the Æsir, particularly Baldr’s death, putting into motion the events that led to Ragnarok. If Freyja is vulnerable to insult for using seiðr, Loki is vulnerable to insult for embodying the liminal and boundary-crossing aspects of magic which lie at the heart of seiðr.

Odin, on the other hand, seems largely immune to the negative implications of practicing seiðr, possibly because it isn’t his only – or even his main – type of magic. It’s possible that he uses seiðr when seducing witches (*Hárþ.*, st. 20) and there’s been speculation that the entirety of *Grímnismál* is a seiðr ritual, depicting ecstasy induced by the heat of the fires and dehydration.³⁴ The conception of Odin’s son Váli is not included in the *Poetic Edda*, but North concludes, due to his cross-dressing during his seduction of Rindr, that Odin ‘must become a seiðmaðr... to produce Váli.’³⁵ Along with Odin’s foresight, which may stem from seiðr, and his ability to send his consciousness outside his body in an animal form, as attested in *Ynglinga saga*, there are therefore only a handful of references in the texts to Odin using seiðr. Loki’s reference to Odin practicing seiðr at Samsey is tantalizing, but the story behind this accusation is not extant (*Ls.*, st.

³¹ Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, p 24-25.

³² Raninen, *Queer Vikings?*, pp. 7-8.

³³ Male pronouns are used for Loki in this essay for the sake of those who might be unfamiliar with gender nonbinary pronouns such as ‘xie’ or ‘zie’ and also because male pronouns are primarily used in the Norse texts to refer to Loki.

³⁴ Schnurbein, ‘Shamanism in the Old Norse Tradition’, p 123-124.

³⁵ Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1997), p 109.

24). In the actual text of the *Poetic Edda*, the majority of the magic Odin uses is galdr, not seiðr. Comparing these scattered references and general abilities to concentration of galdr spells in *Hávamál*, we should question whether Odin's use of seiðr is being specifically downplayed in order to distance him from the negative associations of being a seið-worker or if working seiðr was ever really a large part of Odin's repertoire and if the emphasis placed on it is retrospective.

The overall academic perception towards Odin and his magic makes his use of seiðr problematic by focusing on the negative aspects of seiðr, asking why this assumed gender-normative, masculine warrior god-king practicing women's and gay men's magic and how should we interpret this supposed contradiction in light of his place at the head of the pantheon. Hjort-Larsen sums up the academic trend: 'yet, Odin, the God of War himself, was ... [a] master of seid. How could it be that the most important of all Viking warriors undertook a woman's task? How could he do something that was considered ergi?'³⁶ There are several simple answers to this line of inquiry: Odin may not have been particularly reliant on seiðr; we may well be projecting 'gender-normative' and 'masculine' onto Odin and the supposed dichotomy wasn't as unimaginable to the Norse as to modern scholars; our perception of Odin is skewed by the texts, which make him a much more central figure than he may have actually been in Old Norse paganism. Odin is, after all, 'a highly composite character',³⁷ his war aspect may be somewhat exaggerated by the textual evidence, as there were other war gods worshipped alongside him, notably Thor and Tyr; his position at the head of the Æsir may have been invented or exaggerated by Snorri and other myth compilers, as this is not reflected in archaeological evidence or in accounts by contemporary commentators³⁸ – for instance, Adam of Bremen, in his description of the temple at Uppsala, refers to Thor as the central god, though Thor, Freyr, and Odin are worshipped as a trio. Odin is, however, as close to a central protagonist as one can get in a group of collected poems such as the *Poetic Edda*; he is the petitioner of vǫlur in *Völuspá* and *Baldurs draumar*, the speaker in *Hávamál* (the longest of the mythological poems at 164 stanzas) and *Grímnismál*, the hero of *Vafþrúðnismál*, and the winner of the flyting between himself and Thor in *Hárbarðsljóð* – Odin's stories dominate the mythological portion of the

³⁶ Anne Hjort-Larsen, 'The Viking god Odin – A queer god of War', 2 January 2004, <<http://eng.kilden.forskningsradet.no/c52778/nyhet/vis.html?tid=53502>> [21 September 2013].

³⁷ Anders Andrén, 'Behind "Heathendom": Archaeological Studies of Old Norse Religion', *Scottish Archaeological Journal* 27 (2005), pp. 105-138, p 128.

³⁸ Näström, *Freyja*, p 99.

Poetic Edda just as Sigurðr and Guðrún's stories dominate the heroic poems of the text. The centrality of Odin in the texts is constructed and, as a central figure, a heroic divinity, it appears that the writers attempted to distance Odin from the negative implications of seiðr while allowing him to access its power. We should also note that the dichotomy between masculine and feminine types of magic, which forms the bulk of the 'problem' of Odin's magic, seems to have been created or at least overemphasised by modern scholars, as Odin is hardly the only magician who uses magic of the 'wrong' gender.

