

Ring Composition and Circular Narrative Structure in Eddic Poems¹

It has been known, since H. W. Tonsfeldt (1977) and John D. Niles (1979),² that Old English poets made use of ring composition in the sense that the expressive elements in the first half of a verse echo those in the second half, and are thus arranged to form the chiasmic, ring pattern [A-B-C---X---C-B-A], surrounding a kernel theme [X].³ However, no serious attempt seems yet to have been made to uncover the presence of this principle of composition in Eddic poems. My preliminary assessment reveals that some of the Eddic poets also employed ring composition, setting up a close interconnection between different strophes.

In *Völundarkviða*, for instance, the poetic narrative of Völund's killing of the two princes is positioned in the central strophes 21-23 as a key theme, with a chiasmus of the physical motifs of their teeth, eyes, and feet in its surrounding strophes 17 and 24-25. Evidently the narrative technique consists in arranging other emblematic elements in a circular pattern in the poem as a whole. In *Grimmismál*, on the other hand, only one section of the poem (str. 5-16) seems to have been composed in this way. Besides, a survey of the apparently complicated narrative of *Völuspá* reveals a series of correspondences between specific elements, which are combined to produce a partly fractured ring pattern around the kernel of the portentous prophecy of Baldr's death and Loki's punishment (str. 31-34). Thus, in this poem, an originally tighter ring pattern or circular narrative structure appears to have partly broken down, probably through many years of oral tradition.

A survey of Eddic poetry reveals that the poets of *Völuspá*, *Hávamál*, *Grimmismál*, *Skírnismál*, and *Völundarkviða* wholly or partly made use of ring composition. Here, however, due to limitations of space, I will consider only *Völundarkviða*, which, of these narrative poems, offer the best illustration of circular structure or the compositional techniques in question.

As P. B. Taylor indicated four decades ago, we readily find recurrences of phrases and sentences in *Völundarkviða* as in the following examples:⁴

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| (4) <u>Kom þar af veiði:</u>
veðrevgr skyti,
Slagfiðr ok Egill,
sali fundu auða.... | (8) <u>Kom þar af veiði</u>
veðrevgr skyti,
Völundr, liðandi
um langan veg. |
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On the basis of the Oral-Formulaic theory, advocated by critics in 1950s to explain the compositional processes of Old English poetry, Taylor supposed that such recurrent phrases or sentences in *Völundarkviða* reflected its oral-formulaic character, and that the whole narrative structure of the poem was basically determined by the "archetype of ritual death and regeneration", such as the motifs of the swan-maidens' outward journey and return, or Völundr's imprisonment and the restoration of his power. Taylor maintains that the poet

¹ Some part of this paper is based on the Japanese draft of my oral presentation entitled 'Edda-Shi ni miru Ring Composition to Katari no Enkan-Kozoh', delivered in the Symposium at 18th Congress of the Japan Society for Medieval English Studies, which was held at Graduate School of Letters, Hiroshima University, on Dec. 7, 2002.

² H. Ward Tonsfeldt, "Ring Structure in *Beowulf*", *Neophilologus* 61 (1977): 443-52. John D. Niles, "Ring Structure and the Structure of *Beowulf*", *PMLA* 94 (1979): 924-35.

³ John D. Niles, *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition* (Harvard UP, 1983) 152-53.

⁴ Paul B. Taylor, "The Structure of *Völundarkviða*", *Neophilologus* 47, no. 3 (1963): 228-36; 229.

employs the “recurrence of the formula” mainly for “dramatic emphasis alone”, or sometimes with the aim of allowing the audience to “sympathize with Niðuð’s horror”⁵.

To my mind, however, the recurrence and variation of the theme and motif are basically a consequence of the ring composition technique employed by the poet. In other words, the specific words, phrases, and sentences, which echo each other as variants of the same motifs, are judiciously arranged in different strophes in the first and the latter half of the poem, constituting a ring around the kernel theme X: [A-B-C—X---C-B-A] . These corresponding elements serve to arouse in the reader a sense of interconnections which lend the structural coherence of the poem.

