

An Introduction to Old Norse Literature – the *Poetic Edda*

An example of *fornyrðislag*: *Völuspá*

Ár var alda
þar er Ymir byggði:
vara sandr né sær
né svalar unnir.
Iðrð fannz æva
né upphiminn:
gap var ginnunga,
en gras hvergi.

It was early in the ages
when Ymir made his dwelling:
there was not sand nor sea
nor chill waves.
Earth was not to be found
nor above it heaven:
a gulf was there of gaping voids
and grass nowhere.

An example of *ljóðabáttr*: *Lokasenna*

Þegi þú, Frigg,
þú ert Fiörgyns mæð
ok hefir æ vergiðr verit
er þá Véa ok Vilia
léztu þér – Viðris kvæn –
báða í baðm um tekit.

Hold your tongue, Frigg,
you are Fiörgynn's daughter,
and have always been eager for men,
for Véi and Vili
you – Viðrir's wife – had
both embraced in your bosom.

Words of advice from *Hávamál*:

Deyr fê, deya frœndr,
deyr sjálfir it sama;
enn orðztírr deyr aldregi,
hveim er sér góðan getr.

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

Meyiar orðom skyli manngi trúa,
né því er kveðr kona;
þvíat á hverfanda hvéli vóro þeim
hiortu skopoð, were made,
brigð í brióst um lagið. deceit lodged in their breasts.

The words of a girl no one should trust,
nor what a woman says;
for on a whirling wheel their hearts
were made,
deceit lodged in their breasts.

The Franks Casket:

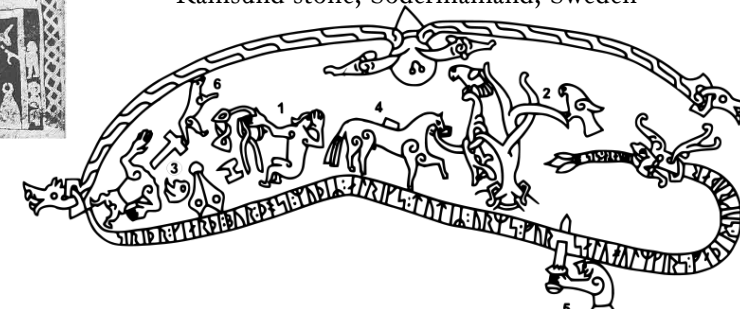


Images of Sigurðr on runestones:



Hunninge stone,
Gotland, Sweden

Ramsund stone, Södermanland, Sweden



Carol Clover on gender:

What finally excites fear and loathing in the Norse mind is not femaleness per se, but the condition of powerlessness, the lack or loss of volition, with which femaleness is typically, but neither inevitably nor exclusively associated. By the same token, what prompts admiration is not maleness per se, but sovereignty of the sort enjoyed mostly and typically and ideally, but not solely, by men.

Guðrún fights Atli's men in *Atlamál*:

Dóttir lét Giuka
drengi tvá hniga:
bróður hió hon Atla--
bera varð þann siðan,
skapði hon svá skæro,
skeldi fót undan.
Annan réð hon höggva,
svá at sá upp reisat--
í helio hon þann hafði,
þeygi henni hendr skulfo.

The daughter of Giúki made
two fighters fall:
she struck the brother of Atli--
he had to be carried away then:
she shaped the battle so,
slashed his leg away.
The second man she hewed
so that he did not rise again--
she placed him in death,
yet her hands did not tremble
(st. 48.1-8)

Atli in *Atlamál*:

Eggia ek yðr, iarler...
Kostið svá keppa,
at klökkvi Guðrún.

I urge you my nobles...
Strive your utmost
to get Guðrún sobbing.
(st. 55.1-6).

Guðrún in *Atlamál*:

Þriú vórom systkin,
þóttum óvægin...
Skæva vér létom,
skipi hvert vart stýrði.

We were three, sister and brothers,
we seemed indomitable...
We made our ships speed,
each commanded his own. (st. 96.1-6)

The *Poetic Edda* primary texts

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Further reading

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Clark, David. 'Undermining and En-gendering Vengeance in the *Poetic Edda*.' *Scandinavian Studies* 77 (2005), 173-200.
Clover, C. 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women and Power in Early Northern Europe.' *Representations* 44 (1993), 1-28.
Gilbert, A. J. 'The Ambiguity of Fate and Narrative Form in Some Germanic Poetry'. *Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992), 1-16.
Gunnell, Terry. *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge, 1995).
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Larrington, Carolyne. *A Store of Common Sense: Gnomes Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry* (Oxford, 1993).
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