Seiðr is a very mysterious form of magic, despite its frequent use in the *Poetic Edda*; only small glimpses of how one worked seiðr are given in the text. Between Loki's insinuation that Odin cross-dressed to use seiðr, Freyja's falcon feather cloak, and descriptions of the vǫlur in other Old Norse texts (particularly the vǫlva Þorbjörg in *Eiríks saga rauða*), there is a sense of probable ritual clothing. Archaeological evidence, such as felt animal masks and depictions of people wearing such masks, may be physical remains of the practice of seiðr – the image 'on the Oseberg tapestry a woman with a boar mask and skin' is especially intriguing,³⁹ given that the boar is sacred to seið-bringing Freyja and the presence of other mystical items – 'cannabis seeds ... among a pile of feathers and down; [similar to] the detailed description of the special feather stuffing of the vǫlva's cushion in *Eiríks saga rauða*'⁴⁰ – amidst the grave goods shared by the two women. However, what we can glean from these hints, even contextually, is not specific or certain. Seiðr seems to be an elaborate form of magic, with specific dress required for casting; it deals with mental magic and potions; it is a foreign magic adopted into Norse culture; it is intricately related to the concept of ergi and, by negative definition, Norse masculinity. Given the dearth of information present in the text about seiðr itself, what we have to work with are the associations recorded by the Norse of this form of magic. The texts depict seiðr very particularly, as a powerful magic with many applications but as unmanly, deceitful, and shameful – it is othered by the texts, both by its foreign origin and the genders (and gender nonconformity) of its practitioners. This is particularly interesting because Norse masculinity transformed after the

³⁹ Anne-Sofie Gräslund, 'The material culture of Old Norse religion' in Stephan Brink and Neil Price (eds), *The Viking World* (London, 2008), pp. 249-256, p 256.

⁴⁰ Neil Price, *The Archaeology of Seiðr: Circumpolar Traditions in Viking Pre-Christian Religion*, 2004, <ppg.revistas.uema.br/index.php/brathair/article/view/616/53> [15 October 2013], p 117.

conversion to Christianity, and during the era of the transcription of the eddas and sagas.⁴¹ If the practice of seiðr and gender nonconformity was at one point accepted and the shame and negativity associated with them are indeed ‘imposed Eurocentric understandings of gender and sexual relations onto indigenous cultures’ of the Norse and the Sámi,⁴² this time of flux for masculinity would have been the time to impose new interpretations of old practices inconsistent with the introduced Christian masculinity and femininity. In such a time and state, the practice of seiðr may be condemned despite its power; the dearth of information on the rituals of seiðr or the unrecorded or lost stories of Freyja and other seið-workers, such as Odin at Samsey, may be regarded as a cultural form of ‘oblivion or forgetting... addressed when we ask who were the bearers of [written memory]... and why other types were lost’.⁴³ The written information preserved about seiðr and ergi are deliberately preserved and should be viewed as carefully edited; what remains may have been either too important culturally to discard and ignore or incapable of challenging the new gender norms and Christian ethics. Such absences in the written record should not be seen as incidental or not intentional; these absences are as critical to analysis as the extant information in the texts.

4: *Runic Magic*: Þat ero bócrúnar, þat ero biargrúnar, oc allar olrúnar, oc mætar meginrúnar [Those are book-runes, those are helping-runes, and all the ale-runes, and valuable runes of power]⁴⁴

Like seiðr, runic magic has a broad range of applications in the *Poetic Edda*; the variety and uses of the runes take up thirteen stanzas of *Sigrdrífomál* when Sigrdrífa teaches them to Sigurðr. Unlike seiðr, which is presumed to be mostly for women, runic magic is presumed to be mostly for men by modern scholars. This assumption may be based on the fact that of the dozens of named rune carvers, culled from the thousands of inscriptions, only one is female (Gunnborga the Good, whose work is found in a church at Hälsingland)⁴⁵ and the general perception of

⁴¹ Zoe Borovsky, “‘En hon er blandin mjök’: Women and Insults in Old Norse Literature’ in Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (eds), *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (New York City, 2002), pp. 1-14, pp. 9-11.

⁴² Wallis, ‘Waking Ancestor Spirits’, pp. 223-224.

⁴³ Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, ‘Cultural Memory and Gender in Iceland from Medieval to Early Modern Times’, *Scandinavian Studies* 85 (2013), pp. 378-399, p 384.

⁴⁴ *Sigrdrífomál*, stanza 19.

⁴⁵ Nancy L. Wicker, ‘Nimble-fingered Maidens in Scandinavia: Women as Artists and Patrons’ in Therese Martin (ed), *Reassessing the Roles of Women as ‘Makers’ of Medieval Art and Architecture* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 865-902, p 884.

literacy as the domain of men throughout history. Of course, only a miniscule fraction of runic inscriptions have a signature attached to them; the vast majority of the carvers are unknown and to assume all, or even a great majority, of the carvers were male is unfounded; it is certainly not an assumption supported by the *Poetic Edda*. In the *Poetic Edda*, the known rune workers are the norms Urðr, Verðandi, and Skuld, Odin, Skírnir, Helgi Hjörvarðsson, Sigrdrífa, Sigurðr, Grimhild, Guðrun, Kostbera, Ríg (Heimdall), Jarl, and Konr. In this list of fourteen, seven are female, seven are male – knowledge of the runes is split exactly equal between male and female magicians. Instead, it appears that knowledge of the runes – in terms of literacy and as a form of magic – is decided by class rather than gender, as is particularly explicit in *Rígsþula*, where Ríg teaches runes to only the lord and the (eventual) king, Jarl and Konr.

