

## THE POSITION OF THE WOMAN IN THE POETIC EDDA

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In the following paper I attempt to examine the position of a woman in the Poetic Edda. The essay views the position of the woman generally, clears up her possible social statuses, functions, family relations and transformation of men into women.

As my knowledge of the Old Norse language is poor, the conclusions are drawn after the Estonian translation by Rein Sepp which may not be a literal one. Also, the names are written as Rein Sepp has given them in his version.

Thanks to Erlingur Sigurdsson, University of Helsinki, who allowed to choose the topic.

Reading "Völuspaa", one can easily discern the classification of women in the Poetic Edda: they are presented in the main characters (Goddess, Giantess, Völva, mortal woman). The origin of the first woman is given (Völ, 17). The two opposites, life and death, are represented by Frigg and Hel. It is interesting to note that the bearer of death is mentioned before the bearer of life and goddess of childbirth in the epic (ibid., 35; Frigg in 37). The main groups of female beings in the epic are named and described below.

### 1. GODDESSES

Surprisingly, Frigg is mentioned only six (seven) times in the epic, although she is the main goddess and possesses the most important functions for both gods and men. Twice her name is given in Völuspaa: in stanza 37 she is said to be "dropping tears in the mossy halls of Valhalla". Stanza 53 uses her name in a kenning for Odin, "the beloved of Frigg". The relations between Odin and his consort are generally the main functions of Frigg in the epic. Twice she appears as an adviser (Vafth 1-4; Grimn, prologue). The goddess Saaga (Grimn, 7) is viewed as a possible variant of Frigg (Munch 1968: 28); from that lay we also learn that Sökkvabekkr is another residence of the couple of the main gods. The Prose Edda gives Fensalir as the residence of Frigg, which is not mentioned in the Poetic Edda.

The most information about Frigg is told in "Lokasenna", 27-29: charge of adultery with Odin's brothers (26); motherhood of Baldr (27); knowledge of the future (29). One can call to mind that the will of Frigg remains stronger than her husband's (Grimn); probably this fact may also be connected with her supernatural abilities.

Surprisingly, too, Frigg is not mentioned in "Baldr's Dreams". On the contrary, Rindr is said to be the mother of the revenger for Baldr. Frigg is briefly noted in "Odin's Raven Charm", 23. The only time when Frigg is filling her direct function as a protector of women in childbirth can be found in "Oddruun's Complaint", 10, where Borgnyy gives thanks to Oddruun for her aid in childbirth: in reward, she asks Frigg and Freyja to help Oddruun just in the same way as Oddruun did when she took away her pains. To sum up, Frigg is not a very important personage in the epic and her behaviour is rarely active.

Freyja appears for five times but at least once she is the main character of the lay. Her residence is described in "Grimnir's Lay", 14. It is Fookvangr. We learn, too, that she gets half of slain, while Odin gets the rest. Her possible similarity to Frigg is noted in "Oddruun's Complaint", 10. In "Lokasenna", 39, her function as a goddess of love and passion is indirectly referred to by Loki. Pejoratively also her incestuous intercourse with her brother Freyr is mentioned (Ls, 32). Njördr, the father of the immoral couple, tries to protect them, whereupon Loki answers that he has done the same thing, begetting his son; so one can suppose that ties of that kind were characteristic to the Vanir gods. By the way, if Loki says that all Aesir and Vanir have been Freyja's lovers, it may also mean that she has had an intercourse with Njördr, too.

In "Hyndla's Lay" Freyja is active as the protector of a young man, Oottarr, taking him with her to the Sabbath ride as a boar (in Prose Edda, "Gylfaginning", XXXVII, she rides cats). The purpose is to teach the young man his ancestry, which is well known to Hyndla. At the end Freyja offers Oottarr a "memory drink". Katherine Morris sees Freyja as the sorceress (Morris 1970: 62).

Covertly, Freyja is the main character in "Thrymr's Lay". She is the reason of the theft of Mjöllnir; Thor as the owner must take on Freyja's disguise which seems to be the most ridiculous motif in the whole epic. Two important attributes of Freyja, "bird-shirt" (Thr, 3) and Briisinga-collar (ibid., 14) are mentioned in the lay (see also: Prose Edda, "Gylfaginning", XLII).

In conclusion, Freyja seems to be more characterized than Frigg and is also more helpful (Thr, 4; Hyn).

