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# **Epics** *for Students*

**Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on  
Commonly Studied Epics**





## Epics for Students

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# Introduction

## **Purpose**

*Epics for Students (EfS)* is designed to provide students with a guide to understanding and enjoying epic literature. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, *EfS* is crafted to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers. This volume contains entries on the works of epic world literature that are most studied in classrooms.

## **Selection Criteria**

The epics covered in *EfS* were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included literature anthologies; *Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges*; and textbooks on teaching literature.

The editor solicited input from an advisor, high school teachers and librarians, and from the educators and academics who wrote the entries for the volume. From these discussions, the final entry list was compiled, featuring the epic works that are most often studied in high school and undergraduate literature courses. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was noted as a possibility for a future volume. The editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

## **Coverage**

Each entry includes an introduction to the epic and its author, when known, and discussion of authorship controversies or speculation in the case of anonymous works. A plot summary helps readers follow the often complicated series of events in the epic. Character sketches include explanations of each character's role in the epic and relationships with other characters. Separate essays provide analyses of important themes and of literary techniques.

In addition to this material, which helps readers understand and analyze the epic itself, students are provided with meaningful information on the literary and historical background of each work. This includes an essay on the historical context of the epic, comparisons between the time and place of the epic's setting and modern Western culture, an overview essay surveying the course of commentary about the work, and excerpts from critical essays on the epic.

## **Special Features**

*EfS* includes a foreword by Helen Conrad-O'Briain, Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how teachers and students can use *EfS* to enrich their own experiences with epic literature.

A unique feature of *EfS* is a specially commissioned essay on each epic by an academic expert, usually one who has taught the work extensively, targeted to the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each epic, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Each entry also features illustrations, such as maps and depictions of key scenes. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional scholarly information on each work.

### Organization

Each entry in *EfS* focuses on one work. The heading lists the title of the epic, the author's name (when known), and the date that the epic first appeared. In some cases, this date is known; in others, a range of dates is provided. The following elements appear in each entry:

- **Introduction:** A brief overview which provides general information about the epic, such as its place in world literature, its significance within its national culture, any controversies surrounding the epic, and major themes of the work.
- **Author Biography:** Includes basic facts about the author's life. In the case of anonymous works, speculative scholarship about the anonymous author or authors is summarized here.
- **Plot Summary:** A description of the major events in the epic, with interpretation of how these events help articulate the primary themes.
- **Characters:** An alphabetical listing of the epic's main characters. Each character name is followed by a description of that character's role, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and motivations.
- **Themes:** A thorough overview of how the principal themes, topics, and issues are addressed within the epic.
- **Style:** This section addresses important stylistic elements, such as setting, point of view, and narrative method, as well as literary devices such as imagery, foreshadowing, and symbolism. Literary terms are explained within each entry and can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical and Cultural Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the epic was

created. Descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written are provided here.

- **Critical Overview:** Supplies background on the critical and popular reputation of the epic. Offers an overview of how the work was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over time.
- **Criticism:** This section begins with an essay commissioned for *EfS* and designed to introduce the epic work to the student reader. This section also includes excerpts from previously published criticism that has been identified by subject experts as especially useful in explicating each work to students.
- **Sources for Further Study:** Alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry and other critical sources useful to the student who wants to read more about the epic. Full bibliographical information and descriptive annotations are provided for each source.
- **Media Adaptations:** A list of film and television productions of the epic, as well as information about stage adaptations, audio recordings, and musical adaptations.
- **Compare and Contrast Box:** "At-a-glance" comparison of some cultural and historical differences between the epic's time and culture and late twentieth-century Western society.
- **What Do I Read Next?:** A list of works that complement the featured epic or serve as a contrast to it. This can include works by the same author and works from other authors, genres, cultures, and eras.
- **Study Questions:** Questions designed to spark classroom discussion or research paper topics. This section includes questions related to other disciplines, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, and psychology.

### Indexes

• A **Cumulative Author/Title Index** lists the authors and titles covered in the volume.

A **Nationality/Ethnicity Index** lists the authors and titles by nationality and ethnicity.

A **Subject/Theme Index** provides easy reference for users studying a particular subject or theme

within epic literature. Significant subjects and themes are included. Boldface entries in this index indicate in-depth discussion of that subject or theme.

Each entry features **illustrations**, including author portraits, depictions of key scenes, and maps.

### **Citing Epics for Students**

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### **We Welcome Your Suggestions**

The editors of *Epics for Students* welcome your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest epic works to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor at:

Editor, *Epics for Students*  
Gale Research  
835 Penobscot Bldg.  
645 Griswold St.  
Detroit, MI 48226-4094  
1-800/347-4253

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# *Elder Edda*

ANONYMOUS

800

The *Elder Edda* is not a single continuous narrative, but a collection of poems, most of which are preserved in the *Konungsbók*, or *Codex Regius* (King's Book), copied in Iceland about A.D. 1270. The poems are the work of many poets. Their language suggests that they were composed between 800 and 1100 A.D. and first written down between 1150 and 1250 A.D. The poems are a rich source of information for culture and belief among the Vikings. They are not, however, purely Scandinavian. Christian Irish influence is likely, while the Sigurd story draws on actual events among the tribes that invaded the Roman Empire between 350–600 A.D.

The *Elder Edda* first came to scholarly attention in the seventeenth century as antiquarian interest in the non-classical past was growing in Europe. It was published in its entirety just as intense romantic and nationalistic interest in the perceived tribal ancestors of the European nation states emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century. This interest, combined with the new science of philology, ensured popular and scholarly interest in texts like the *Elder Edda*. Some of the lays were available in bowdlerized versions even for children by the later nineteenth century. In the hands of Richard Wagner, the *Elder Edda* became the foundation of one of the century's masterpieces. While northern legends and the scholarship based on it were misused by the Nazis to develop and further their ideas of race, they are seriously misrepresented by such ideas. In the 1960s, the poet W. H. Auden in



collaboration with an Old Norse scholar, Paul B. Taylor, produced a translation of sixteen of the poems.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

The *Elder Edda* is not a continuous narrative, but a collection of thirty-nine poems of varying lengths and genres, including short narratives or lays, traditional wisdom including what amounts to a manual of good behavior, and several dialogues in which the question and answers provide a glossary of poetic terms and myth. They form a history of the world from creation to apocalypse, and like the Shakespearean canon, high tragedy exists side by side with bumptious comedy. Thirty-four are preserved in the *Konungsbók*, or *Codex Regius* (King's book), copied in Iceland about A.D. 1270, now in the Royal Library in Copenhagen. The language of the poems as preserved in that manuscript suggests that they were composed between 800 and 1100 A.D. but were first written down between 1150 and 1250 A.D. The poems are the work of many poets and some draw on historical traditions reaching back to the fourth century. Nevertheless, however northern and pagan they may appear to be, they contain much that suggests an interaction with both Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian culture.

It is not known where in Iceland the *Codex Regius* was copied. The elegance of the scribe's writing and its similarity to those of at least two other Icelandic scribes of the period suggest its copyist was connected with a fairly large scriptorium with high standards. Despite early attempts to connect the *Elder Edda* as a collection with a legendary Icelandic scholar, Saemundur Sigfússon the Learned, (1056–1133), none of the poems can be connected with a named individual and were probably collected together only in the thirteenth century, perhaps only a generation before the production of the *Codex Regius*.

Nothing is known of the manuscript until the year 1643 when it came into the possession of Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson. It was already damaged then, and no copy was made of it before the missing leaves were lost. In 1662 the bishop gave the manuscript to the king of Denmark. In 1665 the two mythological poems *Völuspá* and *Hávemál* were published by the Danish scholar Peder Hansen

Resen as part of an edition of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*. The first full edition was prepared by the Arnamagnæan Commission in Copenhagen between 1787 and 1828.

## PLOT SUMMARY

### *The Sibyl's Prophecy*

At Odin's request, a prophetess predicts the future from creation to fall and renewal. She begins with a time when nothing existed; heavens and earth come into existence, but in chaos. The gods, who create the arts and crafts, social life, and finally, mankind, impose order. She prophesies the war between the Aesir and the Vanir and their conciliation, the death of Balder through Loki's trickery, Loki's punishment, the dwarves's golden home, the realm of the dead, and the punishment of the wicked. She foresees the final battle between gods and giants that will end in their mutual destruction. Sun and stars fail, the earth sinks beneath the sea, but in the final stanzas, she describes a second green earth rising from the waters. Balder and Hod, his blind brother who accidentally killed him, will come again to rule. Then a mighty one, sometimes identified as Christ, will come down to bring the deserving to a hall more beautiful than the sun.

### *The Sayings of the High One*

This is a composite poem in which only stanzas 111–64 are in the voice of Odin the 'High One.' It begins with practical advice on behavior and attitude: "It takes sharp wits to travel in the world / they're not so hard on you at home—Better to be alive than to be lifeless / the living can hope for a cow." Even among such homely advice, however, is fame, so important to the epic attitude: "Cattle die, kinsmen die, / One day you die yourself; but the words of praise will not die." The poem ends with Odin's advice addressed to a young man called Loddafnir.

### *The Lay of Vafthrudnir*

Odin has a contest with the giant Vafthrudnir to determine who has the greater knowledge of the gods, creation, and the future. Odin wins because he alone knows what he whispered in Balder's ear as he lay on his funeral pyre. The lay serves as a

glossary of the metaphors and images used in early Norse poetry.

### ***The Lay of Grinnir***

Hunding had two sons: Agnar and Geirrodd. They were fishing from a rowboat and were swept out to sea. When they made land, a farmer took them in until spring came. When they arrived back home, Geirrodd jumped out of the boat and pushed it and his brother back out to sea. Geirrodd became king. Later, Odin and Frigg, his wife, were looking down at earth. Odin teased Frigg that Geirrodd, whom he favored, was king while Agnar, whom Frigg favored, lived in the wilds. Frigg answered that Geirrodd was stingy. Odin bet her he would find him generous to strangers. Frigg sends a message to Geirrodd to beware of a wizard coming to his court, describing Odin in disguise. Odin arrives and when he refuses to give more than an assumed name, Grinnir, he is seated between two fires to make him speak. Geirrodd's son Agnar thinks it wrong to mistreat a guest and brings him a drink. For this act, Odin blesses the boy and tells him his real name. When the king hears, he jumps up to take him away from the fires, but stumbles and falls on his own sword.

### ***Skirnir's Journey***

This lay tells of the god Frey who saw and loved a giant's beautiful daughter. He sent his servant Skirnir to persuade her to accept him as her lover. Skirnir cajoles and threatens her until she finally accepts Frey.

### ***The Lay of Harbard***

The first of the comical lays. Odin disguised himself as a ferryman and engaged Thor in a duel of words. Thor loses badly.

### ***The Lay of Hymir***

The gods are feeling like a party and ask the giant Aegir to brew beer for it. Thor unfortunately annoys Aegir. Aegir tells Thor he must borrow the giant Hymir's brewing vat. Thor and Tyr, Hymir's son, set out for Hymir's home where Hymir's young mistress welcomes them. She warns them Hymir does not like guests and makes them hide when he comes. She tells Hymir that his son has come with a friend. Three bulls are cooked for

dinner. Thor eats two of them. Hymir tells his guests that they will go out hunting for supper. Thor suggests that he will take a boat out and fish if Hymir provides the bait. Thor rows out, baits his hook with an ox's head, and catches the serpent that encircles the earth, drags it up into the boat, but thankfully, throws it back. Hymir then challenges Thor to crack his cup. Thor flings it; columns crash and stone splinters, but the cup is unbroken. At the mistress's suggestion, he flings it at the giant's head and it breaks. Thor grabs the kettle and kills the pursuing giants. Aegir brews the beer.

### ***The Insolence of Loki***

Loki infuriates the assembled gods and goddesses by bringing up past scandals. His stories grow more and more vile until he is finally frightened into leaving with the threat of Thor's hammer. He curses the gods as he leaves.

### ***The Lay of Thrym***

Thor's great hammer, Mjollnir, is stolen. Loki discovers that the giant Thrym has it. Thrym tells Loki that he will give it back only if he can marry Freyja. Not surprisingly, Thor has no luck in convincing Freyja that she should marry a giant. A council of the gods and goddesses is convened and Heimdal suggests that they dress Thor as a bride with Loki as her maid. Thor does not like it, but he must have his hammer to keep the giants out of Asgard. Thrym is beside himself with joy when they arrive, but after a comical passage in which Loki has to explain the bride's incredible appetite and frightening eyes, Thor gets his hands on his hammer and kills his prospective in-laws.

### ***The Lay of Volund***

Volund, the most famous smith of the north, is taken prisoner by Kind Nidud who lames him. Volund makes himself wings, avenges himself by murdering Nidud's sons and raping his daughter, and flies away.

### ***The Lay of Alvis***

The dwarf Alvis tries to steal Thor's daughter, but is tricked into such a lengthy display of his knowledge, which amounts to a catalogue of poetic synonyms, that he is caught by dawn and dies from exposure to sunlight.



*Balder, whose death is depicted here, was the son of Odin and Frigg and a favorite of the gods. The blind god Hod, deceived by Loki, killed Balder by hurling mistletoe, the only thing that could hurt him.*

### ***The First and Second Lays of Helgi Hunding's Bane and The Lay of Helgi Hjorvar's Son***

The Helgi lays are incomplete and confused. Taken with the notes attached to them, they recount a story of two lovers who are reborn again and again. The first and second lays are the story of Helgi, Sigmund's son. Helgi is loved and protected by the Valkyrie, Sigrun. Helgi must fight Sigrun's father, brothers, and suitor to save her from an unwanted marriage. He kills them all except for her brother Dag, whom he spares. Dag swears peace with Helgi, but sacrifices to Odin for vengeance. Odin lends him his spear, and Dag kills Helgi. Sigrun is inconsolable. A maid tells her Helgi's spirit is in his burial mound. Sigrun goes to his grave to be with him one last night, dying of grief soon after. Later, they are both reborn, as Helgi Hunding's Bane and Kara. In the 'The Lay of Helgi Hjorvar's Son' another Helgi is loved by a Valkyrie, Svava, who marries him. His brother Hedin confesses that he made a drunken vow to marry Svava. Helgi replies that his vow may be good for both of them; he is about to go into battle and does not expect to survive. Helgi, as he foresaw, is mortally wounded.

Dying, he asks Svava to marry Hedin. She refuses, but Hedin promises her he will avenge Helgi. The lay breaks off in the manuscript with a note that "It is said of Helgi and Svava that they were born again."

### ***The Prophecy of Gripir***

Ironically, the only straightforward version of Sigurd and Brynhild's story is in the form of a prophecy. Gripir tells him that he will be a great hero. Sigurd questions Gripir further. Gripir tells him he will avenge his father, kill Fafnir the dragon, the evil Regin, and win Fafnir's treasure. He will wake a sleeping Valkyrie and learn her wisdom. Gripir then breaks off. Sigurd asks him if he sees something shameful. Gripir reassures him and finally continues. Sigurd will fall in love with Brynhild. They will swear to be faithful, but Sigurd will betray her, because of Queen Grimhild who wants Sigurd married to her daughter, Gudrun, and Brynhild to her son, Gunnar. Sigurd will forget Brynhild and promise Gunnar and Hogni that he will win her for Gunnar. Sigurd will live happily with Gundrun, but Brynhild will plot her revenge for his betrayal. Gunnar and Hogni will fall in with her plans and

murder Sigurd. Gripir consoles his nephew that at least he will be fortunate in his fame. Sigurd leaves saying, “You would have been glad to say good things of what is coming if you could.”

### ***The Lay of Regin***

This lay begins with the history of Fafnir and his hoard. Regin takes Sigurd as his foster son, forges him a mighty sword, and urges him to kill the dragon Fafnir. Sigurd insists on avenging his father first.

### ***The Lay of Fafnir***

Sigurd, returning after avenging his father, kills Fafnir. The dying dragon warns Sigurd that his treasure is cursed and that Regin means to kill him. Sigurd roasts and eats the dragon’s heart and finds he understands the birds talking about Regin’s plans to kill him. Sigurd kills Regin.