There seems to be no connection whatsoever between gender and runic magic in the *Poetic Edda*. Given the mythic origin of the runes as the norms' tool and the extent to which Sigrdrífa explains runic magic to Sigurðr, one might be tempted to create a connection between female origin or teacher and male receiver or student, but such a pattern fails utterly when considering Jarl and Konr, taught runes by Ríg, and Kostbera's identity as a woman who studied runes without a mention made to the gender of her teacher – in fact, of the known rune magicians, only a handful have known teachers. Odin received runes from the norms, Sigurðr learned runes from Sigrdrífa, Jarl and Konr learned runes from Ríg; all others are merely shown to know runes without explanation given for their knowledge (the norms, Grimhild, Guðrun, Ríg, Helgi, Skírnir, Sigrdrífa) as the process of learning the runes is incidental or unimportant to the story. A connection between rune magic and gender is just not borne out by the text of the *Poetic Edda*. Even the outcomes or goals of rune magic can't be held as gendered – there are runes for seemingly gendered activities such as assisting during childbirth, but to take healing, wisdom, or ale- or sea-runes to be masculine or feminine is to make assumptions not made by the text. Runic magic seems to apply to most anything that can be written about or on by invoking the power of the runes, either as a magic script using the alphabet as a whole or as magic symbols for individual runes, and can't be described as 'exercised in areas of particular interest to men',⁴⁶ as some would make it seem, as the magic is simply too versatile for such constraints and is used regardless of gender for motives beyond the supposedly masculine sphere of war and politics.

⁴⁶ Jochens, *Images of Women*, p 121.

According to *Sigrdrífomál*, there are a variety of runes – sigrúnar, brimrúnar, limrúnar, and hugrúnar (victory, sea, limb, and mind runes, respectively) are a few examples – and each type comes with some instruction on their specific use – for instance, sea runes should be carved ‘on the prow... and on the rudder / and burnt into the oar with fire’, while limb runes should be carved ‘on bark... on those [trees] whose branches bend east’ (*Sgd.*, st. 10, 11). Unsurprisingly, runic magic is the easiest to identify in the archaeological record, limb runes, for instance, are extant, carved in wood and whale bone.⁴⁷ Sigrdrífa describes ale-runes, saying that they should be carved into the drinking horn; while Sigrdrífa mentions those runes as a method protecting the drinker from beguiling, Grimhild uses ale-runes in conjunction with her seiðr potion against Guðrún in *Guðrúnarkviða hin forna*; the drinking horn is carved with runes stained red (‘ristnir oc roðnir’) that Guðrún, despite her knowledge of runes, cannot read (*Ghf.*, st. 22). Odin in *Hávamál* also makes reference to staining runes: ‘Rúnar munt þú finna oc ráðna stafi... er fáði fimbulþulr’ [‘The runes you must find and the meaningful letter... which the mighty sage stained’] and ‘Veiztu, hvé rísta scal, veiztu, hvé ráða scal? / veiztu, hvé fá scal’ [‘Do you know how to carve, do you know how to interpret? Do you know how to stain?’] (*Háv.*, st. 142, 144). Further information on the practice of runic magic can be found within the *Poetic Edda*. Sigrdrífa notes, for instance, that in victory runes one should ‘nefna tysvar Týr’ [‘invoke Týr twice’], a fairly clear instruction to inscribe the Týr or tiwaz rune twice (*Sgd.*, st. 6);⁴⁸ her instructions for ale-runes include the direction ‘merkia á nagli Nauð’ [‘mark your nail with Naud’], another instruction for a particular rune, ‘nauð’ or ‘need’ (*Sgd.*, st.7). Further, the act of carving runes was synonymous with casting spells, so records of rune carving are also details about magic working, a level of detail not preserved in accounts of other forms of magic. There are even references to lifting rune spells by scraping or rubbing off the runes, which means we know not only how rune spells were cast but also how they were dispelled. There seems to be a strong continuity in the practice of runic magic; the description of the Æsir consulting the runes at the beginning of *Hymiskviða* doesn’t differ substantially from Tacitus’ account of Germanic rune prophecy written roughly a thousand years before the *Poetic Edda* was transcribed; further, the method used to dispel rune magic is the same in the rough contemporaries *Skírnismál* and

⁴⁷ David Robertson, ‘Magical Medicine in Viking Scandinavia’, *Medical History* 20 (1976), pp. 317-322, p 320.

⁴⁸ Please refer to the Appendix rune chart, p. 30.

Egils saga. The practice of rune magic is more thoroughly and consistently described throughout the texts than the other forms of magic.