Firstly, let us examine the outer frame of this ring composition. The relevant lines of each strophe are:

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| (1) | <p>Meyjar <u>flugu</u> sunnan
Myrkvið í gögnum,
...þær á <u>sævarströnd</u>
<u>setusk at hvílask...</u></p> | (38) | <p>Hljæjandi Völundr
<u>hófsk at lofji,</u>
<u>en ókáttr Niðuðr</u>
<u>sat þá eftir.</u>⁶</p> |
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Obviously, the abrupt appearance of the three swan-maidens forms a frame in conjunction with the flight of Völund who invents an aviation device. While the former flight necessarily effects a union between Völund and Alvit, his bride-to-be, the latter leads to Völund’s separation from Bððvild, his love, and her family. Thus the sitting posture of the maidens resting after their long journey can be contrasted with that of Niðuð sunk in profound grief and despair. In response to this contrastive elements in the frame, Völund fashions his flying implement, probably in imitation of the *álftar-hamr* “swan-garment”.⁷ The *sævar-strönd* “the shore of the lake” or the place where the swan maidens first alighted can be associated with the isle *Sævar-staðr* where Völund is to be imprisoned by Niðuð. Thus, the flight of Völund who eventually wins freedom from the threat of human bondage as well as from imprisonment, stands in a markedly ironical contrast to that of Alvit and the other swan maidens, who are all to embark upon some eight years of matrimonial bondage.

The motif of Völund’s love, in an association with that of his union with Alvit and separation from Bððvild, constitutes another frame within the poem:

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| (2) | <p>en in þriðja
þeira systir
<u>varði hvítan</u>
<u>hals Völundar.</u></p> | (41) | <p>“... sæva skyldi
<u>ek vætr hánnum</u>
<u>vinna kunnak</u>
ek vætr hánnum
vinna máttak.”</p> |
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In marked contrast to the description of Alvit’s embrace of Völund (str. 2), her husband-to-be, strophe 41 presents the words of Bððvild who is compelled by Niðuð, her father, to confess that she has been violated by Völund: “I did not know how to strive against him”, and “I was not able to strive against him” (str. 41).⁸ Alvit’s fervent embrace anticipates a nuptial union

⁵ Taylor, 234.

⁶ The textual citations, except strophe 17, are from the following edition: Guðni Jónsson, ed. *Eddukvæði*, I (Íslendingasagnauktálfan, 1954) 185-98.

⁷ With regards to the swan maidens in relation to the smith culture, see Anne Burson. “Swan Maidens and Smiths: Structural Study of Völundarkviða”, *Scandinavian Studies* 55 (1983): 1-19. Also, Mitsunobu Ishikawa, “Yamato-takeru to Hakucho to Völund no Uta”. *Saji* 10 (1986): 41-64.

⁸ Carolyne Larrington, tr. *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford UP, 1996) 102-08. The translation shown below is mostly quoted from hers, while in some cases my own, especially with the aim of providing a literal translation in relation with the phrase in other strophes.

with Völund, while Bǫðvild is involuntarily involved with him, yielding to his violence. In this respect, the “white-shining” (*hvítir*) neck of Völund embraced by Alvit seems to echo the phrase “maiden with white eyelashes” referred to Bǫðvild (str. 39)

In the ninth year of their married life, some “necessity” (*nauðr*) impelled the swan maidens (*meyjar*), who had “all languished in an irresistible longing for home”, to fly away beyond the woods and to abandon their husbands (str. 3). By contrast, in strophe 38, cited above, the smith Völund “flies through the air” to escape some period of servitude, leaving Niðuð “in ill luck” behind. In other words, Völund, who is to abandon Bǫðvild in the end, mimics the flight of Alvit, one of the valkyries.

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| (5) | En <u>einm</u> Völundr
sat í Ulfðönum. | (41) | “... <u>Sátum vit</u> Völundr
<u>saman í holmi</u>
eina ógurstund, ...” |
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Strophe 5 narrates how Völund stayed alone at home, occupying himself as a smith and waiting for his wife’s return, while his brothers set out in search of their wives. His factory house in Wolf-dale appears to correspond functionally to the workshop on the isle Sævarstaðr. The latter is, however, transmuted into the place of love affair, while the former is a secluded workplace. Thus the verb *sitja* “to sit” is ambivalent, implying “to work diligently” in the first strophe and “to make love” in the second.

One ring, which Niðuð’s retainers removed from the cord of seven hundred rings (str. 9), is eventually presented to Bǫðvild by her father. When Völund notices the missing ring, he mistakenly imagines that his wife Alvit might have returned and worn it (str. 11). In other words, Bǫðvild wears the ring instead of Alvit whom Völund hoped would wear it. In strophe 26, Bǫðvild visit the smith on the pretense of having him repair the ring which she herself had broken on purpose. This broken ring (*baugr*) must have been the same as the golden ring (*gull-hringr*) or the “red-ring” (*baugr rauðr*: str. 19) presented to her by Niðuð. Thus *baugr* or *hringr* serves as a key-word in the circular narrative structure of the poem.