### ***The Lay of Sigdrifa***

Sigurd has learned from the birds about a Valkyrie lying in an enchanted sleep. He wakes her, and she shares her wisdom with him.

### ***Fragmentary Lay of Sigurd***

A dramatic fragment dealing with the murder of Sigurd.

### ***The Lay of Gudrun***

Gudrun grieves for Sigurd while various noblewomen attempt to comfort her. Brynhild commits suicide to be with Sigurd in death.

### ***The Short Lay of Sigurd***

This is Sigurd’s story from Brynhild’s point of view. After the tale of her betrayal and revenge is told, she makes plans for her funeral and warns Gunnar what the future holds for him and for Gudrun.

### ***Brynhild’s Journey to Hel***

Brynhild, on her way to meet Sigurd in the land of the dead, encounters a giantess who accuses her of murder and fickleness. Brynhild justifies her behavior to her.

### ***The Second Lay of Gudrun***

Gudrun tells of Sigurd’s murder, of her brother’s duplicity, and her marriage to Atli.

### ***The Third Lay of Gudrun***

Gudrun is suspected of being unfaithful to Atli. She proves her innocence by putting her hand into boiling water and withdrawing it unharmed.

### ***Oddrun’s Lay***

Atli’s sister, Oddrun, tells of her grief for Gunnar. After Brynhild’s death, Gunnar wanted to marry her, but Atli forbade it. Oddrun and Gunnar met secretly. Atli learned of this and murdered Gunnar and Hogni.

### ***The Lay of Atli***

Gunnar and Hogni, despite forebodings, visit their brother-in-law, Atli, where they are murdered in Atli’s attempt to extort Andvari’s treasure from them. Gudrun avenges her brothers, murdering her sons by Atli, and feeding them to their father. She then burns Atli and his men in their hall.

### ***The Greenland Lay of Atli***

Another version of Gudrun’s revenge for her brothers’s murders.

### ***Gudrun’s Chain of Woes***

Gudrun urges her sons by her third husband, Jonacr, to avenge their half sister, murdered by her husband Jormunrek.

### ***The Lay of Hamdir***

Hamdir and Sorli, the sons of Jonacr and Gudrun, set out to avenge their half-sister, Swanhild. On the way, they meet and murder their half-brother, Erp. When they reach Jormunrek’s court, they fail to avenge their sister for the lack of his help.

### ***Balder’s Dreams***

Odin consults a prophetess to learn the fate of his beloved son Balder.

### ***The Mill Song***

King Frodi had two captive giant girls. He put them to work grinding out gold and peace at a magic hand mill. They prophesy his downfall.

### ***The Waking of Angantyr***

Hervor, Angantyr’s daughter, goes to his grave to demand his sword, Tyrting, so she can avenge him. Angantyr’s ghost, who knows Tyrting is cursed to kill every one who uses it, tries to dissuade her, but she will not be persuaded. He allows her to take it.

## CHARACTERS

### *Aesir*

Aesir are the Norse gods, more particularly, the race of sky gods who first fought and then joined the Vanir gods of fertility and the earth. They lived in Asgard, home of the gods, reached by a rainbow bridge. The Aesir include Odin (ruler of the gods), Balder, Frigg, Tyr, and Thor.

### *Agnar*

1. The son of King Hunding and the brother of King Geirrod. Patronized by the goddess Frigg, he still lost his place to his younger brother and lived as an outcast. 2. The son of King Geirrod who brought Odin a horn of wine when his father was torturing the disguised god between two fires. Odin rewarded Agnar with a successful reign.

### *All-Father*

See Odin

### *Alvis*

In the poem *The Lay of Alvis*, Alvis the dwarf attempts to steal the god Thor's daughter away to marry her as the price of Thor's great hammer, Mjollnir. Thor, however, catches him and insists that only if Alvis answers correctly a series of questions can he marry his daughter. Alvis answers the questions correctly, but Thor has kept him above ground until sunrise and he turns to stone. The series of questions and answers amounts to a catalogue of literary synonyms.

### *Andvari*

Andvari is a dwarf who was fated to take the shape of a pike. Andvari's treasure plays a pivotal role in a series of lays. In *The Lay of Regin*, his gold is stolen by Loki to pay compensation for the unwitting murder of a man called Otter, killed while in the shape of an otter. Andvari curses the treasure. The gods pay Otter's father, Hreidmar, and brothers, Fafnir and Regin, compensation with the stolen gold. Fafnir murders his father for the treasure, beginning the series of disasters that follow the treasure from owner to owner.

### *Angantyr*

Angantyr's father, Arngrim, won in battle a sword called Tyrping that had the quality that wounds made by it never healed. The sword, however, had been stolen from the dwarves. The dwarves laid a

curse on the blade so that it would always bring death to whomever carried it. Angantyr and his eleven brothers were killed together and buried in the same mound. When Angantyr's daughter found out the identity of her father, she was determined to avenge him and took Tyrping from her father's grave despite his ghost's attempt to dissuade her.

### *Atli*

Atli is the ruler of the Huns, the son of Budli, and brother of Brynhild. The character has its origin in the historical Atli, but the poets have made him and his people a Germanic tribe. Atli is not always a negative figure in northern legends, but in the *Elder Edda* he is a vicious, greedy ruler who murders his brothers-in-law for the sake of Andvari's treasure.

### *Balder*

Balder is the favorite son of Odin and Frigg, and a favorite among all the gods. Frigg asked every living thing and all objects of metal, wood, or stone to swear never to harm him. The gods amused themselves by hurling weapons at him certain he could not be harmed. Loki, however, learned that Frigg had forgotten to ask the mistletoe. He made it into a dart and urged Balder's brother, the blind god Hod, to join in the game. The dart killed Balder. Balder's brother Hermod rode to the land of the dead and begged Hel, goddess of the dead to release him. She agreed if every person and thing in the world would weep for him. All did, except one giantess, believed to be Loki in disguise.

### *Bodvild*

Bodvild is the daughter of King Nidudd. She was raped by Volund in revenge for his imprisonment and maiming by King Nidudd.

### *Borghild*

Borghild is Sigmund's wife and Helgi Hunding's Bane's mother.

### *Bragi*

Bragi is the god of poetry.

### *Brynhild*

Many scholars believe Brynhild (also known as Sigdrifa) is based on a historical character, a sixth-century Visigothic princess, married to a Frankish king. Brynhild is Atli's sister and a Valkyrie. She was betrothed to Sigurd. In the *The Lay of Sigdrifa*, Odin has decreed she will no longer be a Valkyrie

but must marry because she had disobeyed him and fought for a hero he had doomed. She swears she will only marry a man who does not know fear. Odin pricked her with a sleep thorn and she slept until wakened by Sigurd. They pledge themselves to marry each other, but Sigurd is given a magical drink at the court of Gunnar, forgets her, and marries Gunnar's sister, Gudrun. In return for Gudrun, Sigurd promises to win Brynhild for Gunnar and unwittingly breaks his oath and betrays her. Brynhild loves Sigurd deeply, but believes that he has cold-bloodedly wronged her. She sets in motion Sigurd's death. When he is dead, she kills herself to join the man she considers her real husband in the land of the dead.

### **Dag**

Dag is the son of Hogni and Sigrun's sister. He kills Helgi in revenge for his father.

### **Dvalin**

Dvalin is a dwarf. Angantyr's cursed sword, Tyrting, is described as Dvalin's weapon.

### **Ermanrik**

See Jormunrek.

### **Erp**

Erp is the son of Atli and Gudrun. He was murdered by his half brothers Hamdir and Sorli on the way to Jormunrek's court to avenge their sister. His death doomed their plans since his blow would have silenced the old king.

### **Eylimi**

In *The Lay of Helgi Hjorvards's Son* Eylimi is the father of the Valkyrie Svava, wife of Helgi Hjorvard's son. In the *Prophecy of Gripir*, he is Gripir's father, Sigurd's maternal grandfather.

### **Fafnir**

Fafnir is the son of Hreidmar and brother of Otter and Regan. He murders his own father for Andvari's treasure. Fafnir turns into a dragon to better guard the treasures. As a dragon, he is killed by Sigurd. In both Roman and Germanic tradition, the dragon was a symbol of greed.

### **Father of the Slain**

See Odin.

## MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- The *Elder Edda* was a primary source for Richard Wagner's cycle of musical dramas *The Ring of the Nibelungen*, four interconnected operas, *Rhinegold*, *The Valkyries*, *Siegfried*, and *The Twilight of the Gods*. Wagner adapted the mythical and legendary world of the *Elder Edda* to express his own disquiet with the industrial revolution and political movements and developments in nineteenth-century Germany.
- Two of the most important German movies of the silent era are Fritz Lang's *Siegfried* (1924) and *Kriemhild's Revenge* (1924).
- The Swedish poet Victor Rydberg in *Den nya Grottasongen* (1891) transformed the lay of Frodi's mill into a picture of the excesses of industrialism and capitalism, and its cynical exploitation for human beings.

### **Fenrir**

Fenrir is the great wolf, the son of Loki and a giantess. He is bound by the gods until Ragnarok when he will break his chain and devour Odin.

### **Frey**

Frey is a Vanir and a fertility god.

### **Freyja**

Freyja is a Vanir and the goddess of love.

### **Frigg**

Frigg is the Aesir goddess of love, Odin's wife, and the mother of Balder.

### **Frodi**

Frodi is the king of a golden age of peace and prosperity. He owned a magic stone quern or hand mill that, when turned by two captive giantesses, ground out gold and peace. Unfortunately, he drives the giantesses too hard and they rebel, breaking the quern.

**Gagnrad**

See Odin

**Gangleri**

See Odin

**Garm**

Garm is the hound of the goddess Hel, ruler of the land of the dead.

**Geirod**

Geirod is the son of king Hunding. He supplants his older brother Agnar and rules until Frigg tricks him into mistreating the disguised Odin against all rules of hospitality. He trips and dies on his own sword as he runs to release Odin when he realizes his mistake. His son Agnar had comforted and brought Odin a horn of wine against his father's wishes and was rewarded by the god.

**Gerd**

Gerd is a giantess, daughter of Gymir, and loved by Frey. Frey sends his servant Skirnir to woo her. Skirnir has to threaten to curse her with degradation and disgrace before she will meet Frey.

**Gjuki**

Gjuki is the king of the Burgundians, husband of Grimhild, and father of Gunnar, Hogni, and Gudrun. He is apparently dead by the time Sigurd reaches the Burgundian court.

**Glaumvor**

Glaumvor becomes Gunnar's wife after Brynhild's death.

**Gram**

Gram is Sigurd's sword. Naming swords, at least in heroic tales, was not uncommon.

**Grani**

Grani is Sigurd's horse.

**Grimhild**

Grimhild is the queen of the Burgundians, wife of Gjuki, and mother of Gudrun, Gunnar, and Hogni. There seems to be a hint of the witch or sorceress about her. She is the mastermind of the plot to drug Sigurd into forgetting his vow to Brynhild, marrying Gudrun, and helping Gunnar win Brynhild.

**Grimodin**

See Odin

**Gripir**

Gripir is the brother of Hjordis and Sigurd's maternal uncle. In northern heroic literature, the son of a man's sister was his closest male relative. In the *Gripisspé* (The Prophecy of Gripir), he has the gift of prophecy and tells his young nephew all that lies before him. He ends his prophecy with the promise that Sigurd will be 'fortunate in his fame' that no man will surpass. Sigurd is the greatest hero of the north. His exploits color the images and metaphors of the traditional skaldic poetry and Icelandic saga literature.

**Gudrun**

Gudrun is the daughter of Grimhild and Gjuki. Sigurd, under the influence of Grimhild's potion, marries Gudrun. Gudrun knows both of Sigurd's relationship to Brynhild and the plot to use a potion on Sigurd. It is she who provokes Brynhild into revenge. After Sigurd's death, Gudrun is persuaded to marry Atli, king of the Huns. She eventually murders him and his men to avenge his murder of her brothers. Her third husband is Jonacr by whom she has twin sons, Hamdir and Sorli.

**Gungnir**

Gungnir is Odin's spear. It is mentioned in many of the lays and sagas but is named only in the *Lay of Sigdrifa*.

**Gunnar**

King of the Burgundians after Gjuki and the son of Grimhild and Gjuki. His character changes between the lays involving Sigurd and Brynhild and those involving Atli. In the former, he is a deceiver, a breaker of oaths, and a murderer, led first by his mother and then by his wife, but always by his greed. In the later, he is a king who knows himself to be doomed but who will use the most unlikely tool for a hero, his and his brothers' deaths, to deny Atli Andvari's treasure.

**Gunnlod**

Gunnlod is the giantess who guards the mead of poetry.

**Guthorm**

Guthorm is the son of King Gjuki and a step-brother of Gunnar.

**Hagal**

Hagal is the foster father of Helgi Hunding's Bane.

**Hamdir**

Hamdir is Gudrun's son. He dies avenging his sister Swanhild's death on Jormunrek, King of the Goths.

**Heimdall**

Heimdall is the 'radiant' god and the gods' watchman. His horn is called Gjallarhorn.

**Hel**

Hel is the land of the dead and also the name of its goddess. She is the daughter of Loki.

**Helgi Hjorvard's Son**

See Helgi Hjorvard's Bane.

**Helgi Hunding's Bane**

Helgi Hunding's Bane is the son of Sigmund Volsung and Borghild and the hero of *The First Lay of Helgi Hunding's Bane* and *The Second Lay of Helgi Hunding's Bane*. His wife was Sigrun, the Valkyrie who had watched over him in battle. Sigrun chose Helgi, but her family had engaged her to King Hodbrodd. In the battle that followed, her father and all her brothers, but one, Dag, were killed. Sigrun and Helgi lived happily and deeply in love, despite her grief for her kinsmen, but eventually Dag killed Helgi in revenge for his father. Helgi and Sigrun loved each other so much that they were allowed to have one last night together in Helgi's burial mound. A note at the end of the lay says that she died young of grief for her husband. In the *Codex Regius* at the end of *The Lay of Helgi Hjorvard's Son* and at the end of *The Second Lay of Helgi Hunding's Bane* are references to a tradition that Helgi and Sigrun were reborn three times: once as Helgi Hjorvard's Son and Svava the Valkyrie, then as Helgi Hunding's Bane and Sigrun, and finally as Helgi Hadding's Bane and Kara the Valkyrie.

**Hervard**

Hervard is a brother of Angantyr. He was killed and buried with him.

**Hervor**

1. The daughter of Angantyr who retrieves her father's sword from his grave, much against his

wishes, to avenge his death. 2. The Wise, King Hlodver's daughter, a Valkyrie and Volund's wife.

**Hjalmar**

Hjalmar is the slayer of Angantyr.

**Hjalperk**

Hjalperk is Sigurd's foster father.

**Hjordis**

Hjordis is Sigmund's second wife and the mother of Sigurd.

**Hjorvard**

Hjorvard is another brother of Angantyr who was also killed and buried with him.

**Hoddmimir**

See Mimir

**Hogni**

1. The father of Sigrun. Helgi kills him in a battle fought to prevent Sigrun's marriage to another man. Hogni is avenged by his son Dag who uses Odin's spear. 2. A Burgundian prince, brother of Gunnar and Gudrun. He dies rather than reveal the whereabouts of Andvari's treasure.

**Hrani**

Hrani is also a brother of Angantyr who was killed and buried with him.

**Hreidnar**

Hreidnar is the father of Regin, Fafnir, and Otter. He is given Andvari's treasure by Loki and Odin as compensation for their killing of his son Otter when he was in the shape of an otter.

**Hunding**

1. The father of Agnar and Geirrodd. 2. A king killed by Helgi Hunding's Bane.

**Jonacr**

Jonacr is Gudrun's third husband and the father of Hamdir and Sorli.

**Jormunrek**

Jormunrek was the historical fourth-century king of the Goths who entered legend as the murderer of his young second wife Swanhild and his son who were falsely accused of adultery together.