As seen in *Guðrúnarkviða hin forna*, runic magic can be combined with other magics. The use of runic magic in combination with another magic is also found in *Skírnismál*, when Skírnir, already well into a galdr curse, adds the threat of malicious runes to the mix: ‘Þurs ríst ec þér oc þriá stafi, / ergi oc oði oc óþola; / svá ec þat af ríst, sem ec þat á reist, / ef goraz þarfar þess’ [‘Giant I carve on you and three runes: lewdness and frenzy and unbearable desire; thus I can rub that off, as I carved on, if there is need of this’] (*Skírn.*, st. 36). Mitchell finds it intriguing that Gerðr relents not from the ‘[threat] her and her family’s *physical* well-being, but his errand succeeds when he turns to magic and menaces her *sexual* well-being’,⁴⁹ it is more interesting to note that after ten stanzas of galdr cursing, Gerðr finally surrenders when Skírnir turns to runic magic, using it to reinforce the galdr curse he’s already threatened her with. It appears that runic magic, as seen in *Skírnismál* and *Guðrúnarkviða hin forna*, can be mixed with other forms of magic with relative ease and results in stronger spells. This propensity towards mixing magic does make analysis trickier, as is the case with the runic charm *ægishjálmr*, the ‘Helm of Awe’ or ‘Helm of Terror’ worn by Fafnir in *Fafnismál* (‘Ægishiálm bar ec um alda sonom, / meðan ec um meniom lág’ [‘The helm of terror I wore among the sons of men, while I lay upon the necklaces’], *Faf.*, st. 16). This charm was also used as even after the conversion to Christianity as a form of protection before battle: ‘it was believed that the symbol should be cut into lead and then thrust between one’s eyebrows, then the user should recite “Ægishjalm eg ber milli bruna mjer,” (“Ægishjalm I carry between my brows”).’⁵⁰ The charm supposedly granted invincibility against foes or invisibility. The charm itself is fairly straightforward; the question instead is what powers the charm, seiðr conveyed in a runic charm or the runic symbol itself. Hallakarva believes that the charm is powered by seiðr – ‘ægishjálmr is a special subset of seiðr magic called *sjónhverfing*, the magical delusion or “deceiving of the sight” where the seiðr-witch affects the minds of others so that they cannot see things as they truly are’⁵¹ – while others such as Nigel Pennick believe that the fractal-like repetition of the algiz rune gives the symbol its

⁴⁹ Stephen A. Mitchell, ‘*Skírnismál* and Nordic Charm Magic’ in Pernille Hermann, Jens Peter Schjødt, and Rasmus Tranum Kristensen (eds), *Reflections on Old Norse Myths* (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 75-94, p. 77.

⁵⁰ Gunnora Hallakarva *Ægishjálmr: the Symbol Called the Helm of Awe*, <<http://vikinganswerlady.com/aegishjalmr.shtml>> [28 September 2013].

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

power. The latter theory seems extremely probable, as the algiz rune on its own confers protection⁵² and the repetition of runes is fairly common in runic inscriptions; these typically nonsensical carvings don't spell out words but can be decoded nevertheless. An example would be the repeated ansuz rune, 'the eight a runes would render eight times the rune's name *ansuz, i.e. eight gods, ON *átta æsir*. Such a charm is known from Icelandic: *rísti eg þér ása átta, nauðir níu* 'I carve for you eight *æsir*, nine needs''; the algiz rune has been known to be carved in repetition to convey protection just as eight ansuz runes have been known to be carved to denote the eight *Æsir*.⁵³ With such magic inscriptions created by the repetition of runes, the *ægishjálmr* could very well have drawn its strength from the repeated rune algiz, but *seiðr* cannot be ruled out as a power source. It may well be that the *ægishjálmr* is a charm of mixed magic and that both were considered the source of the charm's power.

Runic inscriptions are the only primary sources written by the Norse before the conversion. All other written contemporary primary sources from the Viking and pre-Viking times were written by outsiders such as Tacitus and Al-Mas'udi. The importance of analysing the texts' use of runes, the native alphabet, therefore cannot be overstressed. While the *Poetic Edda* was transcribed in a largely Latin alphabet in Old Norse dialects in the thirteenth century, runic inscriptions were still being made for magical and mundane purposes. The texts portray runes as inherently magical – the runes are the script of the norns, as seen in *Hávamál* and *Völuspá*, used to carve out the fate of mankind and gods. The miscarving of runes can have ill effects, as shown in *Egils saga*, so it's not the intentions of the carver or the carver's knowledge that powers rune magic but the runes themselves. The people who know runes are upper class, such as Guðrún, Kostbera, Helgi, and Konr, or deities such as Odin; the norns are either the ultimate authority at the top of any hierarchy or outside hierarchal systems altogether, depending on how one sees and characterizes the fate-giving women. According to the *Poetic Edda*, runes are useful, powerful, and reserved for the educated elite – regardless of gender, as there is no apparent gender component to knowing or using runes – a striking form of literary magic found in Old Norse literature. Rune magic lasted long after the conversion, not just with the use of runic charms such as the *ægishjálmr* but also in the transcription of the mystical and apparently purposely obfuscating Norwegian and Icelandic rune poems, transcribed from the thirteenth to fifteenth

⁵² Dan McCoy, *The Meanings of the Runes*, 2012, <<http://norse-mythology.org/runes/the-meanings-of-the-runes/>> [20 October 2013].

⁵³ Tineke Looijenga, *Texts and Contexts of the Oldest Runic Inscriptions* (Leiden, 2003), p 166.

centuries. Part of this endurance may be related to the everyday uses of runes – gravestones, Christian inscriptions on bells and other items, inscriptions recording notable feats undertaken for the community such as bridge-building – but the runes didn't lose their magic associations or prominence after the conversion to Christianity, particularly in the *Poetic Edda*.