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| (8) | Kom þar af veiði
<u>veðreygr skyti</u> ,
Völundr, líðandi
um langan veg. | (37) | “... er-at svá maðr hár,
at þik af hesti taki,
né svá öflugr,
at þik neðan skjóti,
þar er þú skollir
við ský uppi.” |
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In accordance with the account given in the prose prologue, the poet portrays Völund and his brothers as hunters in the first part of the poem. In two strophes, for instance, Völund is designated as *veðreygr skyti* which means “a shooter with eyes accustomed to stormy weather”³ or “an archer who is sharp in predicting weather” (Cleasby & Vigfusson). When Völund and his brothers once returned home from hunting, they noticed that their wives had gone away somewhere (str. 4). The brothers except for Völund set out on a journey to search for their wives. On another occasion, when the arrow-shooter Völund returned home, one of the seven-hundred rings was missing (str. 10). Indisputably, in this narrative, Alvit the wife who has left is closely associated with the missing ring.

It would be indispensable for a good archer to possess an acute sensibility to the direction and strength of winds (*veðr*) when taking aim at his quarry. In olden times, the smith might have been regarded as an individual endowed with the talent of perceiving and controlling winds, as he worked beside the blast furnace or generated winds with the bellows. Quite naturally, as a legendarily dexterous smith, Völund might also have earned a reputation

³ Hugo Gering, *Glossar zu den Liedern der Edda*. Ferdinand Schöningh. 1907, 198.

for unparalleled skill as an archer (*skýti*). In this respect, Niðuð's utterance seems ironical: "there is no man so dexterous that he could shoot you down from below" (str. 37), since Völund, who now "hovers in the sky", is such a distinguished archer.

Besides, Völund's way of "traveling" over the long road, expressed by the verb *líða* (str. 8), seems to find an echo in the *skolla*, "hovering" in the sky, of strophe 37. The directions of his "traveling" and "hovering" are exactly opposite, because the former verb describes Völund's return to his own house, and the latter his freedom from forced labor in imprisonment.

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| (10) | Sat á berfjalli,
bauga talði
<u>alfa ljóði</u> ,
eins saknaði; | (32) | "...Seg þú mér þat, Völundr,
<u>visi alfa</u>
af heilum hvat varð
hínum mínum." |
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The appellation *alfa ljóði orvisi alfa* "lord of elves" for Völund, sounds ironical in contrast to the title *Niara dróttinn* "king of the Niarar" for Niðuð. Thus, Völund as "lord of elves" was deprived of one of the seven hundred rings (str. 10) and also of his sword (str. 18), while Niðuð as "king of the Niarar" was to learn that his dear sons had been beheaded by Völund. In brief, Völund carries out the decapitation of the two young princes in recompense for his loss of the "ring" and the "sword"¹⁰.

Moreover, in the light of the context, the account of Völund's sleep corresponds to that of Niðuð's sleep.

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| (11) | Sat hann <u>svá lengi</u> ,
at hann <u>sofnaði</u> ,
ok hann <u>yaknaði</u>
<u>viljalauss</u> ; | (31) | "Vaki ek <u>ávalt</u>
<u>viljalauss</u> ,
<u>sofna ek minnst</u>
síz mína sonu dauðar..." |
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Völund "sat so long that he fell asleep" and awoke "without joy" (tr. Dronke),¹¹ to find himself bound and chained. It was Niðuð who had him taken prisoner. The king gave his daughter Bëðvild the gold ring (*gull-hringr*) removed from the linden cord, and wore the sword which originally belonged to Völund. Moreover, the king made his men cut the sinews in Völund's knees and had him removed to the isle, following the queen's advice. Thus Völund was forced there to forge all manner of treasure for the king.

As shown above, the ring fashioned by Völund was regarded in legend as equivalent to Niðuð's sons. When he became aware of the loss of the ring, Völund suspected mistakenly that Alvit might have come back again (str. 10). His misapprehension causes him to "sit long" and await her in vain, as told in the following strophe 11. After a brief sleep, Völund awakes "without joy" to find himself in fetters. Similarly, in a sense, Niðuð is "awake without joy" (str. 31), but "always" (*ávalt*) so. Niðuð himself confesses here before his queen that he has suffered terribly from insomnia on account of his bereavement. Thus Völund's sitting "so long" (*svá lengi*) and taking a nap in expectation of the return of his wife presents a striking contrast to the situation of Niðuð who, in despair, could not sleep "even for a moment" (*minnst*), brooding over his sons who would never return.