**Kostbera**

In the *Greenland Lay of Atli*, Kostbera is Hogni's wife, a wise and learned woman who tries to make sense of Gudrun's runic warning and has a prophetic dream of disaster.

**Loddfafnir**

Loddfafnir is the recipient of Odin's wisdom in the *Sayings of the High One*.

**Loki**

Loki is an Aesir, but of doubtful allegiance. He is the trickster who is the preferred companion of the gods in tight corners, but whose advice usually involves morally questionable choices that create further problems for those who take it. His mischief becomes a pure destructive maliciousness over the course of the history of the gods.

**Mimir**

Mimir, also known as Hoddmimir, is the guardian of the well under the root of Yggdrasil, the Ash tree at the center of the universe.

**Niflungs**

Niflungs are essentially synonymous with Gjukung, the family and followers of King Gjuki.

**Njord**

Njord is the god of the sea.

**Norns**

Norns, also known as Urd, are the Scandinavian version of the Fates, who determined the destiny of the world and of individuals. They were of the race of giants.

**Oddrun**

Oddrun is the sister of Brynhild and Atli. She was originally promised to Gunnar. When Atli would not allow them to wed after Brynhild's death, they had a secret affair. Oddrun gave this as one of the reasons that Atli killed Gunnar.

**Odin**

For an almost-full list of Odin's names see *The Lay of Grimnir*, stanzas 12 and 13, which end "I've never been known by one name only/since I have

wandered the world." (A brief listing of Odin's many names include: All-Father, Warfather, Father of the Slain, Gagnrad—"Counsel for Victory," Gangleri, Grim and Ygg.) The king of the gods, known among the pagan English as Woden, the god of Wednesday, he was the god of battle, magic, poetic inspiration, and all those who die in battle. He was a shapeshifter and could appear as an old one-eyed man, dressed in a hooded cloak and broad hat, or as a wolf. He was usually accompanied by the so-called beasts of battle: two ravens, 'Thought' and 'Memory', and wolves. He sacrificed his eye and hung nine days and nine nights on *Yggdrasil*, the tree that supports the world, to gain wisdom. He is the Lord of runes and secret wisdom. Odin protected kings and encouraged heroes, largely to build up a fighting force in Valhalla the hall of the slain, for the great battle with the forces of darkness at the end of the world. When he thought the time was right, he would disarm even a protected favorite to bring about his death in battle. It has been suggested that Odin became important only during the period when the Germanic peoples were entering the former provinces of the Roman empire when, as a god of war bands, he attracted worshipers. Normal social and tribal bonds were under stress and were often replaced by new groups coalescing around successful warriors.

**Otter**

Otter is Regin and Fafnir's brother and Hreidnar's son. Andvari's treasure was handed over to his brothers and father as compensation for his murder while in the shape of an otter.

**Ran**

Ran is the goddess of the sea. Her husband and the god of the sea is Aeggir.

**Regin**

Regin is Hreidmar's son and the brother of Otter and Fafnir. He was twice cheated out of his part of Andvari's treasure. A dwarfish smith warped by thwarted greed, he takes Sigurd under his wing to train him to kill Fafnir, now in the shape of a dragon. Sigurd is warned of his treachery by both the dying Fafnir and the birds, and kills him.

**Sif**

Sif is Thor's wife.

**Sigdrifa**

See Brynhild

**Sigmund**

Sigmund is the son of Volsung and father, by different women, of Helgi, Sinfjotli, and Sigurd.

**Signy**

Siggeir, Signy's husband, murdered Sigmund and Signy's father and brothers. Signy sends her young sons to Sigmund hoping they will be able to help Sigmund avenge their family. When the boys prove to be less than the stuff of heroes, Signy, determined to have vengeance, changes shape with a sorceress, seduces her brother, and bears him a son Sinfjotli. Sinfjotli helps Sigmund in the vengeance. Sigmund only learns that he is his son and not his nephew when Signy tells him after they have set fire to Siggeir's hall. Signy then enters the burning hall because, as she says to her brother and their son in the *Volsung Saga*, "I have worked so hard to bring about vengeance I am by no means fit to live. Willingly I shall die with King Siggeir, although I married him reluctantly."

**Sigrinn**

Sigrinn is the daughter of King Svafnir and mother of Helgi in his first incarnation.

**Sigrun**

The three Helgi lays suggest that Sigrun, also known as Svava and Kara, was, like her beloved Helgi, reincarnated three times. In each incarnation, she was a Valkyrie who chose to protect and love Helgi, and eventually marry him.

**Sigurd**

Sigurd is the Siegfried of Richard Wagner's operas. In the *Elder Edda*, he is the son of Sigmund and Hjordis. He is the greatest warrior of his time. He kills the man-turned-dragon, Fafnir, and wins Andvari's treasure from him. Following this, he wakes the Valkyrie Sigdrifa/Brynhild, learns her wisdom and promises to marry her before he goes off to his fate at the hands of the wife and children of Gjuki. Sigurd is the type of honorable and courageous hero, who despite all his qualities, is manipulated into acting completely against his ideals.

**Sinfjotli**

Sinfjotli is the son of Sigmund and Signy his sister and the half-brother of Sigurd and Helgi. The story of his birth is not recorded in the *Elder Edda* where he is presented as helping his young half-brother Helgi.

**Sorli**

Sorli is the brother of Hamdir and son of Gudrun and Jonacr. He is killed on the expedition to avenge their half-sister, Swanhild.

**Surt**

Surt is the lord of the fire giants. He has given his name to a volcanic island off Iceland.

**Svava**

See Sigrun

**Swanhild**

Swanhild is the daughter of Sigurd and Gudrun. She is married to King Jormunrek of the Goths who executes her when she is falsely accused of adultery with her stepson.

**Thor**

Thor, also known as Ving-Thor and Veor, is the god of thunder. He is the son of the Earth (Fjorgyn), and with his great hammer, Mjollnir, he defended gods and men against the giants. He was the most popular of Norse gods. People wore little hammers much as Christians do crosses. Even after Christianity became common, some people would take no chances and keep up a quiet personal devotion to Thor as well as to Christ.

**Thrym**

A king of the giants, Thrym stole Thor's hammer, Mjollnir, in an attempt to force the gods to give him Freya as his wife. He and many of his family and wedding guests were killed when Thor got his hands back on his hammer.

**Tyr**

The god of war, he was apparently once a more important god, but lost most of his functions and popularity to Odin and Thor by the time the *Elder Eddas* were composed.

**Urd**

See Norns

**Vanir**

Vanirs were the gods of fertility who were at one time at war with the Aesir. They are often represented as having knowledge of the future.

**Veor 'Holy, Defender of the Home'**

See Thor

**Ving-Thor**

See Thor

**Volsungs**

Volsungs is the family name of Sigmund, Sinfjotli, and Sigurd.

**Volund**

Volund is the Weyland Smith of many English place names and the hero of the *Volundarqviða* (The Lay of Volund). He was the son of a Finnish king famous for his ability to work iron, gold, and silver. He was captured and lamed by King Nidud who wanted to monopolize his skills. Volund made himself wings, and after killing Nidud's sons and raping his daughter, flew away from his captivity.

**War Father**

See Odin

**Ygg**

See Odin

**Ymir**

Ymir is a giant from whose body the earth, sea, and sky were made.

**THEMES**

The *Elder Edda* begins with the *Völuspá* or 'Sibyl's Prophecy,' a history of the world in the form of a prophecy. The poems following it give instructions for life, the fights and stratagems of the gods, and, finally, a series of heroic narrative poems and dialogues.

**Divided Loyalties**

Norse society was violent, as reflected in the *Sayings of the High One* "Don't leave your weapons lying about / behind your back in a field, / you never know when you may need / of a sudden your spear." In this society personal loyalties were everything, the only real basis of order and security. Nothing stood between order and chaos except the certainty that vengeance would be exacted for a wrong. The duty to defend family and lord was at the core too of personal honor and self-esteem. The man who did not take vengeance could expect neither mercy from his enemies nor sympathy from his friends. Neither love nor friendship nor practical expedience could

stand in its way for long. Women would sweep aside all the commonplaces of love and gender roles to have it. The clash between competing loyalties and duties is perhaps the most important springboard of action in Old Norse literature.

**Hospitality and Generosity**

The "Sayings of the High One" paint a world where hospitality to the stranger as well as to the friend was a sacred duty. This idea was founded on the realities of Viking society. Populations were often small and scattered. In winter, it would be murder to deny a traveler a place at the fire. The man who welcomed a traveler to his home might soon be glad of a welcome himself. This idea was important. Odin himself was represented as checking an accusation of inhospitality. Even a child realized that mistreatment of a stranger is wrong and defied his father and king in *The Lay of Grímnir* to bring a horn of wine and a kind word to the disguised Odin. That small act was enough to win the little boy the life-long favor of the god.

Generosity was the sign of nobility of spirit, of the regard of the giver for the person to whom the gift was given. It was one of the things that bound society together. If hospitality was born of a recognition of common humanity, gift giving was the specific recognition of the importance of one human being for another, whether between friends, lovers, or a king and his warrior.

**Pessimism and Fatalism**

Often, characters in the lays know exactly what lies before them and yet appear powerless to stop and make a conscious decision to snap the chain of events. This is a reflection of the belief that people's lives were laid out before them, just as Ragnarok (the end of time) lay before men and gods. The lays surrounding Sigurd and the royal house of the Burgundians are a reflection of this theory. He and they are swept up in a process started long ago, which centered on the cursed treasure that Sigurd won by killing the dragon Fafnir. The ultimate cause of the curse, the capricious slaying of Otter the dwarf by Loki, sets in motion a chain reaction of acts of vengeance and greed in which gods, giants, dwarves, and people suffer.

**Ragnarok and Heroism**

The opening poem of the *Elder Edda* describes the history of the world from creation to its destruction. The destruction of the world will take place at Ragnarok with the last, great battle between the

gods and heroes on one side and the forces of evil on the other. It is in preparation for this battle that Odin sends his Valkyries to bring the spirits of men slain in battle to Valhalla, the hall of the slain. His need for heroes is so great that he will allow a warrior he has favored to be killed in battle rather than lose his help in the end time. Nevertheless, no matter what Odin and the gods may do, no matter how many heroes join their fight against the forces of darkness, the battle will end in defeat, or more specifically, the mutual destruction of the gods and their enemies. Ragnarok seems to be a symbol of the Vikings' view of their world. They knew that all things end. The world, flawed as it obviously was, could be no different. The important thing was to meet what came, good or bad, head on and unflinching. Man or woman, they must master events. Rather than allowing events to make them less than they were, events were the stage on which they could win the only immortality that mattered: fame. The certainty of defeat and death did not affect the will to fight. Defeat was not important; to endure, to live according to certain standards of loyalty and courage was important. To meet life courageously, however grim life might be, was to rob it of its fears.

### Wisdom

Odin gave his eye for wisdom; Sigurd spent most of his courtship of Brynhild learning her supernaturally acquired wisdom. Heroes are expected to have discernment. They must be able to judge a situation and the character of the men and the women around them. The Norse poets gave wisdom, its acquisition, and transmission. The preoccupation with prophecy in the *Elder Edda* is a reflex of this pursuit of wisdom, even though it is a mixed blessing in a world overshadowed by pessimism and fate. To modern readers, this preoccupation may seem irrelevant and lacking in an aesthetic sense, but in Norse society it was an essential, defining poetic function. Elegance of diction, delicate metrical effects, creation of atmosphere, and emotional power were tools, not ends, for the Norse poet. In gnomic verse, poets distilled wisdom into memorable turns of phrase. In the narrative lays, poets provided embodiments of wisdom and foolishness in action. Experience is the source of wisdom.

Still there are limits to wisdom. The *Sayings of the High One* suggest that it is better not to know too much or to be too wise; perhaps the true nature of life would be too hard to carry. Most poignantly, however, it warns against knowing the future: "If you can't see far into the future, you can live free

## TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- The Vikings opened trade routes down the rivers of Russia to Constantinople. Investigate the importance of Viking trade and trading posts to the development of the modern states of Russia and the Ukraine.
- Icelanders often boast of having the oldest parliament, the Althing, in existence. Investigate the origin and functions of the Althing and compare it to early attempts at self-government on the American frontier, beginning, perhaps, with the Plymouth Colony.
- Many of the heroes of the lays in the *Elder Edda* are not Scandinavian, but came from tribes as far apart as Burgundy and what is now the south west Russia and the Ukraine. Investigate the theories of how these heroes and their stories came to have such a wide and devoted audience.
- Norse raiding, trading and colonization could not have happened without the developments made by Scandinavian shipbuilding. Investigate Viking ships and their construction and the engineering and design principles behind their success.

from care." Discernment too could be thwarted by pull of other ideals and by magic. The betrayal that lies at the heart of Sigurd's tragedy is one induced by sorcery. Gudrun too knows disaster awaits in marriage with Atli, but she too succumbs to her mother's potions.

### STYLE

#### *Epic Characteristics*

Leaving aside the *Sayings of the High One*, which has more in common with works like the biblical *Proverbs*, it appears that the *Elder Edda* is not an epic but materials for one. Here, for once, modern readers have the relatively short poetic narratives, or lays, which supposedly lie behind the

epic. While the collection provides in the *Sibyl's Prophecy* a narrative from earth's creation through destruction and renewal, the majority of the poems fit only loosely into that scheme. There is no single hero, but rather a number of heroes ranging from the dim-but-effective god Thor to Gunnar, the treacherous brother-in-law of Sigurd, who, nevertheless, dies a hero while fighting the great tyrant of the age, Atli. Unlike the generic epic, the *Edda* has the obscenities of Loki in *The Insolence of Loki* and the broad humor of the Thor episodes—particularly the *Lay of Thrym*, an early example of that situation beloved of slapstick humor: the brawny man forced to pass himself off as the blushing girl.

### Point of View

Each poem in the *Elder Edda* must be considered individually as to its narrator and point of view. The composite *Sayings of the High One* gives the impression of more than one narrator. The simple narratives use a third person point of view: except for the occasional lines like: "Hlorridi's heart leaped with laughter/ Then grew hard when he saw his hammer." Characters' thoughts and emotions are revealed entirely through their own words and actions. For example, Freyja's rage is clear from her actions in the *Lay of Thrym*: "Freyja snorted in such a fury / she made the hall of the Aesir shake." Two of the lays, the *Sibyl's Prophecy* and the *Prophecy of Gripir* by virtue of being prophecies, have an omniscient narrator. In some of the question and answer dialogues, for example, the *The Lay of Vafthrudnir*, the purpose is to provide specific information, but the dramatic and ironic interest that keeps the exchange from descending into a glossary is that while one character only appears to be omniscient the other truly is omniscient.

### Setting

The characters's conduct in the *Elder Edda* is not greatly different from what we know of society in the Viking age. The physical setting of the lays stretches on the modern map from Scandinavia to southwestern Russia, home of the Goths before they entered the Roman empire in the late fourth century. The important Sigurd lays are centered on the Rhine valley in western Germany. The true setting of the *Elder Edda*, however, is a universe of nine worlds: Asgard, home of the gods in the center; Midgard, the home of men around it; and Utgard, containing Jötunheim, (giants), Alfheim (elves) Svartalheim (dark elves) and possibly, the sources are not clear, Vanaheim, home of the Vanir gods. Under these

three is Niflhel, the realm of Hel, the goddess of the dead. The ninth world is possibly that of the dwarves, but its name and exact location are not certain. Asgard and Midgard are protected from Utgard by a body of water in which lives the Midgard serpent, so big that it encircles the whole of Midgard with his tale in its mouth. A rainbow bridge, Bifröst, connects Asgard and Midgard. The great world ash tree, Yggdrasil, has one root in Asgard, one in Utgard, and the third in Niflhel. Under the first root is the spring of Urd or Fate, under the second, the well of Mimir, the source of Odin's wisdom, and under the third is Hvergelmir, the source of all rivers. A dragon gnaws continually at its deepest root.