5: *Galdr*: Lióð ec þau kann, er kannat þjóðans kona oc manncis mogr [I know those spells which a ruler's wife doesn't know, nor any man's son]⁵⁴

Galdr has often been compared to *seiðr* as its magical inverse: a simple, masculine form of magic to contrast with *seiðr*'s rituals and femininity or unmanliness. Robertson notes that there are a few types of magic and explains (and perpetuates) this dichotomy: '[the] first [type of magic] is that of *galdr* or *ljód*, such as the spells mentioned from the *Hávamál*. A more sinister kind of magic was a mysterious variety called *seidr*.'⁵⁵ Higley makes a very similar, but more overtly gendered, statement: 'The Norse called it "dirty magic," *seiðr*, that is, "women's magic," a magic [that was] obscene ... *Seiðr* is to be distinguished from *galdr*, "men's magic," "honorable magic," ...'⁵⁶ Fairly often, *galdr* is conflated with runic magic; as shown previously, the two forms of magic could easily be combined, but they are not the same. *Galdr* uses performative, declarative statements;⁵⁷ it seems to be primarily a spoken magic, unlike runic magic, and there is an element of performance in *galdr* that is not necessarily present in runic magic. There is no denying that *galdr* was seen as more masculine than *seiðr* and its use by any gender did not incur accusations of *ergi*, gender transgression, or taboo; we should note, though, that this may be because *seiðr* was unmanly or feminine and belonged to the female and third genders rather than *galdr* belonging strictly to male magicians. Indeed, there are four cases of *galdr* in the *Poetic Edda*; three at length and one short instance, two by men, two by women. These magicians use *galdr* in a variety of manners – *Oddrún* uses *galdr* to ease a woman through childbirth, *Gróa* to grant her son mystical protection before he undertakes a quest, *Skírnir* to curse and threaten *Gerðr* into agreeing to a tryst with *Freyr*, and *Odin* for many disparate matters, as he boasts in *Hávamál*.

⁵⁴ *Hávamál*, st. 146.

⁵⁵ Robertson, 'Magical Medicine', p 321.

⁵⁶ Sarah Lynn Higley, *Dirty Magic: Seiðr, Science, and the Parturating Man in Medieval Norse and Welsh Literature*, <<http://www.illinoismedieval.org/ems/VOL11/higley.html>> [18 October 2013].

⁵⁷ Mitchell, 'Skírnismál', pp. 82-83.

If *Sigrdrífomál* is the *Poetic Edda*'s guide to rune magic, *Hávamál* is the text's guide to galdr. The whole poem is didactic, a list of lessons for men taught by Odin himself, as he narrates the poem. As Swenson notes, the poem

‘has a clearly defined speaker and audience... both presented as masculine. The poem works toward constructing an ethical, social code whereby men relate to one another in spite of the dangers inherent in social interaction... *Hávamál* prescribes modes of behaviour, such as keeping weapons close at hand, which decreased the danger. The danger of man to man, then, is not absolute. It can be regulated... Women, in both the narrative and gnomic passages... are presented as outside and threatening to the masculine speaker/audience/community.’⁵⁸

Odin's galdr is an extension of this construction of masculinity. He starts his list of eighteen spells (líód) by boasting that he knows spells no woman knows, an expression repeated in the eighteenth spell, which is undefined except that ‘er ec æva kennig / mev né mannz kono - / alt er betra, ere einn um kann,’ [‘which I shall never teach / to any girl or any man's wife – it's always better when just one person knows’], though he softens this declaration by admitting he might teach the spell to one woman, either a lover or a sister (*Háv.*, st. 163). Some spells grant authority over women or subvert their agency; spells sixteen and seventeen coerce or seduce women into love or physical relations with the caster while spell ten traps witches who have shape-shifted so they can't return to their regular shape or state of mind (‘at þeir villir fara / sinna heim hama, / sinna heim huga’, *Háv.*, st. 155). In this poem, Odin's knowledge of magic and acquisition of wisdom is framed as a conquest over their previous owners – over the norns for their runes (Odin takes them screaming, *Háv.*, st 139) and over Gunnlöð for the mead of poetry. The gnomic poem ends just after the recitation of Odin's spells, having recounted his knowledge and trials; it ends with a blessing to human men. More aggressively than any flying, this poem establishes a gender for its speaker, its audience, and its magic. The masculinity of Odin's spells aren't inherent to what they can do – seduce women, protect ships or warriors, stop fires, fetter or unfetter, heal or curse – but for their inclusion in this assertively masculine-centric poem. We should note that two of the spells Odin lists deals with other types of magic: the tenth spell, which traps witches outside of their own shapes, seems to be dealing with seið-practitioners, while the twelfth spell uses runes and galdr to animate the dead. In these two instances, seiðr

⁵⁸ Karen Swenson, ‘Women Outside: Discourse of Community in *Hávamál*’ in Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (eds), *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (New York City, 2002), pp. 273-293, pp 274-275.

becomes adversarial to *galdr*, the *seið*-worker an enemy to be struck down, while rune magic integrates smoothly with *galdr* spells. The relationship here between *galdr*-using Odin and the *seið*-using witches he strikes down is particularly interesting in light of Odin's use of *seiðr* elsewhere; in fact, there is no mention made anywhere in *Hávamál* to Odin using *seiðr*. It seems that in this lengthy, masculine poem, Odin must be distanced from his *seið*-abilities even during the celebration of his skill as a magician.