¹⁰ Christopher Fee, "Beag & Beaghröden: Women, Treasure and the Language of Social Structure in *Beowulf*", *NM* 97, no. 3 (1996): 285-94. It is true that treasure objects and women are analogous in *Beowulf*, but I have offered counter-examples against Fee's assertion that the terms *beaghröden* "ring-adorned" and *goldhröden* "gold-adorned" are used 'exclusively to describe women'. See Mizuno "The Magical Necklace and the Fatal Corset in *Beowulf*," *English Studies* 80, no. 5 (1999): 377-97; esp. 393-94.

¹¹ Ursula Dronke, ed. & tr. *The Poetic Edda, vol. II. Mythological Poems* (Clarendon, 1997) 246.

The deprivation of joy, expressed by *viljalauss*, seems to suggest that, since being thrown into captivity, whatever Völund may forge will belong hereafter to Niðuð. The same word, occurring in strophe 31, represents Niðuð's grief, lamentation and everlasting despair.

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| (16) | <u>hon inn of gekkr</u>
<u>endlangan sal,</u>
<u>stóð á golfi,</u>
stillti röddu: | (30) | Úti <u>stendr</u> kunnig
kván Niðuðar,
ok <u>hon inn of gekk</u>
<u>endlangan sal,</u>
– en hann á salgarð
settisk at hvílask –: |
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It is preferable to interpret the compound *sal-garð* (str. 30) as “hall-wall”, following the translation of H. Gering and Carolyne Larrington, rather than as “hall-garden”.¹² Both of the above strophes describe how the anonymous queen strolls through the hall, but conspicuously the order in which she is described first as “walking inside” and then “standing” somewhere is reversed in the latter passage. The poet discreetly arranges the relevant words and phrases to form a ring structure. I am not inclined, in this respect, to follow the supposition that the first two lines of strophe 30 might be inserted at the top of strophe 16.¹³

Moreover, in both strophes, the queen advances towards her lord Niðuð inside the hall and speaks to him. Thus, she reveals her feelings to Niðuð, by saying “that man (Völund), who comes out of the forest, does not appear so gentle (*hýrr*)”. Her words show the acuity of her first impression of Völund whose vicious character will be revealed as he begins relentlessly to avenge himself. The queen proceeds to entice her lord into cutting sinews in Völund's knees and expelling him to an isle named *Sævarstaðr* “the Place off the Seacoast”. This audacious demand leads to the tragedy which befalls Niðuð and his family. By contrast, in strophe 30, the words uttered by the queen are merely an everyday greeting, “Are you awake, Niðuð?” Even though her two sons have been killed and her daughter Böðvild violated by Völund, it seems as if she knows nothing of the dire tragedy which has driven Niðuð to his insomnia (str. 31).

In proceeding to the internal part of the ring structure, we observe these strophes, which share the motif of sleep, echoing each other.

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| (20) | <u>Sat hann, né hgan svaf, ávalt</u>
ok hann sló hamri;
<u>vél</u> gerði hann heldr
hvatt Niðuði. | (28) | Bar hann hana bjóri,
því at hann betr kunní,
svá at <u>hon i sessi</u>
<u>of sofnaði.</u>
“Nú hef ek heft
<u>harma minna</u>
allra nema einna
<u>íviðgjarra.”</u> |
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In the preceding strophes 18-19, Völund nurses a grudge against Niðuð, who deprived him of his sword, and also against Boðvild who wears the “red rings” of “his bride” Alvit. It might be mainly because of his implacable hatred that Völund cannot sleep. But on the other hand, he hammers out every *vél* “work of craft” for the king, without sleep or rest (str. 19). The word *vél* has been defined as meaning both “intrigue; betrayal” and “work of art”.¹⁴ Thus, his ceaseless labor also implies the contriving of a secret scheme of revenge. His deep grudge, in other words, seems to be transformed positively into the extraordinarily strenuous work,

¹² Gering, 149; Larrington, 107. Dronke, 251.

¹³ Guðni Jónsson, 190; Dronke, 313.

¹⁴ Gering, 191.

which so “rapidly” brings forth the “ingenious and cunning gifts” (*vél*) to be bestowed upon Niðuð’s family.

One day, two young sons of Niðuð hurried to visit the smith and begged him to give them a key to open a casket. Then, the poet adds in a refrain that the “malicious intention (*illúð*) was laid ‘open’, when they looked into the casket” (str. 21 & 24), interposing the singular comment that “a number of invaluable treasures (*menja*) was put inside the casket, though the boys imagined red gold and jewels contained there”. Thus they eventually come to know the contents of the casket. Undoubtedly, with their discovery of what the casket contains, Völund risks the public disclosure of his “malicious intentions” or *vél* “evil plot”, which might otherwise have remained hidden in his “breast-hoard”.