### Allusions

The *Elder Edda* constantly alludes to a whole body of myth and legend that it only imperfectly preserves and that controls the imagery and symbolism of not only of the *Elder Edda*, but of Norse literature in general and Skaldic verse in particular. Even within the *Elder Edda*, there are poems that are essentially dramatic glossaries of allusions and metaphors: *The Lay of Alvis* and *The Lay of Vafthrudnir*.

### Heiti and Kennings

The two most prominent poetic devices are heiti and kennings. Heiti are simply cultivated and unusual words for common things or concepts. They can be archaisms, lost from everyday speech, or common words used in a way peculiar to poetry, or poetic coinages. Kenning comes from the verb *kenna* to characterize or define. They consist of a noun plus a modifier in the possessive case, as 'the raven's feeder' for a warrior. Some rely on natural or everyday connections 'the bane of tinder' for fire or 'the giver of linen' for a lady. The most complex rely on allusions to legend or myth.

### Prosody

The *Elder Edda* are typically in four line stanzas. Each line is divided by a *caesura* (pause). Each half-line contains two stressed syllables; the half lines are connected across the *caesura* by alliteration connecting a stressed initial sound in the first half of the line to a stressed initial sound in the second. Individual consonant sounds only alliterate with the same sound. All vowels alliterate with each other. There is no restriction on the position of the stressed syllables. *Fornyrdislag* (ancient verse) allows generally only two unstressed syllables per half-line:

Betty Bouncer bought a candle. *Málaháttir* (speech verse) allows three unstressed syllables per half-line: Sad little Susan, sought for a candle. In a third stanza form *ljóðaháttir* (song measure) the first and fourth lines are in *Málaháttir*, the second and fourth have only three stresses.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### *The Vikings*

The Vikings have entered popular imagination as bloodthirsty and immensely daring pirates, but they were first and foremost farmers and traders, raiding for treasure and slaves to accumulate capital to acquire status at home, or looking for lands abroad to colonize. Their raids, trading expeditions, and colonizing took them from Constantinople, modern Istanbul, to the coast of North America. They laid the basis of the Russian state with their trading posts along the Volga and Dneiper. They founded nearly all the cities of modern Ireland. The threat of their great raiding parties was crucial to the development of England as a unified state.

The society the Vikings came from was one of mixed farming, fishing and hunting, supplemented by trading. They would turn their hand to anything. The development of greatly improved ship designs towards the end of the eighth century gave the Scandinavians the finest ships in Europe. Their knorrs were the most effective cargo ships yet built. Their longships could cross the Atlantic or sail up the Seine to lay siege to Paris.

Beside their trading and manufacturing settlements in Ireland and settlements in England, the Vikings colonized the Isle of Man, the Orkneys, Iceland and Greenland. Many of the original settlers of Iceland were from Norway where the consolidation of the country under a central kingship was opposed by many noblemen and free farmers, used to handling their own affairs without outside interference. Others came from the Viking settlements in Ireland, always under pressure from the native Irish princes.

### *Viking Society*

Scandinavia and her people were dominated by the sea. The landscapes of the three Nordic countries, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, are each distinct, but in all of them the terrain tended to

separate communities, while the sea connected them. The people looked to the sea as naturally as to the land for opportunities.

The Scandinavians were farmers wherever the land was good enough. Rye, wheat, oats and barley were grown depending on local conditions. Cows, sheep, pigs, geese and chickens were kept. They supplemented agricultural production with hunting, fishing and gathering wild foods: honey, birds eggs and wild plants. Farms were family enterprises, and depending on the richness of the land, often at some distance from one another. Towns only began to emerge from trading posts and ritual centers towards A.D. 1000.

Control of land was the basis of wealth. Sons in a land-owning family increased its power since their wives' dowries would increase and consolidate their landholdings. The family itself in a legal sense and in terms of the various social obligations of Norse society was defined to the degree of third or fourth cousins recognizing a common great-great-great-grandfather. Obligations of one kind or another would also bind a man to the protection of a more powerful neighbor, whom he in turn would support at need. In a hard and violent age these mutual bonds were essential to the maintenance of order and to ensure access to justice.

Men worked their farms with the help of their family which might include two or three generations. Slaves were used for heavier labor by those who could afford them. Free laborers might work for their keep and a small wage. A rich landowner could afford to employ more help, giving him the leisure to go raiding and trading and with luck acquire the wealth necessary to maintain or enhance his status.

### *Viking Ships and Shipbuilding*

The development of ship construction towards the end of the eighth century gave the Scandinavians the finest ships in Europe. They perfected sailing ships that had no need of deep water, safe anchorages or quaysides, but could cross the North Sea or the North Atlantic under sail, as well as be rowed up most of the major rivers of western Europe. These ships were slender and flexible. They had symmetrical ends and a true keel, the lengthwise structure along the base of a ship to which its ribs are connected. They were clinker-built, that is of overlapping planks riveted together. At times these planks would also have been lashed to the ribs of the ship with spruce roots to ensure the ship's

## COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **Setting during *The Elder Edda*:** During the Viking era, raw material and slaves are the main resources of northern and western Europe. Tens of thousands of European men, women, and children are sold into slavery not only within Europe, but into Muslim Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East. Today, the tide of cheap labor has turned and thousands of North Africans are forced to seek a living in Spain and France.

**Medieval Iceland:** Iceland is poor, with a small population, but it produces a vibrant and extensive literature in prose and poetry. Reading to the family group or to assembled neighbors is a

common winter's entertainment into the nineteenth century in farming districts. Iceland still has one of the highest literacy rates in the world.

**Tenth and Twelfth Century:** Norse colonies flourish in Greenland, which they found to be uninhabited and to have a climate good enough for stock-raising and their traditional way of life. Climactic change meant a return to the weather we see today and the Eskimo who had retreated north before the Vikings arrived. The colony finds it culturally impossible to adapt to the new conditions and disappears by the end of the fifteenth century.

flexibility in rough seas. They were steered with a side rudder fitted to the starboard side. One ship excavated in 1880 from a mound at Gokstad on the west side of the Oslo Fjord was 76 and 1/2 feet long. At its widest it was 17 and 1/2 feet. When fully laden it would have drawn only three feet of water: it could have been sailed deep into the heart of the Irish countryside or up to the gates of Paris. A copy was sailed across the Atlantic.

### *Treasure*

However it was acquired, treasure, particularly silver, was important in Viking society. One function was display. Fine jewelry and ornamented weapons were an obvious indication of status and success. It was considered part of family wealth like land, and, despite legend, no more than one or two pieces of jewelry were buried with the dead. It was used to reward one's retainers and to provide lavish hospitality. Both of increased a man's standing in his society. Spent on land it raised a freeman's status. For a slave it could mean liberty.

On a practical level, because they did not have a coinage, silver had to be weighed and tested before transactions could take place. It was not necessary, therefore, to keep all one's silver in coins or even ingots. If, mid-deal, a man found himself a little

short of cash, he need only throw in his cloak pin or a piece of a bracelet, properly weighed.

### *Iceland and its Professional Poets*

Almost from the beginning of its settlement, Icelanders kept in constant touch with Ireland, England and their Scandinavian homelands. Icelanders with poetic skills found their services appreciated and well rewarded by Norse rulers or by rulers with Norse subjects. Indeed poetry became something of an Icelandic monopoly. For 350 years, from Egill Skalla-Grímson to Jón murti Egilsson who composed for King Eiríkur Magnússon in 1299 there are records of 110 Icelandic court poets. Snorri was probably trying to keep alive a tradition which had proved useful not only to individual Icelanders, but to Iceland as a whole. A successful court poet would give his fellow countrymen access to the king's court, and keep distant Iceland's concerns from being completely forgotten.

### CRITICAL OVERVIEW

The first indication of the *Elder Edda's* critical reception is the simple fact of its preservation in a quietly elegant manuscript, the *Codex Regius* with

the explanatory prose passages interspersed among the lays. It is often assumed that, as Christianity reached the peoples of northern Europe, devout Christians, as well as the institutional church, automatically attempted to destroy the memory of the old gods and the human heroes whose activities, judged by Judeo-Christian standards, were often less than edifying. Nevertheless, the poems in *Elder Edda* were preserved, collected, and copied. This process can perhaps be most easily understood with reference to the work of the Icelandic scholar and politician, Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), author of the treatise the *Prose Edda*, which laid the foundation for the analysis of Norse poetry. The stories preserved in the *Elder Edda* were part of the essential tools of the skalds, Norse poets who worked within complex metrical forms, using allusions and metaphors drawn from native heroic and mythological lays, much as Greek and Roman poets enriched their poetry with allusions to their god and heroes or Christian poets to the bible. A gifted skaldic poet could hope for patronage and advancement in the northern courts. Iceland in particular, poor in other resources, produced more than a few of these poets.

In the twelfth century, the ability to understand the older skaldic poetry and to compose in its manner was under threat from Church disapproval on one hand and new French-influenced popular poetry on the other. Christianity was probably the lesser threat. Once conversion was reasonably complete and real, references to Thor and Volund were generally considered as innocuous as references in Latin poetry to Hercules. The growing loss of the traditional material may indeed be reflected in the *Elder Edda* itself since the *Lay of Varthrudnir* and the *Lay of Alvis*, which function as dramatic glossaries of poetic terms and allusions. Snorri attempted to reverse this loss with his *Prose Edda*, prose versions of the old stories together with a treatise on the complex metrical rules governing the composition of the various types of skaldic verse, and which provided an explanation of the ancient gods that turned them into clever Trojans, taking advantage of the gullible northerners. In a renaissance of the older literature, reflected in the work of Snorri, the lays of the *Elder Edda* were collected and copied.

There is no record of the *Elder Edda* before the *Codex Regius* came into the possession of Bishop Brynjólf Seinsson in 1643. The manuscript had lost a number of leaves by that time, and no copy exists that was made before the leaves were lost. In 1662, the bishop sent it to the ruler of Iceland, King

Frederick III of Denmark. The Renaissance had begun with a renewed interest in Greek and Roman literature and art. Before long, however, people in northern and western Europe, in emulation and partial reaction to this absorption, began to search for information about their own ancestors and their cultural life. This interest, fed by the political usefulness of national identities, led to speculation about ancient monuments and the careful combing of Greek and Latin texts for information. It also meant that early vernacular writings now interested all those who felt it was their duty or in their interest to encourage scholarship and a sense of a shared national past. In 1665, the “Sibyl’s Prophecy” and the “Sayings of the High One” from the *Elder Edda* were published together with Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*. The full collection, however, was published only between 1787 and 1828. By this time, the romantic movement and the new study of philology, the study of the development and interconnection of languages, were ready to make full use of the texts. Scholars pored over them for linguistic clues to the development and interconnections of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European languages and ancient northern society. In England and Germany as the century progressed, the *Elder Edda*, along with the Icelandic Sagas (prose tales of fictionalized historical events and characters) were moving into the consciousness of the reading public at large. In Nordic countries, this assimilation was strikingly resisted on some fronts; in the nineteenth century, the traditional evening saga reading was discouraged in favor of the Bible in Iceland. The Danish scholar Grundtvig attempted to re-introduce the images, characters, and narratives of the *Elder Edda*, but with little success.

The *Elder Edda*, like many other early medieval epics, for example *Beowulf* and the *Táin Bó Cuáilgne*, were approached almost purely as philological lucky dips or archaeological artifacts well into the twentieth century. It can be no coincidence that Auden’s translations, which helped bring the *Elder Edda* to the attention of late twentieth century readers, were dedicated to his former teacher Tolkien, whose own 1936 lecture, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” radically shifted the perception of the epic towards its first and essential existence as literature. Stylistic discussions of the poetry have begun to be discussed more, in the critical literature, even though Nordal’s edition of the “Sibyl’s Prophecy,” revised in 1952 and printed in English translation as late as 1978, has nothing to say about the attributes of the poetry, which contains this mythol-

ogy like insects and leaves in amber. Ursula Dronke's commentaries, particularly on the Atli lays, demonstrate both the richness of construction and the imaginative play of author with historical material.

## CRITICISM

### *Helen Conrad-O'Briain*

*In the following essay, Conrad-O'Briain looks at the great romance of the Elder Edda in an effort to understand its neglect by writers and critics.*

Seventeen of the lays in the *Elder Edda* concern the house of the Volsungs. Fifteen directly or indirectly point towards the Icelandic *Volsung Saga*, the Middle High German *Nibelungenleid*, and finally to Wagner's series of operas, *Ring of the Nibelungs*. They are part of one of the best case histories for the development of the epic from short lays or tales available. The other two "The First Lay of Helgi Hunding's Bane" and "The Second Lay of Helgi Hunding's Bane" could also be approached as points on a continuum of development, but a development that was somehow interrupted. The second lay has already begun the expansion. It adds incidents and treats them with greater complexity, even if it still relies, in true lay style, on the dramatic use of the characters' voices to create atmosphere and setting, direct the audience's sympathies, and propel the narrative. In that process of development, however, Helgi and his beloved Sigrun proved a dead end, while Sigurd and Brynhild became the star-crossed lovers of northern legend, the Viking answer to Lancelot and Guinevere or Tristan and Isolde.

Sigurd was not the only son of Sigmund to inspire the love a Valkyrie, but his elder brother Helgi and his Valkyrie, Sigrun/Svava/Kara and their love stretching across three lifetimes has never caught the popular fancy; even the extant lays in the *Elder Edda* are fragmentary. Their story must once have been popular. What happened?

In the second lay, as mentioned above, the story already incorporates events after Helgi's defeat and killing of Sigrun's father, brothers, and unwanted suitor. The audience now had both the beginning and end of their love, expanding Helgi's death into what might otherwise have been detached as a separate lay. Helgi's death by Dag, the brother-in-

law he had spared, is of far less importance or interest to the poet than the love of Helgi and Sigrun. To express this love to the audience, the poet devoted slightly over a third of his lay to Sigrun's lament for Helgi and their meeting in his grave mound. He incorporated both the theme of the unquiet grave and an audacious reversal of the demon-lover motif.

Instead of being carried off unwillingly to the horrors of the grave as in the demon lover ballads and tales, Sigrun goes to the burial mound, arranges a bed, and insists "Here in the barrow we'll go to bed, released from sorrow, I will sleep, Helgi, safe in your arms the way I used to when you were alive." This material might serve to flesh out an epic, but placed on center stage, they seem more naturally the stuff of romance. This and the substitution in the second lay of the first's generalized hero's boyhood with Helgi's daring secret mission to spy on his family's enemies suggests a poet with a gift for narrative innovation. What then cuts off the development? Possibly the lack of a theme to support an extended narrative. The winning of Sigrun provided the center of a narrative lay, but the process was never given the emotional complexity to sustain a long narrative.