Skírnir and Gróa use *galdr* magic in completely opposite ways. Skírnir seems to use only one *galdr* spell, albeit one with multiple parts and stanzas; he uses a curse which threatens Gerðr's physical, psychological, social, and sexual wellbeing when she continues to defy Skírnir's attempts to coerce her into accepting Freyr as a lover. He resorts to *galdr* only after bribery and physical threats have failed and his magic wand ('*gambantein*', *Skírn.*, st. 32) which 'function[s] in the same way as the sword operates in the earlier section of the dialogue' and proves to be the superior weapon.⁵⁹ Gerðr resists Skírnir up to the point that he threatens to carve the runes 'Þurs ... ergi oc oði oc ópola' ['Giant... lewdness and frenzy and unbearable desire'] (*Skírn.*, st. 36) onto his wand, at which point she capitulates and agrees to *tryst* with Freyr at Barri. It seems to be, given that she did not back down during Skírnir's magic threat to make her a starving outcast, jeered at by giants and gods, mentally ill and grieving, that the runes push the power of the spell past a point that Gerðr can withstand. Mitchell argues that *Skírnismál* follows an Icelandic literary pattern '*að ljóða á* (to chant at), a ritualized form of versified imprecation [related to flyting, which depends] on the readiness of the human actor to deflect the supernatural adversary's magical chant with a versified riposte of [their own]', in which case Gerðr's refusals are magically matched to Skírnir's threats until Skírnir turns to mixing runic and *galdr* magic.⁶⁰ Skírnir uses one long spell, using two types of magic and a wand as a prop, to browbeat Gerðr into accommodating Freyr's sexual desire for her. In contrast, Gróa sings nine *galdr* spells, without the assistance of a wand or rune magic, to defend her son during his quest to meet Menglöð. The *völva*'s spells promise to make rivers dwindle, foes become allies, fetters fall away, and seas calm; she also wards her son against ghosts – '*kristin dauð kona*' [a Christian dead woman], (*Gró.*, st. 13)⁶¹ – and blesses him with Mimir's wisdom. The very first spell she

⁵⁹ Mitchell, '*Skírnismál*', p 82.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87

⁶¹ Eysteinn Björnsson, *Svipdagsmál*, <<https://notendur.hi.is/~eybjorn/ugm/svipdag2.html>> [8 October 2013].

sings, though, is the most antithetical to Skírnir's curse; this spell promises her son Svipdagr that he will rule himself, 'sjálfur leið þú sjálfan þig' (*Gró*, st. 6).⁶² This is a stark contrast to Skírnir's curse, which effectively undermines Gerðr's free will and ability to consent, as this benediction bolster's Svipdagr's capacity to control himself (albeit within the confines of his fate, as the norn Urðr still binds him in the next stanza and spell). The range of *galdr* can be seen in the spells of these two magicians. Gróa bends the physical and mental forces to protect her son; Skírnir twists the physical, mental, and social forces to curse Gerðr.

In these cases, *galdr* plays a rather important role in the poem, for good or for ill; this is not the case in *Oddrúnargrátr*, where 'ríct gól Oddrún, ramt gól Oddrún, / bitra galdra, at Borgnýio' [strongly Oddrún sang, powerfully Oddrún sang, / bitter spells for Borgný] (*Odd.*, st. 7). Oddrún tends to Borgný, who has difficulty giving birth to twins, but the focus of *Oddrúnargrátr* is on Oddrún's sorrow for her ill-fated love affair with Gunnar and her falling out with her friend Borgný over that same affair. The poem is one of a very few in which all the speaking characters are female (male-only casts occur much more frequently in the *Poetic Edda*). Little is said of how Oddrún knows *galdr*, but her reason for using it is made clear; she apparently gave an oath to assist any who possess royal blood – Borgný is the daughter of a king and although Oddrún isn't pleased to aid her, she is determined to keep her word. With Oddrún's use of magic *galdr* to aid the pregnant Borgný through her difficult delivery, *galdr*, like every Norse magic except *spá*, is described as able to assist during childbirth. While we should be careful to note that childbirth is not an inherently female interest any more than war is an inherently male interest (beyond the fact that a uterus does not imply femininity, Loki and the valkyries should make it clear that we shouldn't gender such topics as male or female interests, as Jochens and other academics sometimes do), the fact that *galdr* is used in such a capacity in a female-oriented text is interesting, for the same reason that Odin's use of *galdr* in *Hávamál* is interesting. The context for the use of *galdr* in *Oddrúnargrátr*, which is a short poem in the myriad of poems that recount the stories of Sigurðr and Guðrún, is very different from its use in *Hávamál*, the divine gnomic poem of Odin; in *Oddrúnargrátr* *galdr* is a tool and a justification for bringing two estranged women together so that Oddrún can recount her tragedy rather than a skill to be boastful about. As the focus of the poem is Oddrún, her lamentation for her