Probably in this context, ON *men* does not refer to “treasures” in general, but to some “necklaces” which Völund might have forged for his wife Alvit. We may suppose that Freyja as the owner of Brisingamen “the Brising necklace” bears the character of a valkyrje, just as Alvit, for the goddess is, in any battle, to “take possession of half of the slain, while Othin owns the other half” (Gylf 24).¹⁵ The OE compound *breost-hord*, with the literal sense of “breast-hoard”, means “(hidden or true) emotion in the breast” (*Beowulf* 1719; 2792), while *breost-veorðung* “breast-ornament” (2504) and *breost-gewædu* “breast-garment” (1211; 2162) refer to the “necklace” and the “corslet” respectively. As I have argued elsewhere, *Beowulf*, returning from the Danish expedition, offers the “fatal” corslet to his lord Hygelac, and gives the necklace as a “token of love” to Hygd, his queen.¹⁶

One day, Böövild pays a visit to the smith on the pretext of having him mend the ring, which she herself has broken intentionally (str. 26). Strophe 28 presents us with the underlying reason that Völund was “more knowing in craftiness” (*betr kummi*) than Böövild, when he plied her with so much beer that “she fell asleep” on the couch. The deceitful manner in which he puts Böövild to sleep is assuredly cunning, but it might also constitute a parody of the ritual practice of drinking mead to mark entering into a marriage contract, especially in the case of marriage by capture.¹⁷ In the preceding strophe, *fegri* and *betri*, the comparative form of the adjectives is employed in the repetition in the words of Völund, who promises that “I will mend the broken ring for you (Böövild) so that it will look ‘far fairer’ to your father and ‘much better’ to your mother” (str. 27). Böövild might have expected such an offer when she ventured secretly to visit the smith. Völund, who was “cleverer in craftiness” (*betr kummi*), however, astutely sees through her ruse in advance.

At any rate, the painstaking work of Völund, consumed by his intense hatred (str. 20), is a contrast with Böövild’s imprudence in drinking herself to sleep (str. 28). Moreover, the smith’s acts of incessantly “smiting with hammer” (str. 20) insinuates an act of sexual intercourse in strophe 28. Völund prides himself on his deed, saying “Now I have avenged my injuries (*harma minna*)”. Obviously, the poet makes a pun between *hamarr* “hammer” and *harmar* “sufferings”. In other words, Völund’s “hammer”, with which he fashions every *vél* may symbolize the phallus with which he avenges his *harmar* “sufferings and troubles”.

The word *vél* in strophe 20, with double meaning of “intrigue” and “skillful piece of work”, echoes the adjective compound *ivið-gjarn* “hatching a wicked scheme” in strophe 28. The first element of this compound is cognate with OE *inwit* (or *inwid*) “fraud; deceit” and *inwit-nið*, for instance, is used to denote “malicious enmity” which exists for a long period between different tribes (*Beowulf* 1858). Völund hints ominously that he will exact revenge

¹⁵ See above, n. 10: Mizuno 1999, 381-82.

¹⁶ Mizuno 1999, 390-93.

¹⁷ Tomoaki Mizuno, “Baldr Satsugai-shinwa no Keisei: Daichi-boshin to Unmei-joshin Suhai”. [The Formation of Baldr Myth: The Cult of Earth Mother Goddess and Fate Goddess]. *Epos* (1981): 26-46; 28-29.

on the person who has “hatched a wicked scheme” against him. It must be upon none but the queen that Völund here intends to wreak his last vengeance.

The arguments above demonstrate that the *Völundarkviða* poet establishes interconnections between narrative episodes in more or less remote strophes by positioning specific words and phrases according to the technique known as ring composition. Thus, if we follow a linear narrative from the outer frame to the internal component, we would then, turning from the kernel theme of the poem, be led backward by degrees to the outer frame again in the final part. In other words, we have come to recognize the uniquely centripetal and regressive character of the narrative as a whole. The kernel theme in square brackets lies in [the queen’s exhortation] and [Völund’s revenge].