The core of the story, the unshakable love between Helgi and Sigrun, could not accommodate an emotional struggle between them to take the place of war. Such a change would rob the story of its essential character. In the second version, the scene in which, going over the battlefield, she first finds the despised Hodbrodd dying and then Helgi safe, might easily have become an extended episode. But when Helgi who says "'Sigrun I will grieve you by what I say . . . there fell this morning at Freka Stone, Bragi and Hogni; I was their bane.'" Her reaction does not give the society, which produced the *Volsung Saga* or *Njal's Saga*, much to work with to extend the conflict and therefore the narrative: "Then Sigrun wept. She said: 'Now I would wish those warriors alive, and still have your arms around me.'" Then, as the story says, they married and had sons, but "Helgi didn't live to grow old" and "grief and sorrow caused Sigrun to die young." Helgi had spared Sigrun's brother, Dag, who repays the oaths he has sworn with Odin's spear in vengeance for his father. When he confesses the slaying to his sister and offers compensation to her and her sons, she curses him, but she does not pursue vengeance. Her focus and the story's

## WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda: Tales from Norse Mythology*, trans. by Jean I. Young (1971), provides a lively translation of the most accessible parts of an encyclopedic thirteenth century prose collection of the myths and legends at the heart of the Norse poetic vocabulary.
- Magnus Magnusson, *Viking Expansion Westwards* (1973) is a lavishly illustrated history of the expansion of the Vikings from England to North America. Magnusson focuses on individuals like Aude the Deep-Minded and the realities of daily life, bringing the reader face to face with the people who wrote and listened to the *Elder Edda*.
- Lee Hollander, *The Skalds: A Selection of Their Poems* presents the poets of the Viking Age and a selection of their poetry whose incredibly elaborate lyric poetic language and imagery depends upon the myths and legends preserved in part in the *Elder Edda*.
- Magnus Magnusson and H. Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*. The vikings in North America in their own words, this might well be read in conjunction with *Viking Expansion Westwards*.
- Magnus Magnusson and H. Pálsson, *Njal's Saga*. This is perhaps the greatest of the Icelandic family sagas, set in the period when Icelandic society was slowly adopting Christianity and the cultural changes conversion required.
- Jesse L. Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer* (1990) is a prose retelling of the Sigurd story, written down between 1200 and 1270. It is closely related to the lays in the *Elder Eddas*, but presents all the Volsung stories as part of an integrated whole.
- A new collection of essays on *Elder Edda*, edited by Paul L. Acker, is promised for November, 2000. It is promised to apply new critical approaches to the mythological poetry in the *Elder Edda*.

focus remains love of Helgi rather than vengeance. She dares the terrors of the grave for him and dies of her grief; he comes back to her from the dead, from the halls of Odin.

Perhaps the most compelling scene, the one that might have offered the possibility of an extended narrative is Helgi's return from the dead to his wife for one night. It operates within the context of their inability to meet in the Norse afterlife. Since Sigrun is fated to die of grief, not in battle, she cannot join her husband in Valhalla. It is often overlooked by modern readers that Brynhild does not want Sigurd dead merely to punish him. She wants to ensure that she will have him in the afterlife. She does not kill herself out of guilt or remorse, but to join him in the kingdom of Hel. Sigurd must be killed treacherously, not merely because of his prowess, but because if he dies in battle he is lost to her forever. The

composers of the lays were very much alive to this. Their sensitivity to it is reflected in "Brynhild's Hel-ride."

The tale of Sigurd and Brynhild was a tale of thwarted love, but there is no adultery, no stolen meetings, none of the twists and turns of lovers's intrigue, only the cold frustrated fury of a woman who has been tricked into marrying a man she despises, having been betrothed to the one man she could respect and therefore love. Besides, the French romance as a genre was not invariably or even usually about adulterous love but a love that found its harbor in marriage.

The women of *Elder Edda* and of the saga literature in general are praised for the same qualities as the men. Modern readers tend to judge the medieval taste in heroines by Chaucer's, but Geoffrey Chaucer had a highly personal taste for the plaintive



It is the nature of their  
love, their own natures, that  
they should find each other  
and nothing shall come  
between them, not even death  
itself, which is the meaning of  
the story . . . The center of  
their story is their love that  
propels them across death.”

and helpless woman (usually married). Brynhild’s character did not change substantially between the Norse and courtly version of her story. The ballad tradition is full of women who follow their lovers to war in disguise, often saving them.

The problem of the Helgi legends’ dead end may lie exactly in the cleft stick of the Eddic traditions of the afterlife and the in the reincarnation motif. The great engine of the traditional development of the Helgi story, the narrative tool by which the story could be extended was that the lovers were reincarnated at least three times. The story never found a replacement. However much reincarnation may appeal to modern sensibilities, if only as a narrative tool, it was a bar to wider development of the story between the Vikings’ conversion to Christianity and the end of the nineteenth century. It has been suggested that the statement at the end of “The Lay of Helgi Horvard’s Son” may be a belated scribal attempt to link the old Helgi tradition to the Volsung-Helgi tradition.” But, it seems unlikely that such an idea would have occurred to a Christian scribe out of nowhere, least of all to attract an audience. Keeping the interest in the story alive would have suggested suppressing or ridiculing such a heathen concept as reincarnation, as the prose passage at the end of “The Second Lay of Helgi Hunding’s Bane”: “In olden times it was believed that people could be born again, although that is now considered an old woman’s tale.” More likely to represent a scribal attempt to make the sequence more acceptable would be the prose introduction to “The Second Lay of Helgi Hunding’s

Bane”: “King Sigmund, the son of Volsung, married Borghild from Balund. They called their son Helgi, for Helgi Hjorvard’s son.” This at most suggests a subconscious recognition of their similar fate. The lines in “The Second Lay of Helgi Hunding’s Bane”—“before she had ever seen Sigmund’s son / she had loved him with all her heart”—is also suggestive of a love reincarnated.

Perhaps the problem is more fundamental. There simply wasn’t enough material. Despite the great potential offered and already exploited by certain incidents, there were not enough of them. Even when fleshed out, there certainly were not enough tensions to make a convincing saga like that which formed around Sigurd. The tradition of their love offers only one possible tension between them: there is no meeting again for them after death. No writer after the conversion would be able to exploit the literary possibilities of either this endless loss or the alternative, the rebirth and repetition of the cycle of their love. There is no great object to be pursued. It is the nature of their love, their own natures, that they should find each other and nothing shall come between them, not even death itself, which is the meaning of the story. That is what differentiates them from the characters in the Sigurd material. The center of their story is their love that propels them across death. Their great sorrow, the thing that they must conquer, is their separation by death. That is a subject worthy of an epic, but not an epic that could have been written in the prevailing cultural atmosphere.

**Source:** Helen Conrad-O’Brian, for *Epics for Students*, Gale, 2001.

### **Lotte Motz**

*Lotte Motz argues that the pattern between Eskimo and Norse tradition is similar, which leads to understanding the “similarity of linguistic dynamics.”*

In his treatise on poetry, the so-called *Edda Snorra*, Snorri (1949:244) states that the human mind is periphrased in skaldic speech as ‘the wind of troll-women’ without offering an explanation for the unexpected image. We do find such kennings as . . . ‘the storm of Járn saxa (a giantess) in the meaning of ‘courage’, or *Herkju stormr*—‘Herkja’s (a giantess’) storm’ in the meaning ‘mind’.

Snorri’s puzzling statement has given rise to some scholarly interpretations. In his book on magic practices Dag Strömbäck assumed that the noun



*The Norse god Odin is considered the mythological godfather of poets. The Elder Edda includes a story about how Odin learned the runes, the alphabet of the ancient north Germanic tribes.*

*hugr* of Snorri's sentence (*Huginn skal svá kenna at kalla vind troll-kvenna*) relates to the force named *hugr*, which lives in men, and which may, according to Norse belief, detach itself and wander forth, corporeally, to attack and harm an enemy. Strömbäck (1935:175 ff) points out that witches or troll-women are often visualized as traveling in the wind. The 'trolls' wind' thus would be equated with the powerful and noxious force, named *hugr*.

Basing herself on folkbelief, Lily Weiser-Aall (1936:76–78) offered a somewhat different expla-

nation. The word *hugr* is, according to her, to be understood in its meaning of 'bodily affliction', the kind of sickness which may be brought on by a troll's breath or 'wind', as shown by the modern Norwegian nouns *trollgust*, *alvgust*—'trolls' wind', 'elves' wind', as names of a disease.

Concerning both interpretations we must note that the kenning 'trolls' wind' does not, in the instances which have been gathered, periphrase 'sickness' or 'attack'. The examples, cited by Rudolf Meissner, circumscribe the notions of 'cour-



...the equation 'mind—trolls' wind' of skaldic poetry had originated in its turn, as in the scenario of the Eskimos, in a belief, forgotten in its articulated form at the time of our texts, that to receive insight, strength, or vision, a man must attain close contact with the elemental powers."

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age', 'mind', 'emotion', 'thoughts', which coincide with the standard meanings of the noun *hugr* — 'mind' 'feeling', 'desire', 'courage'. Snorri must have based his statement on his knowledge of skaldic diction. It is therefore not likely that he used *hugr* in the meaning 'sickness' or 'attack' if the metaphors consistently relate to the workings of the human mind. Strömbäck and Weiser-Aall apparently did not consider the material from which Snorri's conclusion was derived.

I shall, in my turn, seek to find the reason for linking witches' weather to human thoughts and emotions, and interpret Snorri's sentence, understanding *hugr* in its standard meaning of 'mind, emotion, consciousness', with the help of a non-Germanic parallel.

The parallel is found among the Eskimos. Their highest god, named Sila, Hila, or Tla, by the various groups, is a being of the outer air, of winds and storms, the great majestic, cosmic power before which men must bow in humbleness and awe. He is, as stated by an Eskimo, "A great spirit so mighty that his utterance to mankind is not through common words, but by storm and snow and rain and the fury of the sea; all the forces that men fear ..."

Surprisingly the name of this great force serves also as a designation of the human mind or human intelligence. In Greenlandic speech it may be said: *Siálihliuppa*—"Sila rained on him", and it may be stated about someone: "He has Sila," i.e. "He has intelligence." In Alaska the name Sla means 'weather' and the verb *slaugohaqtoa* means "I am thinking".

We may find an explanation for this duality of meaning by considering that among some of the Eskimo nations, for instance among the Caribou Eskimos, it is indeed from Hila that the shaman-magician, the central figure of religious life, receives his visionary powers. He has prepared himself for this profound experience by leaving the settlements of men and by the endurance of much suffering. Then in his loneliness he may hear the god's voice, be filled with god's presence, and thus himself become part of the secret workings of the universe. "All true wisdom," an Eskimo explained to the explorer Rasmussen, "is only to be learned far from the dwellings of men, out in the great solitudes".

In a recurrent tale from Greenland a poor orphan boy transforms himself into a mighty hero through his strength of will, and he too obtains his gifts through his experience of meeting Sila in the wilderness. If a man wishes to become an *angakoq* (shaman), we are told by an eighteenth century observer of Eskimo life, he must go a long way from his home to a field where there are no men; he must look for a huge stone, sit down on it, and call for Torngarsuk (the shaman's helping spirit with this group of Eskimos). The shock of the terrifying encounter will cause the man to fall into a stupor, and to lie like dead; but he will reawaken and return to his community as a shaman.

The examples given testify to a belief that to acquire knowledge of the secrets of the world one must meet and merge with the forces which are manifest in storm and winds.

Eskimo culture, as we know, remained for climatic reasons at a very early stage of economic development, i.e. that of hunters and of fishermen, until the most recent time, and preserved some extremely archaic forms of belief. It is reasonable to assume that these forms had at one time had a wider distribution and that some had stayed, vestigially, in more sophisticated environments.

I wish to show in this paper that the equation 'mind—trolls' wind' of skaldic poetry had originated in its turn, as in the scenario of the Eskimos, in a belief, forgotten in its articulated form at the time of our texts, that to receive insight, strength, or vision, a man must attain close contact with the elemental powers. If enough fragments of such a faith are still discernible, though in various altered forms, in our texts we may be able to assume the



*The goddess Frigg (also known as Friia or Freya), Odin's wife and a promoter of marriage and fertility.*

existence of such a pattern in Germanic lands. To arrive at this assumption we would have to be able to point to the following:

1. that in north-Germanic tradition inspiration may be gained by contact with the forces of untamed nature,
2. that trolls and giants (the names are interchangeable) represent such forces,
3. that trolls and giants are capable of dispensing knowledge and inspiration,

4. that humans have indeed gained inspiration through a meeting with the trolls in distant places.

The examples from the arctic environment, here cited, describe an initiatory experience from which the human arises with a new identity, a new dimension to his person, possibly a new conscious soul. We shall examine whether in the Germanic context the inspiration granted would be of an individual nature, pertaining to a certain task, the working of a poem, or the divining of the future, or to the more profound event of acquiring a new state of consciousness.

*Inspiration through contact with the forces of untamed nature*

The Icelandic noun *útiseta*—‘sitting outside’, designates the wizard’s practice of staying outdoors for the night in the course of his profession. The act is performed to gather knowledge of the future—*eflaútiseta ok leita spádóms*—and is considered a felony or crime. And we may understand that the wizard of Germanic society reached in his lonely vigil contact with the superhuman as does the *angakoq* of the Eskimos, visited by Torngarsuk while ‘sitting on a stone’.

Inspiration may also be gained by sitting on a mound—*sitja á haugi*. After a night of sleeping on a mound an Icelandic shepherd gained the gift of poetic creativity.

While the instances above depict techniques of seeking specific visions or knowledge the episode of an Eddic poem shows how a whole new form of being is granted to a man through forces that have come to him through wind and air. The lad was, in his early youth, mute and without a name. One day, while sitting on a mound, he noticed that a train of shining maidens was riding through the clouds; one of them came to him to bestow these gifts: a name, the power of speech, and a sword. That practices meant to gain manhood, i.e. a new state of consciousness, were associated in Norse tradition with a stay in uncultivated places may be surmised from a sentence of *Landnámabók*; here a man was led into a certain cave of Iceland before attaining the ‘rank of man’.

*2. Trolls and giants as representatives of nature*

This point hardly needs belaboring. Trolls and giants are the powers of *úlgarþar*, for they dwell outside of the settlements of men in the stones and crags, the caves and glaziers of the mountainside. Theirs is an especially close alliance with the weather, with storms and snow, and frost and winds. In Norse myth the wind arises because a giant in the shape of an eagle flaps his wings. A saga giant will frequently manipulate the weather to gain his end; he thus may send a storm to wreck the boat of sailors near his shore. The troll-woman *Thorgerth Hölgabrúth* created a hailstorm so that her friend might win his battle (*The Saga of the Jomsvikings*). The giant Gusir was observed as he was moving in a whirl of snow (*Ketils saga hængs*), and Thorri, a giant and a king in a legendary saga, sends snow for ‘good skiing’ if he is favorably inclined (*Hversu Noregr byggðist*).

Winds may rise and darkness fall, just before a human meets a giant. The young Icelandic lad Oddr thus found himself in darkness, frost, and drifts of snow as he was about to meet the giant Bárth (Bárthar saga *Snæfellsáss*). Rain and hail descended just before the heroes Hjálmtér and Ölvis encountered the giantess Skinnhúfa (*Hjálmtér saga ok Ölvis*). The Icelander Thorsteinn experienced an agony of cold before he faced the giant Grámann (*Ármanns saga inn fyrri*). The modern German noun *Windsbraul* for ‘whirlwind’ shows that in folk belief storm and wind may be visualized in the form of a witch.

We may be quite sure that the giants speak to men, like Sila of the Eskimos, ‘by storm and snow and rain and the fury of the sea’.

*3. Trolls and giants as source of knowledge and inspiration*

Óthinn learned nine important magic songs from the giant Bolborn, his maternal uncle (*Hávamál*). The goddess Freyja approached Hyndla, a troll-woman living in a cave, to learn from her the genealogy of her human friend Óttar. And she received the information (*Hyndluljóth*). Though the Eddic poem *Vafthrúthnismál* ostensibly presents a contest between Óthinn and a giant, much information, concerning matters of the cosmos, is dispensed by Vafthrúthnir in the course of the event.

Young Oddr acquired so much legal knowledge from the giant Bárth that he became the greatest lawyer of his generation (*Bárthar saga Snæfellsáss*). The warrior Thorsteinn learned many skills from his giant mistress (*Thorsteins saga Geirnefjufóstra*), while another man, named Thorsteinn, was taught so well by a giant woman and her daughters in the arts of courtly accomplishment that none could rival him in these matters (*Ármanns saga inn fyrri*); and the giant Ármann offered valuable advice in the lawsuit of an Icelandic farmer (*Ármanns saga inn fyrri*). Bárth, who himself was a giant, was introduced to magic skills, knowledge of genealogy, sorcerers’ chants, and the old magic lore by the giant Dofri (*Bárthar saga Snæfellsáss*). This giant was also said to be the teacher of the historical king Harald Finehair and he instructed him in learning—*fræthi*—and accomplishments—*úthróttir*. The giantess Menglôth appeared to Ormr in a dream and advised him on his future battle (*Orms thátr Stórolfssonar*), while the giantess Brana came to Hálfðan in a dream to remind him of a pledge he had forgotten (*Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*). The hero Hadingus was sent for

his education to the giant Vagnhofthus and he increased much in strength and skill, as reported by Saxo Grammaticus.