⁶² *Ibid.*

relationship with Gunnar, and recounting the falling-out between Oddrún and Borgný, this poem seems to focus on a feminine experience the way *Hávamál* focuses on masculine experiences. Between these two poems particularly, we see that galdr can be used in masculine contexts and feminine contexts, by male or female magicians (there are no third-gender magicians that appear to be using galdr) – it therefore seems to be neutral rather than masculine. Why, then, the emphasis on galdr’s masculinity, in texts like *Hávamál* and in academic studies on magic? In patriarchal societies – such as medieval Scandinavia and the modern western world – masculinity *is* often considered neutral. This androcentricity makes non-masculine (or non-normative masculinities) the marked other while normative masculinity is presented as the default gender, the unexamined standard state of being.⁶³ For this reason, ‘men and women alike are rewarded, but only insofar as they are masculine ... Meanwhile, men are punished for doing femininity’⁶⁴ – a concept clearly seen in accusations of *ergi* in Norse culture and in the ‘exceptional’ and ‘masculine’ behaviour and legal status of some Norse women,⁶⁵ as opposed to the shame or *ergi* associated with men who behave in feminine or non-normatively masculine ways. Galdr, too, may be simultaneously masculine and neutral in this manner, capable of fitting into the male-only gnomic poem *Hávamál* as another facet of masculine ability as well as being neutral and unobtrusive in the feminine text *Oddrúnargrátr*. Galdr, like *seiðr* and runic magic, permits a wide variety of spells to be cast under its power; like *seiðr*, it carries gender implications – unlike *seiðr*, this implication can be hidden as it implies the ‘neutral’ masculine gender.

6: Conclusions

There are broad, general gender patterns that some forms of Old Norse magic follow, but the analysis of these gendered patterns should not be allowed to lapse into simplifying binarist categories, which obscure the complexity of the relationship between gender and magic in the primary sources. We may observe, then, that *spá* seems to be largely the realm of women due to

⁶³ Amy Aronson and Michael Kimmel, *Men and Masculinities: a social, cultural, and historical encyclopedia*, (Santa Barbara, 2004), p. xxii.

⁶⁴ Lisa Wade, *Androcentrism: It’s okay to be a boy, but being a girl...*, 12 June 2011, <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2011/06/12/androcentrism-its-okay-to-be-a-boy-but-being-a-girl/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed:%20SociologicalImagesSeeingIsBelieving%20%28Sociological%20Images:%20Seeing%20Is%20Believing%29> [20 October 2013].

⁶⁵ Carol J. Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe’, *Representations* 44 (1993), pp. 1-28, pp. 4-7.

its close association with the always-female *vǫlur*, though there seems to be no taboo against practitioners of other genders using *spá*; meanwhile *seiðr*, as the boundary-crossing, gender-bending, unmanly, feminine magic may nonetheless be used by masculine magicians who may incur and avoid the *ergi* associated with it, as Odin does. Runic magic seems the domain of the educated elite and the truly gender-neutral Norse magic while *galdr*, as the masculine magic, is framed as both masculine and neutral as it can be accessed by male magicians as a male magic and by magicians of other genders as an unmarked or gender neutral form of magic. The amount of magicians using magic of the gender not specified to a particular form of magic implies that Norse gender roles were far less strict than modern scholars hold them to have been; in general, the permeability of Norse gender roles does not seem restrained to magic in the *Poetic Edda*. Norman notes that the valkyrie Brynhildr behaves in a transgender manner, ‘act in the intermediary sphere’ between male and female roles and contrasts the valkyrie to Guðrún;⁶⁶ she explains the difference between the two women as ‘Brynhildr, the woman warrior, and Guðrún, who is headstrong but acts without chain mail’; her analysis includes Guðrún fighting alongside her brothers in hand-to-hand combat against Atli, but does not account for her past as a ship captain alongside her brothers and Sigurdr (*Atla.*, st. 98). Instead of contrasting the valkyrie and queen as gender-bending and mostly gender-compliant, the two women depict the flexibility of Norse gender roles – both are feminine but take on masculine roles during the course of their narratives. Loki seems to flout gender norms entirely with his shapeshifting and genderfluidity while Odin uses magic apparently without regard to the gender implications and the *vǫlva* Gróa and the wise king Gripir similarly use magic against the apparent gender trends. Whether the role in question is linked to magic or not, there is clearly a high degree of permeability or flexibility involved in the gender roles in the *Poetic Edda*. As this text was produced by the Norse themselves, who considered these poems and their tropes worthy of being recorded, this permeability might be taken as symptomatic of the culture as a whole, particularly with cases where women performed legally as men,⁶⁷ Norse graves with ‘men buried in women’s clothes’ and with women’s jewellery and graves with women buried with ‘male’ grave goods and

⁶⁶ Lena Norman, *Woman or Warrior?: The Construction of Gender in Old Norse Myth*, 2000, <<http://rp-www.arts.usyd.edu.au/arts/medieval/saga/pdf/375-norrmn.pdf>> [8 October 2013], p. 378.

⁶⁷ Clover, ‘Regardless of Gender’, pp. 3-6.

weapons;⁶⁸ the scattered evidence, taken as a whole, suggests that gender in Norse society was not as rigid a category as it is seen in the modern western world. As Lauritsen and Hansen note,

‘The danger of archaeological sex determination is that the archaeologist risks confusing the beliefs and practices of his or her own culture with those of the prehistoric culture in question. Most people's ideas about what is natural for humans to think and do, or not, are products of enculturation into a specific culture at a particular time. Our ideas and the practices of our own society are not universal or even inherent in human nature.’⁶⁹

This danger is present in historical analysis, as well, as seen in the misleading binarist theories that paint Norse magic as mostly feminine and Norse gender roles as unbending. By re-examining the primary sources – textual and otherwise – a much more accurate, though less easily categorized, depiction of Norse magic and gender appears, challenging the limited and binarist assumptions that project modern Western gender norms onto the past in general and Norse magic in particular.