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| <p>(17) “<u>Tenn</u> hánum teygjasz,
er hánom er tét sverð
ok hann Böövildar
baug of þekkir;
<u>Ámun</u> eru <u>augo</u>
ormi þeim enom frána.
<u>Sniðið</u> ér hann
<u>sina magni</u>
ok setið hann síðan
í <u>Sævarstöð.</u>”
(Dronke, ed.)¹⁸</p> | <p>(24) <u>Sneið</u> af höhuð
húna þeira
ok und fen fjöturs
<u>fætr</u> of lagði;
en þær scalar,
er und <u>skörum</u> váru,
sveip hann útan silfri,
seldi Niðuði.
(25) En <u>ór augum</u>
jarknasteina
sendi hann kunnigri
konu Niðaðar;
en <u>ór tönnum</u>
tveggja þeira
sló hann brjóstkringlur,
sendi Böövildi.</p> |
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In strophe 17, the queen, in her foresight, expresses fear and anxiety at the abominable appearance of Völund, and then urges her lord Niðuð to “cut off” (*sniða*) Völund’s sinews, which appear to constitute a source of his *megin* “strength”. This story reminds us of the Greek myth about the smith god Hephaestus, who was crippled in the leg, alienated from his mother Hera and expelled from the divine world to fall down onto an island or into the ocean.¹⁹

Völund avenges himself on the queen, by killing her young boys and fashioning treasures out of their dismembered bodies (str. 24-25). Remarkably, the verb *sniða* is employed to refer to the severing of parts from the bodies in both strophes 17 and 24. Völund’s physical body, abhorred by the queen, is described firstly with reference to his hateful teeth, then his serpent-like eyes, and finally his leg sinews. It is noteworthy, by contrast, that this descriptive order is roughly reversed in the procedure of Völund’s vengeance. Firstly, the heads of the boys are “cut off” (*sniða*) by the smith to hide their legs “under” the mud of a furnace. Secondly their skulls, which are said to have been originally positioned “under” their hair, were overlaid with silver sent to Niðuð. Thirdly, the smith forged *jarknasteina* “precious stones” from the princes’ eyes, and sent them to the queen. And finally, he completed the *brjósti-kringlur* “breast-ornaments” from “the teeth of these two boys” and delivered them to the princess Böövild.

¹⁸ Viewed from ring composition in str. 17, instead of Guðni Jónsson’s emendation, I am for the editions of Dronke (n. 11) as well as of G. Neckel & H. Kuhn, *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmäler*. (Carl Winter, 1962).

¹⁹ Franz Rolf Schröder, “Die Wielandsaga,” *PBB* 99 (1977): 375-94.

Thus Völund dismembers the boys in this sequence: (1) the heads, (2) the legs, (3) the skulls, (4) the eyes, and (5) the teeth. Of these physical parts, the last three are employed as the materials from which he fashions the treasures. The other physical parts such as heads and legs appear irrelevant here, but the separation of heads and limbs from the body would probably have been an indispensable first step for a hunter like Völund before proceeding to the next stage of the butchering. The legs hidden “under the mud of a furnace” appear to have an odd relationship to the skulls which were originally positioned “under their hair”. The ON *faetr* might be interpreted as “legs” rather than “feet”, since the poet plainly reverses the order of the teeth, eyes and legs in the reproachful words of the queen.

Norse cosmogony related how Borr’s sons or the three gods, including Othin, carried the corpse of the primordial giant Ymir, whom they had killed, into the great void Ginnungagap, to make the earth out of his flesh, and the sea and the lakes out of his blood (Gylf 8). The principle of homologies prevails in this myth which explains further that the rocks were made from Ymir’s bones, trees from his hair, and the sky from his skull (Grm 40). We might imagine Ginnungagap as representing a gigantic furnace.²⁰ In this respect, the apparently odd phraseology whereby the skulls of the two princes, “which were under their hair” (str. 24) seems significant to my mind. In the narrative of the disposal of the two princes who fell victim to Völund’s vengeance, their skulls are closely associated with the locks of their hair. In light of Norse cosmogony, the locks of the princes’ hair might be envisaged as being thrown into Völund’s furnace, as if they were firewood, or as a sort of sacrificial offering.²¹ Indisputably, the poet is acutely conscious here of the cosmogonic transformation of Ymir’s corpse.

At any rate, the skulls, eyes, and teeth of the princes are, in succession, remodeled into the treasures which as gifts of revengeance would be bestowed upon Niðuð, his anonymous queen, and their daughter Böðvild respectively. These gruesome gifts made of their sons’ skulls might perhaps be intended to serve as drinking vessels for Niðuð. The *jarknasteina* “precious stones” given to the queen have been interpreted as pearls, topaz, or emerald.²² They are four treasures in all, since the materials were the eyes of the two victims. Lastly, Völund seems to set about making a number of treasures out of their teeth, which must be the most delicate and painstaking work requiring minute attention to every detail, based on the singularly deliberate comment of the material of “the teeth of the two”. The *brjóst-kringlur* “breast-ornaments” which Völund fashioned from the boys’ teeth, are delivered with malice to Böðvild (str. 25).