Trolls and giants, who are themselves, as we have seen, wise and versed in magic crafts, thus appear in teaching and counseling, and, in dreams, in helping and admonishment.

#### 4. *The inspirational meeting between troll and human in the wilderness*

The *útisetá*, the magician's stay outside of human dwellings, is performed, as it is overtly stated, so that the trolls may be aroused—*útisetur at vekja troll upp*. The trolls thus are, in this practice, the superhuman forces of the natural environment whom the Norse magician wishes to approach, as the *angakoq* wishes to approach the mighty Sila.

In most instances, cited under 3, knowledge is imparted and instruction conducted in the uncultivated space of the giant's realm. Oddr spent a winter in his teacher's cave. Thorsteinn lived with Geirnefja as her lover while she taught him, and the other Thorsteinn resided with three giant women. In a mountain cave young Bárth became acquainted with the many magic powers and the wisdom of the giant Dofri. And young Harald, later king of Norway, spent five years in this giant's cave.

Frequently the hero gains, through his meeting with the troll, usually a troll-woman, a superhuman friend who will help him in time of need in his later adventures. The giantess Mána came to Sörli's rescue when he was threatened by the anger of a queen (*Sörla saga slerka*), and the giantess Fála rushed to fight at Gunnar's side against an entire horde of trolls (*Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*). The giantess Skinnhúfa killed a monstrous whale which had threatened her human friend (*Hjálmthés saga ok Ölvis*), and the giant woman Brana arrived to save Hálfðan from the fires of a blazing hall (*Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*). A troll-woman, riding on a wolf, offered to become the *fylgja*, the lifelong and loyal guardian force, of the warrior Heth inn.

After the encounter with the troll some heroes of the legendary sagas are given a new by-name as the foster-son of the respective spirit. In this way Hálfðan became the Fosterling of Brana, Illugi the Fosterling of Gríthr, and Thorsteinn the Fosterling of Geirnefja. King Harald Finehair was also known as the Fosterling of Dofri. It is clear that receiving a new name, which he will bear throughout his future

life, marks a decisive change in the being of a person, the reaching of a new stage, the acquisition of an altered identity. And this event is occasioned, in the cases cited, by the man's stay with the troll in the troll's environment.

Let us summarize our argument: we cannot doubt that in north-Germanic tradition men are believed to gain temporary or lasting wisdom or inspiration by meeting with forces of the wilderness (1); it is also clear that trolls and giants represent such forces, especially those of wind and weather (2); trolls and giants, themselves deeply versed in magic wisdom, may generously give of their knowledge (3); an encounter of a human hero with a troll, in the troll's environment, and its impact is also frequently noted in the Old Icelandic texts (4).

We may, however, raise some questions concerning the latest category and wonder if the Norse hero's friendship with the troll is indeed of the same kind as the Eskimo shaman's contact with his god. Let us consider these events more closely.

The Eskimo's experience in the solitude of the arctic waste initiates him into his craft. He leaves the place of contact as a profoundly altered being, a man with a new identity. The Norse hero's experience in a giant's cave also leaves him as an altered being. The possession of a helping spirit has added a new dimension to his person; he may, furthermore, be protected in his future adventures by a magic gift received from his superhuman friend, as is Hálfðan by the corselet *Brönunautr*. Sometimes, as in the case of Illugi Grítharfóstri, he goes forth as one whose mettle has been tested, for Illugi's courage did not falter even at the moment of the greatest peril. At times a new by-name marks him as a man tested or instructed by a superhuman creature in the wilderness.

The initiatory nature of the Norse episodes is also underlined by the events preceding the adventure. The Eskimo shaman cannot attain his visionary powers without enduring suffering so great that it may endanger his physical existence. The saga hero in his turn is subjected to hardship and to pain. His ship may have drifted aimlessly, for weeks or months, in fog and darkness, before it was shattered on the rocks; he may be the sole survivor on the cliffs (*Ásmundar saga Atlasonar*). He may have been wounded and lie close to death on the battle ground. He may be on the point of drowning, as was Thorsteinn of *Thorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, or worn to exhaustion by the cold as was Thorsteinn of *Ármanns saga inn fyrri*.

The initiatory pattern of the saga hero's adventure would allow us to place it generically with the initiatory encounter of the *angakoq*. We must admit, however, that the experience in the arctic ice is part of the tradition of a living faith while the *útisetá* of the sorcerer belongs with forbidden practices, and the episode concerning the Norse hero and the troll is embedded in fictional or semi-fictional tales. We may wonder in what way information from such sources may be related to religious beliefs. Clearly the magician's practices, though forbidden in Christian time, had been part of pre-Christian faith and its manifestations persisted, as we may note, after the conversion.

We do not know, however, to what extent the sagas mirror a believed reality. They clearly have preserved a tale of a man's meeting with an elemental power in the wasteland and its impact on his personality. To the extent to which there was belief in the actual existence of the hero there also must have been belief, at least at one time, in the reality of his adventures. That such a faith was likely and that it had, actually, not completely vanished, is supported by the fact that the medieval king Harald Finehair bore, among others, the title Fosterson of (the giant) Dofri. The assumption might have been that to be a real king or a real hero one must have had the tutelage of an elemental force of nature.

If the arguments brought forth allow us to understand that the thought pattern here discussed is, in essence, the same in Eskimo and in Norse tradition then we may also understand the similarity of linguistic dynamics, the equation of Sila with intelligence and the equation of the 'troll's wind' with the human mind, for in meeting with the troll the hero acquired his *hugr*, his aware and conscious soul. That the meaning 'courage' recurs among the kennings is in keeping with the destiny and role awaiting the young warrior of the northern lands.

**Source:** Lotte Motz, "The Storm of Troll-Women," in *Maal og Minne*, Vol. 1-2, 1988, pp. 31-41.

### **Lee M. Hollander**

*Lee M. Hollander, in this article from The Poetic Edda, attributes the preservation of the Teutonic race's literary heritage to the early Christian missionaries, and specifically, to Iceland, whose inhabitants contributed greatly to capturing the wonders of the Viking Age, its sagas and Eddic lays.*

What the *Vedas* are for India, and the Homeric poems for the Greek world, that the *Edda* signifies

for the Teutonic race: it is a repository, in poetic form, of their mythology and much of their heroic lore, bodying forth both the ethical views and the cultural life of the North during late heathen and early Christian times.

Due to their geographical position, it was the fate of the Scandinavian tribes to succumb later than their southern and western neighbors to the revolutionary influence of the new world religion, Christianity. Before its establishment, they were able to bring to a highly characteristic fruition a civilization stimulated occasionally, during the centuries preceding, but not overborne by impulses from the more Romanized countries of Europe. Owing to the prevailing use of wood for structural purposes and ornamentation, little that is notable was accomplished and still less has come down to us from that period, though a definite style had been evolved in wood-carving, shipbuilding and bronze work, and admirable examples of these have indeed been unearthed. But the surging life of the Viking Age—restless, intrepid, masculine as few have been in the world's history—found magnificent expression in a literature which may take its place honorably beside other national literatures.

For the preservation of these treasures in written form we are, to be sure, indebted to Christianity; it was the missionary who brought with him to Scandinavia the art of writing on parchment with connected letters. The Runic alphabet was unsuited for that task.

But just as fire and sword wrought more conversions in the Merovingian kingdom, in Germany, and in England, than did peaceful, missionary activity so too in the North; and little would have been heard of sagas, Eddic lays, and skaldic poetry had it not been for the fortunate existence of the political refuge of remote Iceland.

Founded toward the end of the heathen period (ca. 870) by Norwegian nobles and yeomen who fled their native land when King Harald Fairhair sought to impose on them his sovereignty and to levy tribute, this colony long preserved and fostered the cultural traditions which connected it with the Scandinavian soil. Indeed, for several centuries it remained an oligarchy of families intensely proud of their ancestry and jealous of their cultural heritage. Even when Christianity was finally introduced and adopted as the state religion by legislative decision (1000 A.D.), there was no sudden break, as was more generally the case elsewhere. This was partly because of the absence of religious fanati-

cism, partly because of the isolation of the country, which rendered impracticable for a long time any stricter enforcement of Church discipline in matters of faith and of living.

The art of writing, which came in with the new religion, was enthusiastically cultivated for the committing to parchment of the lays, the laws, and the lore of olden times, especially of the heroic and romantic past immediately preceding and following the settlement of the island. Even after Christianity got to be firmly established, by and by, wealthy freeholders and clerics of leisure devoted themselves to accumulating and combining into “sagas,” the traditions of heathen times which had been current orally, and to collecting the lays about the gods and heroes which were still remembered — indeed, they would compose new ones in imitation of them. Thus, gradually came into being huge codices which were reckoned among the most cherished possessions of Icelandic families. By about 1200 the Danish historian, Saxo Grammaticus, already speaks in praise of the unflagging zeal of the Icelanders in this matter.

The greatest name in this early Icelandic Renaissance (as it has been called) is that of Snorri Sturluson (1178–1241), the powerful chieftain and great scholar, to whom we owe the *Heimskringla*, or *The History of the Norwegian Kings*, and the *Snorra Edda*—about which more later—but he stands by no means alone. And thanks also to the fact that the language had undergone hardly a change during the Middle Ages, this antiquarian activity was continued uninterruptedly down into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when it was met and reinforced by the Nordic Renaissance with its romantic interest in the past.

In the meantime the erstwhile independent island had passed into the sovereignty of Norway and, with that country, into that of Denmark, then at the zenith of its power. In the search for the origins of Danish greatness it was soon understood that a knowledge of the earlier history of Scandinavia depended altogether on the information contained in the Icelandic manuscripts. In the preface to Saxo’s *Historia Danica*, edited by the Danish humanist Christiern Pedersen in the beginning of the sixteenth century, antiquarians found stated in so many words that to a large extent his work is based on Icelandic sources, at least for the earliest times. To make these sources more accessible, toward the end of the sixteenth century, the learned Norwegian, Peder Claussön, translated the *Heimskringla*, which,



The whole is in one firm,  
legible hand which  
paleologists agree in assigning  
to an Icelander of the last  
half of the thirteenth century.  
He must have copied it from,  
it seems, at least two  
manuscripts for the nature of  
a number of scribal errors  
shows that he did not write  
from memory or from  
dictation.”

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with the kings of Norway in the foreground, tells of Scandinavian history from the earliest times down to the end of the twelfth century.

Since it was well known that many valuable manuscripts still existed in Iceland, collectors hastened to gather them although the Icelandic freeholders “brooded over them like the dragon on his gold,” as one contemporary remarked. As extreme good fortune would have it, the Danish kings then ruling, especially Fredric III, were liberal and intelligent monarchs who did much to further literature and science. The latter king expressly enjoined his bishop in Iceland, Brynjólfur Sveinsson, a noted antiquarian, to gather for the Royal Library, then founded, all manuscripts he could lay hold of. As a result, this collection now houses the greatest manuscript treasures of Northern antiquity. And the foundations of other great manuscript collections, such as those of the Royal Library of Sweden and the libraries of the Universities of Copenhagen and Uppsala, were laid at about the same time.

This collecting zeal of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may almost be called providential. It preserved from destruction the treasures, which the Age of Enlightenment and Utilitarianism following was to look upon as relics of barbarian antecedents best forgotten, until Romanticism again invested the dim past of Germanic antiquity with glamor.



*The god Thor, whose name means thunder, is probably the most well-known figure in all of Germanic mythology.*

At the height of this generous interest in the past a learned Icelandic, Arngrímur Jónsson, sent the manuscript of what is now known as *Snorra Edda* or *The Prose Edda* (now called *Codex Wormianus*), to his Danish friend Ole Worm. Knowledge of this famous work of Snorri's had, it seemed, virtually disappeared in Iceland. Its author was at first supposed to be that fabled father of Icelandic historiography, Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056–1133), of whose learning the most exaggerated notions were then current. A closer study of sources gradually undermined this view in favor of Snorri; and his authorship became a certainty with the finding of the *Codex Upsaliensis* of the *Snorra Edda*, which is prefaced by the remark that it was compiled by Snorri.

To all intents and purposes this *Edda* of Snorri's is a textbook—one of the most original and entertaining ever written. In it is set forth in dialogue form the substance and technique (as we should say) of skaldship, brought conveniently together for the benefit of those aspiring to the practice of the art. The first part, called “Gylfaginning” or “The Duping of Gylfi,” furnishes a survey of Northern mythology and cosmogony; the second, called

“Skaldskaparmál” or “The Language of Skaldship,” deals with the subject of “kennings,” whose origin is explained by quotations from skaldic poems and other lore; the third, called “Háttatal” or “The Enumeration of *hættir* (metres),” contains Snorri's encomiastic poem, in 102 stanzas, on King Hákon and Duke Skúli, exemplifying as many metres employed in skaldship and giving explanations of the technical aspects of the skaldic art.

Among the scholars eagerly scanning this precious find the conviction soon made itself felt that the material in it was not original with Snorri: they saw that much of the first two books was on the face of it a group of synopses from older poetic sources which, in their turn, investigators ascribed to Sæmundr. Hence when that lucky manuscript hunter, Bishop Brynjólfur, discovered (about 1643) the unique and priceless codex containing what we now call *The Poetic Edda*, it was but natural that he should conclude this to be “The Edda of Sæmundr,” whose existence had already been inferred theoretically. And this conclusion was unhesitatingly subscribed to by all, down to modern times. The fact is, though, that the connection of Sæmundr with *The Poetic Edda* has no documentary evidence whatever. Moreover, it is inherently improbable.

But, since the great bulk of poems which we have come to regard as “Eddic” is handed down precisely in this manuscript, and since we lack any other collective title, the name of *Edda*, which properly belongs to Snorri's work, has been retained for all similar works. We know with a fair degree of certainty that Snorri himself named his handbook of poetics “Edda”; but as to the meaning of this word we are dependent on conjecture.

Quite early, the name was taken to be identical with that of Edda, who was progenitress of the race of thralls according to “The Lay of Ríg,” and whose name means “great-grandmother.” This identification was adopted by the great Jakob Grimm who, with his brother Wilhelm, was one of the first to undertake a scientific edition of part of the collection. In the taste of Romanticism he poetically interpreted the title as the ancestral mother of mankind sitting in the circle of her children, instructing them in the lore and learning of the hoary past. However, as it happens, Snorri did not, in all likelihood, know “The Lay of Ríg”; nor does this fanciful interpretation agree at all with the prosy manner in which the Icelanders were accustomed to name their manuscripts, or—for that matter—with the purpose and nature of Snorri's work. It is altogether untenable.

Another explanation was propounded early in the eighteenth century by the Icelandic scholar, Árni Magnússon, and has been accepted by many. According to him, *Edda* means “poetics”—a title which (from a modern point of view) would seem eminently fitting for Snorri’s work. Later scholars, who have provided a more solid philological underpinning for this theory than Arni was able to, also point out that the simplex *óðr*, from which *Edda* may be derived, signifies “reason,” “soul” and hence “soulful utterance,” “poem,” agrees excellently, etymologically and semantically, with the related Latin *vates* and the Old Irish *faith*, “seer,” “poet.” Nevertheless, this explanation does not quite satisfy, for the word “Edda” in the meaning “poetics” is nowhere attested before the middle of the fourteenth century.

The simplest theory, agreeing best with the matter-of-fact Icelandic style of naming their writings, is the proposal of the Icelandic-English scholar, Eirík Magnússon. He reminded us that *Edda* may mean “the Book of Oddi.” This was the name of the renowned and historic parsonage in southwest Iceland which under that remarkable mind, Sæmundr Sigfússon, had become a center of learning whither flocked gifted youths eager for historical or clerical instruction. After his death, in 1133, the estate, continuing to prosper, kept up its tradition for learning under his two sons, and especially under his grandson, the wise and powerful chieftain, Jón Loptsson. It was he who fostered and tutored the three-year-old Snorri and under whose roof the boy lived until his nineteenth year. What is more likely than that Oddi with its traditions and associations played a profound role in Snorri’s entire development? To be sure, whether Snorri wrote his work there in later years, whether he gave it the title in grateful recognition of the inspiration there received, or whether he wished thus to indicate an indebtedness to manuscript collections of poems owned at Oddi—these are mere surmises.