⁶⁸ Ole Thirup Kastholm Hansen and Tina Lauritsen, *Transvestite Vikings?*, 2001, <<http://www.idavallen.org/artiklar/transvikings.html>> [21 September 2013].

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Appendix: Runic Magic

The Runic Alphabet: symbol, phoneme, and meaning.

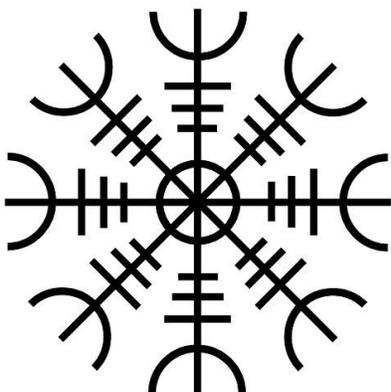
	PR.-SCAND.	ON	MEANING
ᚠ	* <i>fehu</i>	<i>fé</i> n.	cattle, goods, property, money
ᚢ	* <i>ūruR</i>	<i>úrr</i> m.	aurochs, wild ox
ᚦ	* <i>purisaR</i>	<i>þurs</i> m.	giant, troll
ᚨ	* <i>ansuR</i>	<i>áss</i> m.	god
ᚫ	* <i>raidu</i>	<i>reið</i> f.	riding, journey on horseback, waggon
ᚱ	* <i>kauna</i>	<i>kaun</i> n.	boil, sore
ᚷ	* <i>gebu</i>	<i>gjof</i> f.	gift
ᚹ	* <i>wunju</i>	not attested	joy
ᚻ	* <i>hagalaR</i>	<i>hagall</i> m.	hail
ᚾ	* <i>naudiR</i>	<i>nauð</i> f.	need, distress, bondage
ᚿ	* <i>īsaR</i>	<i>íss</i> m.	ice
ᛀ	* <i>jāra</i>	<i>ár</i> n.	year
ᛂ	* <i>perþu</i>	not attested	meaning uncertain
ᛄ	* <i>tīwaR</i>	<i>ýr</i> m.	yew
ᛆ	* <i>algiR</i>	<i>elgr</i> m.	moose
ᛈ	* <i>sōwīlu</i>	<i>sól</i> f.	sun
ᛊ	* <i>tīwaR</i>	<i>Týr</i> m.	Týr, the Norse god of war
ᛌ	* <i>berkana</i>	<i>bjarkan</i> n.	birch twig
ᛎ	* <i>ehwaR</i>	<i>jór</i> m.	horse
ᛏ	* <i>mannaR</i>	<i>maðr</i> m.	man
ᛒ	* <i>laguR</i>	<i>lǫgr</i> m.	water
ᛄ	* <i>ingwaR</i>	<i>Ing</i> m.	name of a Norse god
ᛆ	* <i>dagaR</i>	<i>dagr</i> m.	day
ᛈ	* <i>ōþila</i>	<i>óðal</i> n.	property (held under an allodial system)

Chart photocopied from Terje Sprukland's *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, trans.

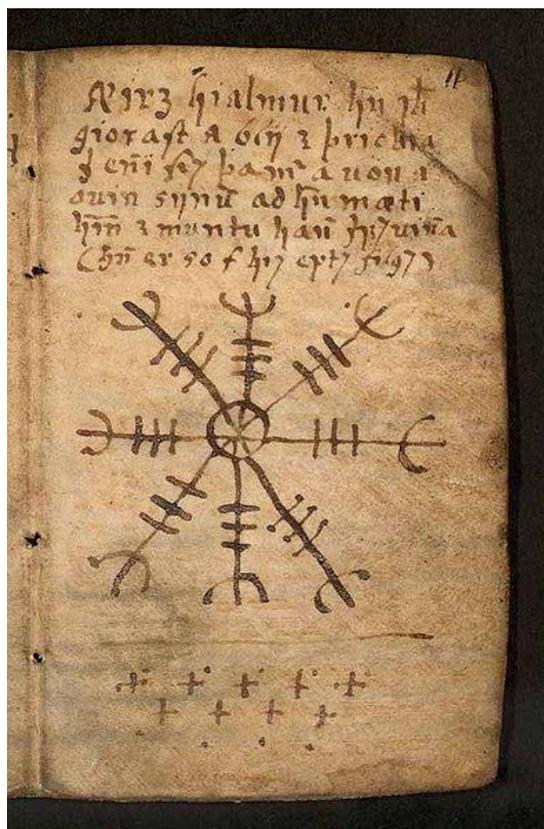
Betsy van der Hoek (Woodbridge, 2005), p. 11.

The Ægishjálmr

The runic charm:



The ægishjálmr as seen in Galdrakver Lbs 143, 8vo, a 17th century Icelandic grimoire in the collection of The Museum of Icelandic Sorcery and Witchcraft (Strandagaldur) in Hólmavík, Iceland.



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