Idunn, Gefjon, Sigyyn are seldom met in the epic. All of them are presented in "Lokasenna" in a negative light, as the name of the lay demands. Idunn must be crazy after men and has therefore even "embraced her brother's assassin with well-shaped hands" (Ls, 17). Idunn's origin is explained in "Odin's Raven Charm" 6: she is one of the bright-elves, the middle daughter of Iivald. We also find a marginal note that can be interpreted as a supernatural birth of Idunn: she has fallen from the ash-tree Yggdrasil (ibid.). Her function is to hold the apples of the eternal youth (Prose Edda, "Gylfaginning", XXVI; "Bragi's Speeches", LVI); the fact is not mentioned in the Poetic Edda.

We get to know Gefjon only by Loki's words that she has sold herself for a golden necklace (Ls, 20). G. Dumézil emphasizes that Loki taunts the Aesir in accordance with from everyone's function (Dumézil 1968: 95). So the function of Gefjon as a protector of virgins can be inferred from Loki's words.

As for Sigyyn, Loki's own consort, her fate is pitiful: as she remains true to her husband even after his fall, she must share Loki's punishment (Ls, epilogue). The same function is presented also in "Völuspaa", 38.

Nanna, Baldr's wife, is briefly noted in "Odin's Raven Charm", 8. One never learns anything more exact about her.

Tyyr's wife is marginally presented in "Lokasenna", 40: Loki announces that he has begot her son, paying no compensation to Tyyr later. Tyyr's wife remains nameless; neither in the Poetic nor in the Prose Edda do we meet her for the second time. Munch's manual has no word about her either.

Sif, the consort of Thor, appears twice in the kenning for Thor, "husband of Sif" (Hyym, 15, 34; Thr, 25) in the same way; Loki confirms it in "Lokasenna", naming himself as her lover and adding that Sif has had no more adulterous intercourses (54). Sif confirms the accusation by her own behaviour: she offers Loki a drink and asks him to protect at least one of the Aesir before Loki begins to enumerate her shameful deeds (53). Offering a cup showed the greatest honour among the ancient Germanic peoples and was also the gesture of love and invitation.

The daughter of Thor (Thruodr?) may also to be included into the list of the Aesir goddesses (Alv, 1-8).

Hel, the Empress of the Nether World, is never directly on the stage in the epic. She is only said to be "waiting for men" at the beginning of Ragnarök (Völ, 47). She is active in the Prose Edda ("Gylfaginning", XLIX) wanting to keep Baldr within her realm. The horrible house and its servants are also described in the same place. Her being the daughter of Loki is mentioned in "Gylfaginning", XXXIV). In the Poetic Edda her state seems to be more important than she herself. Hel's state or the Nether World of Hel is noted frequently (Völ, 35; Grimn, 31; Ls, 63; Fjölsv, 25). Atli regrets that half of his soldiers are "at Hel" (Gr L of A, 51).

Vegtamr/Odin rides to the eastern gate of Hel where contact with Völva is possible (Vegt, 2-4).

The Nornes seem to be the most important and the most often met celestial female beings in the epic. They are introduced and their names given in "Völuspaa", 20: the first is Urdr, the second is Verdandi and the third is Skuld. H. Ellis Davidson translates the names as "Spinner", "Being" and "Duty" (Davidson 1964: 58). Rein Sepp has desisted from translation of Verdandi's name ("Noorem Edda", 122). Skuld is also noted among the list of the Valkyries in "Völuspaa", 24. Further the Nornes are named only all together and not by their personal names; so one can accept them as personification of the Fate generally. Their function, giving fate or "dealing out different fates" (Faafn, 11) is explicitly stated each time they appear in the epic. The motif of spinning, similar to the same of the Moiras (Parkas) in the ancient Mediterranean mythology, is presented in "Helgi Hundingrbane's Lay" II, 2-4, where they give an extraordinary and illustrious fate to Helgi.

In "Faafnir's Lay", 11, Faafnir says that the Nornes are not all of the same kind. The darker side of their activities is more usual. Helgi Hundingrbane exculpates Sigruun from the slaying of the armies, saying that part of it has done by the Nornes (HHb I, 24).