Magnússon, indeed, believed that Snorri, while in Oddi, had used a manuscript containing about all the lays comprised in the codex found by Bishop Brynjólfur, and from them made the synopses found in the “Gylfaginning.” In this he was mistaken however; for it seems well-established now that Snorri could have had before him only “Voluspá,” “Vafthrúonismál,” and “Grímnismál.”

Subsequent finds added a few lays of Eddic quality to those preserved in Brynjólf’s codex, which thus remains our chief source for them. This

famous manuscript, now known as *Codex Regius No. 2365* of the Royal Library of Denmark, is a small quarto volume consisting of forty-five sheets closely covered with writing. No distinction is made between prose and poetry, except that the beginning of every lay is marked off by a large colored initial, and every stanza, by a smaller one. The whole is in one firm, legible hand which paleologists agree in assigning to an Icelander of the last half of the thirteenth century. He must have copied it from, it seems, at least two manuscripts for the nature of a number of scribal errors shows that he did not write from memory or from dictation. Paleographic evidence furthermore shows that these postulated manuscripts themselves cannot have been older than the beginning of the thirteenth century; also, that they must have been written by different scribes, for there is a distinct paleographic and orthographic boundary between “Alvíssmál,” the last of the mythological lays in *Regius*, and the heroic lays. We know nothing concerning the provenience of this priceless collection, not even where it was preserved when Bishop Brynjólfur found it. As to the date when the lays were first collected, various considerations make it probable that this occurred not earlier than the middle of the thirteenth century.

Next in importance to the *Regius* comes the manuscript *Fragment 748* of the Arnarnagæan Collection of the Copenhagen University Library, dating from the beginning of the fourteenth century. Among other matters it contains, in a slightly different form and in a divergent order, part of “The Lay of Hárbáth,” “Baldr’s Dreams” (for which it is the sole source), part of “The Lay of Skírnir,” “The Lay of Grímnir,” “The Lay of Hymir,” and part of “The Lay of Volund.” For all the differences between the manuscripts, scholars are unanimous in holding that it derives, ultimately, from the same source as *Regius*. The different ordering of the two collections may be due to the various lays having been handed down on single parchment leaves, which the scribe of *Regius* arranged as he saw fit. He no doubt was the author of the connecting prose links.

The large *Manuscript Codex No. 544* of the Arnarnagæan Collection, called *Hauksbók* from the fact that most of it was written by the Icelandic judge, Haukr Erlendsson, about the beginning of the fourteenth century, is important for Eddic study in that it supplies us with another redaction of “The Prophecy of the Seeress.”

For “The Lay of Ríg” we are entirely dependent on the *Codex Wormianus* of the *Snorra Edda* (re-

ferred to above) written in the second half of the fourteenth century, where it is found on the last page.

The huge *Codex No. 1005* folio of the Royal Library, known as the *Flateyjarbók* because Brynjólfr Sveinsson obtained it from a farmer on the small island of Flatey, is the source for “The Lay of Hyndla.”

“The Lay of Grotti” occurs only in the *Codex Regius* manuscript *No. 2367* of the *Snorra Edda*, dating from the beginning of the fourteenth century, where the poem is cited in illustration of a kenning based on the Grotti myth.

There exists also a considerable number of paper manuscripts of the collection; but aside from the fact that some of them contain the undoubtedly genuine “Lay of Svipdag,” not found in earlier manuscripts, they are of no importance since they all date from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and are essentially derived from the same source as *Regius*, if not from that collection itself. To be sure, they bear eloquent testimony to the continued interest of Icelanders in these poems.

The Eddic lays which are found in these manuscripts, utterly diverse though they be in many respects, still have in common three important characteristics which mark them off from the great body of skaldic poetry: their matter is the mythology, the ethical conceptions, and the heroic lore of the ancient North; they are all composed in a comparatively simple style, and in the simplest measures; and, like the later folk songs and ballads, they are anonymous and objective, never betraying the feelings or attitudes of their authors. This unity in apparent diversity was no doubt felt by the unknown collector who gathered together all the lays and poetical fragments which lived in his memory or were already committed to writing.

A well thought-out plan is evident in the ordering of the whole. In the first place, the mythic and didactic lays are held apart from the heroic, and those of each group disposed in a sensible order.

The opening chord is struck by the majestic “Prophecy of the Seeress,” as the most complete bodying forth of the Old Norse conceptions of the world, its origin and its future. There follow three poems, in the main didactic, dealing chiefly with the wisdom of the supreme god, Óðin (the lays of Hár, of Vafthrúthnir, of Grímnir); then one about the ancient fertility god, Frey (“The Lay of Skírnir”); five in which Thór plays the predominant, or at least a prominent, part (the lays of Hárbarth, of Hymir, of

Loki, of Thrym, of Alvis). The poems following in the present translation (“Baldr’s Dreams,” the lays of Ríg, of Hyndla, of Svipdag, of Grotti) are, it will be remembered, not contained in *Regius*.

The Heroic lays are found arranged in chronological order, as far as feasible, and joined by Prose Links so that the several smaller cycles form one large interconnected cycle. The procedure is especially clear in the case of the Niflung Cycle. Not only has the Collector been at pains to join the frequently parallel lays, but he tries hard to reconcile contradictory statements. Connection with the Helgi Cycle is effected by making Helgi Hundingsbani a son of the Volsung, Sigmund. The tragic figure of Queen Guthrún then links the Niflung Cycle with the Ermanarich lays (“Guthrún’s Lament,” “The Lay of Hamthir”).

There has been a great deal of discussion as to the authenticity and age of the Prose of the Collection, but it is clear now that (excepting the piece about “Sinfjotli’s Death,” which no doubt is a prose rendering of a lay now lost) the Prose Links for the most part add nothing, or very little, of independent value—nothing, indeed, which could not have been inferred from the poems themselves. We shall hardly err in attributing these links to the intelligent, but not very gifted, compiler of the Collection.

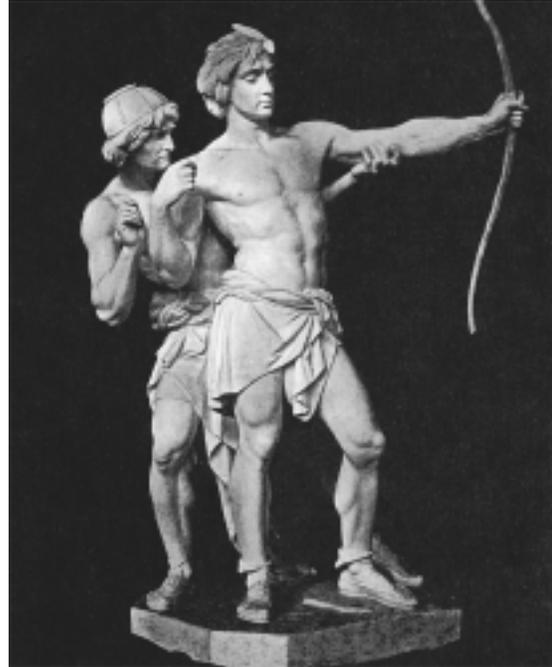
The case is somewhat different, perhaps, with the narrative which binds together the fragments of “The Lay of Helgi Hjorvarthsson” and those of “The Second Lay of Helgi,” and with the Prose Links of the Sigurth Cycle from “The Lay of Regin” to “Brynhild’s Ride to Hel.” Especially the latter group notably resembles in manner the genre of the *Fornaldarsaga*—prose with interspersed stanzas—a form exceedingly common in Old Norse literature and one which, for aught we know, may have been the original form in this instance. Still, even here the suspicion lurks that the Prose is but the apology for stanzas, or whole lays, imperfectly remembered: there is such discrepancy between the clear and noble stanzas and the frequently muddled and inept prose as to preclude, it would seem, the thought of their being by the same author.

Even greater diversity of opinion obtains concerning the age and home of the lays themselves. As was stated above, in sharp contradiction to our knowledge of skaldic poetry, we know nothing about the author of any Eddic poem. Nay, in only a very few, such as “The Lay of Grípir,” or “The Third Lay of Guthrún,” can one discern so much as the literary individuality of the authors. In conso-

nance with medieval views, they were probably felt to be merely continuators, or elaborators, of legendary tradition. Thus, to illustrate by a very clear case: A Gothic lay about the death of Hamthir and Sorli is known to have existed already in the sixth century. So the person who indited or, perhaps, translated, or possibly, added to such a song could not well lay claim to be an “inventor” and hence worthy of being remembered. Skaldic art, on the other hand, may also deal with myth and legendary lore or allude to it; but—note well—skaldic poems do not narrate directly, though some do describe in detail pictorial representations of scenes from mythology or legendary history. Hence, there the author is faithfully recorded if we owe him but a single stanza; just as was the troubadour and the minnesinger, in contrast with the anonymity of the *chansons de geste* and the German folk epics.

Thus it is that we are entirely dependent on internal evidence for the determination of the age and the origin of the Eddic poems, individually and collectively. And here experience has taught that we must sharply differentiate between the subject matter of the poems and the form in which they have been handed down to us. Failure to do so was responsible for some fantastic theories, such as the uncritical notions of the Renaissance, that the poems harked back to the Old Germanic songs in praise of the gods of Tuisco and Mannus, or else to the *barditus*, as Tacitus calls the terrifying war songs of the ancient Teutons, and the speculations of the Age of Romanticism which claimed the Eddic poems as the earliest emanations of the Spirit of the Germanic North, if not of all German tribes, and would date them variously from the fifth to the eighth century.

It was not until the latter third of the nineteenth century, when the necessary advances in linguistic knowledge and philological method had been made, that it was established beyond contradiction that the Eddic poems have West Norse speech forms; that is, that they are composed in the language that was spoken only during and after the Viking Age (*ca.* 800–1050 A.D.), in Norway, Iceland, and the other Norwegian colonies in the Atlantic, and hence, in their present shape, could have originated only there. In the second place, they can under no circumstance be older than about 700 A.D.—most of them are much later—because it has been shown experimentally that the introduction of older (Runic) forms of the Old Norse language would largely destroy the metric structure. This date *a quo* is admirably corroborated by comparison with the



*Loki the trickster, another commonly known Norse figure, is shown here helping Höd aim the arrow that caused the death of Balder.*

language of the oldest skaldic poems, whose age is definitely known.

More general considerations make it plausible that even the oldest of the lays could hardly have originated before the ninth century. Of the Heroic lays precisely those which also appear in other ways to be the oldest breathe the enterprising, warlike spirit of the Viking Age, with its stern fatalism; while the later ones as unmistakably betray the softening which one would expect from the Christian influences increasingly permeating the later times. And the Mythical lays, by and large, bespeak a period when belief in the gods was disintegrating, thanks to contact with the same influences. In particular, “The Seeress’ Prophecy” reads like the troubled vision of one rooted in the ancient traditions who is sorrowfully contemplating the demoralization of his times (which we know a change of faith always entails) and who looks doubtfully to a better future.

There is also the testimony of legendary development. To touch on only one phase of the matter: we do not know when the Volsung and Nibelung legends were first carried to Norway, but spring

allusions in the oldest skaldic verses from the early ninth century would point to the seventh or eighth century, thus allowing several generations for the complete assimilation and characteristic Northern transformation of the material. Some lays, however, show traits of a legendary development which had not taken place in Germany before the ninth century—in other words, they presuppose another, later, stratum of importation.

Contrary to views formerly held, we now understand that the lays about the gods are, on the whole, younger than some of the heroic lays, which in substance (except the Helgi lays) deal with persons and events, real or fictive, of the Germanic tribes from the Black Sea to the Rhine during the Age of Migrations. In general we may say that, although there is little unanimity among scholars as to the dating of individual lays, the composition of the corpus of Eddic poetry can safely be ascribed, not to a single generation, not even to a single century, but to three or four centuries at the very least.

Intimately connected with the question of the date is that of the home of Eddic poetry. There is fair agreement about only two poems. "Atlamál," which is generally allowed to be of Greenlandish origin, and "The Prophecy of Grípir," which no doubt was composed by an Icelander of the twelfth century or later who had before him a collection of the lays dealing with the Sigurth legends. But a strong diversity of opinion exists concerning the place of origin of the bulk of the lays.

For one thing, no evidence can be derived from the language because the Old West Norse of the *Edda* was spoken with scarcely a dialectal variation throughout the far-flung lands of the North Atlantic littorals and archipelagoes. Again, all attempts to seek definite and convincing clues in climatic or topographic references, or in the fauna and flora mentioned in the poems, have proved vain. Did they originate in the motherland, Norway, or in Iceland, or in the British or North Atlantic islands?

Those who claim the bulk of the Eddic poems for Norway have contended that the related Skaldic poetry flourished there especially throughout the tenth century, favored by a period of comparative calm following the organization of the realm by Harald Fairhair; whereas Iceland, from its first settlement down to the beginning of the eleventh century, was in a condition of constant turmoil which could not have favored the rise of a body of literature like that of *The Edda*. Undeniably, Norway furnishes the cultural background for

the *Weltanschauung* of nearly all of the poems, mythologic, gnomic, and heroic. In every respect their milieu is that of a cold, mountainous land by the sea. One, "The Lay of Hyndla," may refer to a Norwegian princely race; another, "The Lay of Rígr," glorifies the institution of monarchy based on an aristocracy; both poems but poorly agree with Icelandic, republican conditions.

The theory of origin in the British Islands settled by Norwegians—the Orkneys, the Shetland Islands, the Hebrides, the Isle of Man, and the littoral of Ireland, Scotland, and Northern England, is based on several considerations. These regions furnish precisely the stage where the rude Vikings first came in contact with the cultural conditions of a more advanced kind already deeply infused with Roman and Christian elements. Indeed some Celtic influences are seen in the apparel, the architecture, and the wood carving of ancient Scandinavia. In literature the saga, and possibly also skaldic verse, were thought to owe their inception to Irish impulses. Also a small number of both mythical and heroic motifs occurring in the *Edda* may have congeners in the British Islands. Now, most of these claims are discounted by modern scholarship.

Those who argue Icelandic origin admit that Anglo-Celtic influences are evident, but insist that this can be amply accounted for by the fact that a very large proportion of Icelandic settlers had come from Norway by way of the North British Islands and littoral where they had sojourned for shorter or longer periods, frequently even wintering, and whence they had brought with them a goodly number of Celtic slaves and freedmen. Also, on their return journeys to the motherland they frequently touched at North British, and especially at Irish, trading towns, interchanging goods and ideas. As to the milieu being that of a cold, mountainous land, this holds of course also for Iceland. There, the general state of unrest attending the first times was by no means unfavorable to the intense cultivation of the skaldic art—witness such poets as Egil Skallagrímsson, Hallfróeth Óttarsson, Sighvat Thórtharson, not to mention scores of others—and hence probably was no more unfavorable to conditions for the inditing of Eddic lays. The first families of Iceland were notably proud of their origin from the princely races of the motherland—whence the aristocratic note of some lays. Indeed the whole people clung to their cultural traditions all the more tenaciously for being separated from their original homes. In general, the defenders of Icelandic origin would put the burden of proof on those who contend

that the Eddic lays did not take at least their final, distinctive shape in the land where arose, and was perpetuated, virtually all of Old Norse literature. Certainly, the later poems definitely point to Iceland. On the other hand this does not preclude a number of stanzas, particularly the gnomic ones representing the stored wisdom of the race, from having originated in Norway.

Of late the Norwegian paleographer Seip has endeavored to demonstrate, on the basis of a number of Norwegianisms in *Codex Regius*, that all the Eddic lays were originally composed in Norway. Other scholars would ascribe these to a pervading influence from the motherland, since several manuscripts of unquestionable Icelandic origin also show Norwegianisms.