As I have conjectured elsewhere, on the grounds of the legendary association between ON *Brisingamen*, Freyja’s necklace, and OE *heals-beag*, the necklace given by Beowulf to Hygd (*Beowulf* 1195; 2172), both of the necklaces prove to embody hidden love, avarice, and strife in their respective stories. Besides, the necklace named *breast-weorðung* “breast-ornament” (*Beowulf* 2504), which the king Hygelac, Hygd’s husband, wears during his fatal campaign in Frisia, can be identified with that of Hygd (Mizuno 1999).²³ We might suppose that Beowulf, whose father is named Ecgþeow “the servant of a sword”, was originally characterized as a blacksmith, in parallel with Völund. When the necklace was given to Hygd by Beowulf, the poet adds the hearsay statement: “After that necklace-bequeathal (*beah-ðegu*) her *breast* was thereupon adorned with it” (2175-6). The necklace was originally one of the gifts bestowed upon Beowulf from the Danish queen Wealhtheow in the banquet after the

²⁰ Tomoaki Mizuno, *Sei to Shi no Hokuoh-shimwa*. [Life and Death in Norse Mythology] (Tokyo: Shohaku-sha, 2002) 57-65.

²¹ Schröder, 390.

²² Dronke, 318-19.

²³ Mizuno 1999, 394.

hero had cleansed the court Heorot by conquering Grendel. In the gift-giving scene, the *Beowulf* poet draws an apparently odd comparison between Wealhtheow's necklace and *Brosinga mene*, which Hama carried away fleeing the pursuit of Eormenric, the East Gothic king, according to an episode (1197-201). This brief and cryptic account has puzzled critics, evading clear interpretation, but in its legendary function, Wealhtheow's necklace in the comparison with *Brosinga mene* is clearly being associated with ON *Brisingamen*, which Freyja acquired through the "scandalous bargain" of offering one night of love to each of the four dwarfs who were treasure forgers. We know the story in which Loki, with the cognomen of *þjófr Brisingamens* "the thief of Brisingamen" (Skm 23), was urged by Othin to steal the jewel from Freyja. As the story continues, the goddess successfully regains it by fulfilling the condition that she must bring the two friendly kings, Heðinn and Högni, to confront one another in "an everlasting battle" (*Sörla þátr*). In brief, paying special attention to the common theme concerning the necklace, which seems to represent "scandalous love", strife, and future death, I have offered an analysis which may shed light on the main characters of the *Beowulf* poem, such as Wealhtheow, Beowulf, and Hygd, who are portrayed as donors or donees of the jewel.

Turning back to Völund's story, the *brjóst-kringla* has been generally translated into "brooches".²⁴ Its literal sense of "the ringed ornaments of the breast", however, seems quite significant to me. In light of the above legendary association of the necklaces, I am inclined to interpret this compound as "necklaces" which might adorn Böðvild's breast. The poetic account in which Völund fashions the jewel out of "the teeth of the two princes" may appear to be somewhat scrupulous, but also encourages us to envisage the completed "necklaces" with the shape of twofold circles. Probably, when Böðvild wears such "a pair of the doubly circled ornaments" to adorn her own "breast", without knowing its jewelry material, the *vél* "cunning revenge plot" which Völund has devised through his smithery work is almost fulfilled. Thus, the narrative of the humiliation and torment inflicted on Völund (str. 17) is correlated with that of his malicious gift-giving (str. 25), while the revenge he takes by killing the princes (str. 24) constitute the kernel of the poem. In other words, the poet deliberately arranges the physical motifs in the order of [teeth—eyes—legs—X—legs—eyes—teeth], to form a chiasmic, ring pattern surrounding the kernel theme [X]: the revengeful killing.

In strophes 34-36, Völund, in presence of Niðuð and the queen, makes a horrible confession as to how he disposed of the princes' feet, skulls, eyes, and their teeth, after firstly beheading them. When Völund also reveals the appalling fact that the princess Böðvild is pregnant with his child, his revenge is nearly completed. Then, the king urges Böðvild to tell the truth and she confesses to having been violated by Völund on the isle. It is noteworthy that Böðvild, as the donee of the *brjóst-kringla* which reminds us of *Brisingamen* and Hygd's necklace, here reveals a sort of hidden and forbidden love before her father. As a consequence, a baby is to be born in the royal family as the final gift of the departing smith, who has contrived his *vél* "intrigue" or "work of craft" by use of his phallus instead of his *hamarr* (str. 20) in order to avenge his *harmar* "sufferings" (str. 28). It is when being informed of his sons' death that Niðuð realizes that the queen's advice (*ráð*) has eventually invited the sequence of tragedies (str. 31).

