

**The 'Myth of Valkyries' and the Female Characters of the Heroic Lays  
of the *Elder Edda*  
(Abstract)**

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Much has been written about the valkyries of Old Norse literature and their links with myth, ritual, ancient customs or the traditions of Viking society (see the recent bibliography in Riti Kroesen 1997, *Skáldskaparmál 4: 129–161*). Special attention has been paid to the Elder Edda, which gives some helpful clues to the origin and development of the 'myth of valkyries'. My research is an attempt to look at the problem from a more literary ('textual') point of view and to assess the extent to which the 'myth of valkyries' contributes to the creation of the images of women in all nineteen of the 'heroic' lays of the Elder Edda (including *Völundarkviða*). Though the female characters under discussion are quite varied (and still impress the reader with their tragic force and depth) they appear to be constructed according to a number of stereotypical features, most of which seem to be borrowed from mythology. Each lay (or cycle of lays) has its own 'system' of images of women, which are contrasted through the oppositions of 'natural / supernatural' and 'valkyric / non-valkyric'. The 'valkyric' features can be further categorised as either 'archaic' (reminding us of the origin of valkyries as female demons devouring newly-slain warriors) or 'classical' (associating them with the radiant and beautiful 'wish-maidens' of Óðinn and those who are loved by heroes) – a distinction which also refers to the opposition between 'low' and 'high' in the mythological universe. These features find their expression in a limited number of motifs and phrases, which are often formulaic and create specific verbal echoes between particular lays and characters. Each lay or cycle of lays is characterized by a specific 'configuration' of characters (compare the 'binary' opposition of Sváva and Hrímgæðr in *Helgaqviða Hjörvarðssonar* with the 'triangle' of Brynhildr, Guðrún and Grimhildr in the *Sigurðr* cycle), or by a specific combination of features within one character (compare the figure of Sigrún in the two lays about Helgi Hundingsbani). Not many of the characters can be 'reduced' to their 'place in the system' (like, for example, Þóðvildr in *Völundarkviða*). Most of them are characterized by various traits within one lay or are transformed as the plot develops over several lays. The transformation of Guðrún and Brynhildr, the central characters of the cycle of the *Niflungar*, is especially notable. Guðrún soon rejects her role as passive wife and weeping widow and turns into an active revenger who brings death even to her husband and sons (in *Atlaqviða* and *Atlamál* her 'valkyric' features, though treated differently, are quite clearly perceptible). By contrast, Brynhildr is first described in terms of a female demon (*Úrór öðlinga, Guðrúnarkviða I 24.5; Ein veldr Brynhildr / ölo bǫlvi, Sigurðarkviða in skamma 27. 7–8*), but finally rejects her role as supernatural revenger and in her dialogue with the giantess (*Helreið Brynhildar*) behaves like an ordinary loving woman showing disgust for the world of the supernatural. Mythological traits are mostly ascribed to her by others: she herself rejects any 'mythologization' and tries to justify herself by referring to fate or natural circumstances. A theme of complaint begins to prevail in her answers (*Sigurðarkviða*

*in skamma* 3–5, 6–9, 34–41, 57–58, 71), and even her ‘valkyric past’ is treated in more earthly terms (as taking part in the viking raids – *i vikingo*, *Helreið Brynhildar* 3.4). This conflict of the heroine with her environment can be interpreted as the birth of a kind of a lyrical ‘self-consciousness’.