All this raises the question as to the ultimate source, or sources, of the matter of the Eddic poems. Were they all or partly indigenous to Scandinavia?

With regard to the mythological poems we shall probably never know, though here and there we seem to glimpse a connection with classical or oriental legends. But in all cases the matter has undergone such a sea change that we never get beyond the verdict "perhaps."

With the Helgi poems we are on somewhat firmer ground. The Vendel Period of Scandinavian hegemony (550–800) in the north of Europe, attested by innumerable archeological finds in the western Baltic lands, may well have been accompanied by a flourishing poetic literature of which these lays (and *Bēowulf*) may be remnants.

The matter of the Niflung cycle undoubtedly is of German (Burgundian) provenience; and much has been made by German scholars of faint South and West Germanic traces in the style and language of the lays dealing with the Gjókungs, Sigurth, and Atli. But whether these stories were transmitted to the North in poetic form or only there received their characteristic aspects, that is another question. The fact that only on Scandinavian soil did a rich literature actually arise as early as the ninth century, although its origins date even further back, would seem to speak for the latter assumption. But in the case of the retrospective and elegiac monologue poems it has been convincingly demonstrated that they share many motifs, phrases, even vocables, with what must have been the forerunners of the Danish ballads.

One of the distinguishing features of Eddic, as against skaldic, poetry is its comparative simplicity

of style and diction. This is true notwithstanding the fact that we have to deal with poems different in subject matter and structure and composed by different poets working centuries apart. Essentially, the style is akin to that of the alliterative poetry of the other Old Germanic tribes, especially in the use of kennings and the retarding devices of variation and parenthetical phrases. It is to the employment, rather more extensive than usual, of these stylistic features that Old Norse poetic style owes its peculiar physiognomy which, in skaldic art, becomes most pronounced.

The figure of speech called a "kenning" is a kind of condensed metaphorical expression. It most often contains a real, or implied, comparison, or else defines a concept with reference to something else. Thus, a ship (which may be thought of as galloping over the waves) is called a "sailsteed"; a warrior, a "helm-tree" because, helm-clad, he stands proudly erect like a tree, braving the "shower-of-arrows" (as the battle is designated for obvious reasons). Or instead of naming a person or object directly, there is a reference to somebody, or something, else. Thór, for example, is called, simply, "Sif's husband," or "Hrungnir's bane," or in allusion to his typical activity, "Breaker-of-thurs-heads." Similarly, blood is termed "dew-of-wounds" or "dew-of-sorrow"; gold, "the burthen-of-Grani" (Sigurth's steed which bears away the Niflung hoard); a prince, most often "breaker-of-rings," "reddener-of-swords," or similar names, referring to the two qualities most highly admired in rulers—generosity and bravery.

Figures like these are common to the poetic speech of all races and all times. The important difference is that whereas elsewhere they are coined *ad hoc*, as the situation demands, and struck in the heat of poetic fervor, in Old Germanic, and particularly Old Norse, poetry they have become stereotyped; that is, entirely independent of the situation in hand, and hence are apt, at first, to appear to us farfetched and frigid, until by longer acquaintance we arrive at the deeper insight that they are part and parcel of a style, like the ever-recurring "dragon motif" of Scandinavian carvings.

In skaldic poetry the systematic and unlimited use of kennings marks that type of composition off from anything known elsewhere in world literature. Only two Eddic lays, "The Lay of Hymir" and "The First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani," show a frequency of kennings approaching skaldic usage from afar. In "The Lay of Alvis" the express didactic purpose is to cultivate copiousness of diction by

enumerating the “unknown names” (*heiti*) and kennings by which common objects may be designated.

Although somewhat less prominent, variation or parallelism is a stylistic device characteristic of all Old Germanic poetry—as it is, indeed, of the poetry of many nations. Only the more important features will be enumerated here, especially such as come out clearly in a somewhat faithful translation. There is variation of words, of conceptions, of verses; and there is refrain.

The variation of words (synonymic variation), more particularly found in gnomic poetry, is on the whole not frequent in *The Edda*. The following stanza will furnish an example:

With his friend a man should be friends ever,  
and pay back gift for gift;  
laughter for laughter he learn to give,  
and eke lesing for lies.

More frequent, and also more characteristic, is the repetition of related, or contrasting, conceptions. These are usually joined by alliteration, and occasionally by rime, so as to form together a half-line. Thus: “bark nor bast,” “he gives and grants,” “shalt drivel and dote,” “in wine and in wort,” “whet me or let me.”

Peculiar to Eddic poetry is the repetition, with or without variations, of entire half-lines. One example for many will suffice:

I issue bore as heirs twain sons,  
as heirs twain sons to the atheling.

With variation:

I saw but naught said, I saw and thought.

Repetition (with variation) of a full-line occurs in the so-called *galdralag* or “magic measure” of the *ljthahátt* stanza:

No other drink shalt ever get,  
wench, at thy will,  
wench, at my will.

Refrain—for example, the “know ye further, or how” of “The Seeress’ Prophecy”—and incremental repetition—especially in the gnomic poetry—are occasionally used with telling effect.

Only less characteristic of skaldic art than the unlimited use of kennings is the employment of parenthetical phrases—usually containing an accompanying circumstance. In *The Edda* the device occurs infrequently, and most often in “The First Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer,” which also approaches skaldic art in the use of kennings; for example (Stanza 17):

But high on horseback Hogni’s daughter—  
was the shield-din lulled—to the lord spoke thus.

In contrast with Old West Germanic poetry, which is stichic, and quite generally uses run-on lines, Old Norse poetry is strophic, the stanzas as a rule being of four lines each. Each stanza is most commonly divided into two *vísuhelmings* or “half stanzas,” by a syntactic cæsura.

This is the rule; but imperfect stanzas occur too frequently to be explained away in all cases by defective tradition. It is certainly worth pondering, however, that unexceptional regularity is found, on the one hand, in poems whose question-answer form offered a mnemotechnic help to preservation, and on the other, in those that belong to the youngest strata; whereas lays which, for a number of reasons, seem among the oldest—for example, “The Lay of Volund” and “The Lay of Hamthir”—are quite irregular in this respect. The inference seems plausible that stanzaic structure was a later and specifically Scandinavian development, the bulk of Old Norse monuments being younger, both chronologically and developmentally, than most West Germanic monuments.

Like the mass of Old Germanic poetic monuments, the Eddic lays are composed in alliterative verse; in verse, that is, whose essential principles are stress and concomitant alliteration.

The rhythmic unit of alliterative verse is the so-called “half-line,” represented in metrics by convention as dipodic. These two feet, as will be seen, may be of very different lengths. In the normal half-line there are four or five syllables (very rarely three) two of which are stressed, the position of stress depending on the natural sentence accent. The rhythmical stress (and concomitant alliteration) generally requires a long syllable and is conventionally represented thus:  $\underline{\quad}$ . However, it may also be borne by two short syllables (“resolved stress”). . . “a *salar steina*,” where *salar* constitutes two short syllables; this may be paralleled by “that *etin*’s beerhall,” with *etin* reckoned as two shorts; or else by one short syllable immediately following a stressed long syllable. . . (see the discussion of rhythmic patterns below). In the unstressed syllable, quantity is indifferent, marked thus: x.

The juxtaposition of two stresses without intervening unstressed syllable, so rarely used in modern poetry, is not only permitted but is a distinctive feature in Old Germanic poetry. It gives rise to the rhythmic types C and D (see below), where a strong

primary, or secondary, stress may fall on important suffixal or compositional syllables, and on stem syllables of the second member of compounds: for example, “es hann vaknathi” (C), “hatimbruthu” (D). The following may serve as English examples: “The sun knew not,” “a hall standeth,” “till trustingly.”

Always, two half-lines, each an independent rhythmic unit, are joined together by alliteration to form the “long-line.” Alliteration, or initial rime, consists in an initial consonant alliterating, or riming, with the same consonant (except that *sk*, *sp*, and *st* alliterate only with themselves), and a vowel alliterating with any other vowel; but—note well—alliteration occurs only at the beginning of *stressed syllables*. Because the verse is addressed to hearers, not to readers, “eye-rimes” are not permitted. Also, alliteration may be borne only by words of syntactic importance.

In Old Norse verse, alliterating initial sounds are called *stafir*, “staves,” the one of the second half-line, *hofuthstafr*, “main-stave,” governing the whole line. Somewhat greater latitude is allowed in Eddic poetry than in Old English poetry in the matter of the “main-stave” falling only on the first stress of the second half-line. In the first half-line, either stress, or both—they are called *stuthlar*, “props”—may receive the alliteration.

Beyond stating that alliteration is the bearing principle in their verse the ancients made no statement about how this verse is to be read. Simple observation shows that the alliteration is borne only by stressed syllables concomitant with the syntactic importance of the word, and also that the stress is borne predominantly by nominal elements—nouns, adjectives, and pronouns. As stated earlier, there is agreement among scholars that the half-line is dipodic. But there is divergence of opinion about the disposition and relative stress of the various elements of the half-line, that is, about its rhythm.

In view of the utter difference between Old Germanic verse and any modern or classic scheme of versification, an adequate comprehension of the principles of Old Germanic verse technique is essential for the correct reading and understanding—nay, for entering at all into the spirit—of Old Germanic poetry. It is hoped that the reader will acquaint himself with the facts set forth above before attempting to recite Eddic lays—and indeed he should recite them, for they are meant for the ear, not the eye.

In reciting the Eddic lays it should ever be kept in mind that the strongly expiratory nature of Germanic verse demands very strongly stressed syllables, and correspondingly weak or slurred unstressed syllables. Juxtaposed stresses must by no means be avoided; in fact, type C is of extremely common occurrence. We must ever be on the alert, guided by the alliteration, to ascertain which words or syllables bear the main stress and are, hence, syntactically predominant. Thus we must be careful to read not “who made Mithgarth,” but “who made Mithgarth.”

The translator has endeavored to follow faithfully the rules of Eddic metrics above explained—at least in spirit. Naturally, in an analytic tongue like English many more particles, pronouns, and prepositions must be used than in the highly inflected Old Norse. A liberal use of anacrusis (upbeats), to dispose of them, cannot well be avoided, and this use swells the number of syllables countenanced by the original. This should not, however, interfere with reading half-lines of the same metre in about the same time. Thus, “much that is hoarded and hidden” should not occupy more time than the line “save one only.”

I have followed Sophus Bugge’s text in the main, but by no means always, because, for the purpose in hand, a somewhat constructive text is called for—one not fatuously sceptical of the results won by a century of devoted study. I can see no harm in adopting the brilliant emendations of great scholars, some of them guided by the poet’s insight in solving desperate textual problems, always providing the emendations be shown as such. I have considered it unavoidable to transpose stanzas and lines for the sake of intelligible connection. In fact, this course must be chosen to accomplish an æsthetically satisfying translation of poems which, at best, are strange and difficult for the modern reader, both as to matter and manner. Naturally, not all, or even most, changes could be so indicated. Nor is that called for in a work intended, not as a critical text, but as an interpretation for the student of literature, of folklore and folkways. Still I have thought it wise to give warning whenever the terms of the translation might give rise to misconceptions.

I hope I shall not be criticized for confining myself to the body of poems generally considered as comprising *The Poetic Edda*. I am, of course, aware of the existence of other lays fully deserving to be admitted to the corpus; but neither in this respect nor

in the ordering of the material was it my intention to rival Genzmer-Heusler's *rifacimento*.

As to the principles which I have endeavored to follow, I may be permitted to quote from my program, "Concerning a Proposed Translation of *The Edda*":

"... while scouting any rigorously puristic ideas, I yet hold emphatically that, to give a fair equivalent, Germanic material must be drawn upon to the utmost extent, and later elements used most sparingly and only whenever indispensable or unavoidable, and even then only after anxiously considering whether consonant with the effect of the whole. The stylistic feeling of the translator must here be the court of last instance; ... At the same time I do not mean to be squeamish and avoid a given word just because it is not found in Anglo-Saxon before the battle of Hastings, or because I have preconceived notions about the relative merit of Teutonic and French-Latin elements. Any one who has given the matter thought knows that no amount of linguistic contortions will furnish Germanic equivalents in English for such oft-recurring words as: battle, hero, glory, revenge, defeat, victory, peace, honor, and the like. Still, wherever possible, Germanic words ought to be chosen ... because of the tang and flavor still residing in the homelier indigenous speech material...

"Another difficulty: the old Germanic poetry, however scant in content, and in however narrow a circle it moves, is phenomenally rich in vocabulary, and shines with a dazzling array of synonyms for one and the same conception. Scherer has shown how this state of affairs was brought about by the very principle of alliteration. ... *The Edda* shows almost all stages in this development short of the final consummation, from the austere art of the 'Volundarkvitha' to the ornate art of the 'Hymiskvitha.' It stands to reason that to approach this wealth of synonymic expressions even from afar, and to avoid the overhanging danger of monotony, all the resources of the English vocabulary ought to be at one's disposal. I have, therefore, unhesitatingly had recourse, whenever necessary, to terms fairly common in English balladry; without, I hope, overloading the page with archaisms.

"The proper rendition of Old Norse proper names presents a knotty problem to the would-be translator. Shall he translate them all, to the best of his knowledge—and that is a difficult task—or some only, and if so which? Or shall he leave all untranslated—much the easiest course. Or shall he

try to render only those parts of proper nouns which are of more general significance? E.g., shall he call the dwarf, Alvís or Allwise; Thór, Sithgrani's son or Longbeard's son; the seeress, Hyndla or Houndling; the localities Gnípalund and Hátun, Cliffholt and Hightown? Shall we say Alfheim, Elfham, or Alfhome? Are we to render Skjoldungar, Ylfingar by Shieldings and Wolfings? I do not hesitate to say that on the translator's tact and skill in meeting this problem—for dodge it he cannot—will depend in large measure the artistic merit of his work and its modicum of palatableness to the modern reader."

For this reason, absolute consistency in this respect was not striven for or even thought desirable.

**Source:** Lee M. Hollander, "General Introduction," in *The Poetic Edda*, University of Texas Press, 1962, pp. iv–xxix.

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A thirteenth century prose version of the Volsungs drawing upon the Edda lays. It will help the reader place the dramatic and allusive lays in a coherent narrative.

Dronke, Ursula, *The Poetic Edda: Volume I Heroic Poems*, Clarendon Press, 1969.

This book is the most modern edition. The analysis of the poetry is designed for the advanced student but is the finest available.

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A magnificently illustrated book with a good but non-technical discussion of the Vikings at home and abroad.

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A very old, but very engaging book. It has introduced generations to the excitement and beauty of Norse literature.

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Sturluson, Snorri, *The Prose Edda: Tales from Norse Mythology*, translated by Jean I. Young, University of California Press.

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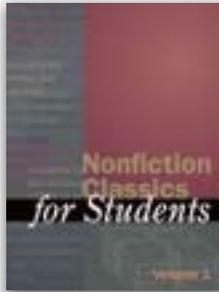
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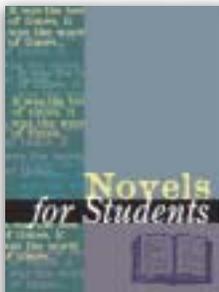
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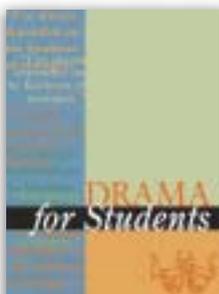
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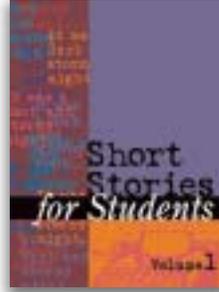
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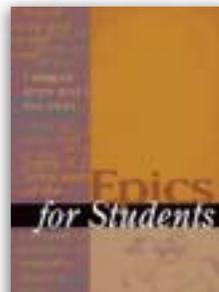
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