In sum, the piece of work entitled *Völundarkviða* starts with the marriages of the three sons of a Lappish king, and the married lives and departure of their wives as "swan-maidens". After that, the narration proceeds to focus on how Völund, who has suffered dire humiliation, torture, and enslavement, demonstrates his extraordinary talent in smithery, which is to lure each member of Niðuð's family to a sort of magical captivity. Thus his plot of revenge is to

²⁴ Dronke, 252; Larrington, 107.

be fulfilled by degrees in accordance with the advancement of his painstaking work. Obviously, his love for the swan-maiden Alvit is in a stark contrast to that for Böðvild. Völund finally flies into the sky by use of some device, and so forsakes Böðvild and his unborn child. Thus his flight from Böðvild, in the end, presents another contrast to the flight of Alvit who has left Völund behind.

Some of the specific motifs which occur in the first half of the poem are complemented by motifs in the second half. The poem as a whole turns out to be constituted by a ring structure as follows:

[A] (str. 1): The swan-maidens come flying through the wood and settle to rest on the lake shore (*sævar-strönd*).

[B] (str. 2): Conjugal love: The three maidens (named Ölrún, Svanhvít, and Alvit) get married to the three brothers Egil, Slagfið, and Völund respectively. Then Alvit embraces Völund around the "white-shining" (*hvít*) neck.

[C] (str. 3): In the ninth year of their married lives, an irresistible longing for home and some indistinct "necessity" compel the three swan "maidens" (*meyjar*) to abandon their husbands and fly away.

[D] (str. 5): Völund "sat alone" to devote himself to smithery, waiting for Alvit's return.

[E] (str. 8): Völund as "weather-eyed" (*veðr-eygr*) archer returns from hunting.

[F] (str. 10): Völund named "the lord of elves" who is aware of the loss of an arm-ring

[G] (str. 11): Völund's sleep and his awakening "without joy"

[H] (str. 16): As soon as the queen enters the hall, she seems intuitively to sense his evil character, whispering: "He is not trustworthy".

[I] (str. 20): Despite insomnia, Völund continues to strike with his hammer (*hamarr*) to contrive the *vél* quickly.

[J] (str. 17): The queen loathes the uncanny appearance of Völund and advises her lord to "cut" (*sníða*) the sinews of his legs and confine him to the isle: the arrangement of the physical parts in the order of teeth, eyes, and legs.

[X] (str. 21-23): The young princes, who visited Völund, are curious to know the content of a chest and ask him to unlock it. The disclosure of "the evil" (*illúð*) in the chest drives Völund to slay the boys.

[J] (str. 24-25): Völund disposes of the corpses and makes treasures out of their severed body parts: the arrangement of physical parts in the order of heads, legs, skulls, eyes, and teeth.

[I] (str. 28): The injudicious sleep of Böðvild on account of drinking. She yields to violence of Völund, who says proudly, "Now I have avenged my afflictions (*harmar*)".

[H] (str. 30): The queen enters the hall to extend a customary morning greeting to her lord.

[G] (str. 31): The king suffers insomnia "without joy" at the news of his sons' death.

[F] (str. 32): Calling Völund "the lord of elves", the king asks him what became of his sons.

[E] (str. 37): Seeing Völund hovering in the air, the king regrets the absence of an archer "powerful" (*áflugr*) enough to shoot him down.

[D] (str. 41): Böðvild confesses to having "sat together" with Völund and having spent "a fleeting while of love" (*ögur-stund*).

[C] (str. 38): "Völund, laughing, soared into the sky, while Níðuð unhappily remained sitting. In his flight he inevitably abandons Böðvild.

[B] (str. 41): Clandestine and false love: The princess, whom the king called "maiden with white eyelashes" (str. 39), confesses to having been unable to resist Völund's violation.

[A] (str. 38): The flight of Völund to escape from imprisonment on the isle *Sævar-staðr* may bring about an everlasting separation from Böðvild.

Viewed in the form of this table of contents, the expressive elements or narrative motifs which echo each other are not always arranged to form an exact ring pattern: Especially as the poem is coming to an end, the strophes appear to deviate from the proper order of ring composition. However, the relevant strophe in the first half of the poem bears a relationship of correspondence or contrast with that in the second half, forming a complement to one another in the narrative sequence. In view of the supposed principle of the chiasmic, ring pattern, such interconnected strophes are arranged more properly in accordance with the narrative advance towards the pivotal theme [X]. Thus the poet deliberately devises a concentric structure with a kernel theme balanced by symmetrical frames, generating the proper tension among the apparently complicated, different elements in his narration.