The characterising adjectives for the Nornes: wretched (SF II, 2); cruel (SF III, 7); restless (ibid., 5); unhappy (G I, 24). Their peace is taunted: I wanted to crush their frozen peace (G In, 13). The news they bring are always bad: "none is able to meet the night after the prophecy of the Norn" (Hamd, 31). They also make people blind and insensitive: "We were defrauded by the Nornes - we killed our battle-knower" (ibid., 29). The Nornes are also skilful in magic: Griimhildr adds Urdr's magic to her memory drink (G II, 21). Her words can be accompanied

with the knowledge about Urdr's wellhead (Grimn, 7). It is understandable that men, mostly suffering pitiful fates, feared the Nornes, although paying honours to them. Only once there is the belief that one may ask a better fate from the Nornes: in "Grooa's Charm" Grooa prays for her son: "...may the hands of Urdr hold you firm when evil goes out." (Grooa, 7.)

The origin of the Valkyries has been left unclear in the epic. Some of them are celestial, probably those about whom information is given in "Völuspaa", 24. The terrestrial ones are usually daughters of kings and get the status of Valkyries in childhood already, like Brynhildr who has been a Valkyrie since the age of twelve (BrJ, 6). Their general function is to be Odin's female emissaries (Dumézil 1970:29), so we get the kenning "the women of Herjann" (Herjann means Odin) we meet in "Völuspaa" 24 and "Gudruun's Lay" I, 19. Their general name means "chooser of the slain" so they, too, have power over the fate of warriors. Skuld, the youngest of the Nornes, is included among the Valkyries and named as the very first of them (Völ, 24). On the other hand, Gudruun accuses Brynhildr, saying 'you were always the evil Norn to the nobles' (G I, 24). The list of the names of the Valkyries is presented twice: first in "Völuspaa", 24: Skuld, Skölgul, Hildr, Gunnr, Göndul and Geirskölgul. Hildr and Gunnr are only synonyms for 'battle', as H. E. Davidson believes (Davidson 1964: 62). Odin himself gives the names as follows: Hrist, Mist, Skeggöld, Skölgul, Hlökk, Herfjötur, Hildr, Thrundr, Göll, Geirölul, Randgriid, Raadgriid and Reginleif in "Grimnir's Lay", 36. Hlökk is another the synonym for 'battle' (Davidson 1964: 62). Three more Valkyric names are presented in "Vöölundr's Lay": Hervör Alvittr, Hladgudr Svanhviit and Ölrúun. In "Grimnir's Lay", 36 Odin refers to the other function of the Valkyries: to take care of Odin's drinking horn containing the drink of everlasting life in Valhalla. The fact can be connected with magic: the drink seems to have similarities with the memory drink of Freyja in "Hyndla's Lay". Sigdríifa the Valkyrie possesses a drink of the same kind which, too, is used for learning as in the case of Ootarr (Sgdrf). The Valkyries, at least Sigdríifa, know also the magic runes and are able to teach them. Sigvördr names Sigdríifa "the most clever of women" as Griipir, too, has done before him (Griip, 45). Brynhildr has also the characteristics of a seeress when she tells the fate of Gjuukings before her death (SF III). She also names herself a "sensitive woman" (SF III, 40).

The appearance of the Valkyries is presented better than that of anyone other in the epic. They are fully panoplied (HHb I, 15; Sgdrf, prologue) and wear helmets (ibid.); their presence in the battles is revealed by drops of blood on their dressing (ibid.). They carry spears and arbalets (HHb I, 15; 16); Skuld is called the holder of the shield (Völ, 24). Shields of the Valkyries are noted in "Helgi Hundingrbane's Lay" I, 17, too. The Valkyries can ride on the water and in the air as well as on the ground (Völ, 24; HHj, between 9 and 10; HHb I, 15) or possess a feathered disguise (Vööl; BrJ, 6). Generally they are fair to look at: in "Helgi Hjörvardsson's Lay" Svaava is said to be the proudest among them; also Brynhildr is said to be charming (Griip, 30); fair (ibid., 36) and the best (ibid., 40); magnificent woman (SF III, 15) and designated with the kenning "the foam of gold" (BrJ, 2).

The disposition of the Valkyries is not so fair: they are told to be defiant (ORC, 1). Sigruun and Brynhildr are both accused of having sowed enmity (HHb II, 26); being fond of cruelty (SF III, 31) and being destruction-bringers (ibid.). Högni says that Brynhildr appeared as a ghost from her mother's womb, and grew to the dolour of others, to haunt the minds of men (SF III, 44). By the way, their character can be changed by love or marriage: Sigruun promises to 'wake up all the dead to find rest at your /Helgi's/ chest' (HHb II, 27). The parallel can be found in the Saga of Hjading (Munch 1968: 130).

The ties between Valkyries and men come up often in the epic. They choose their favourites themselves, like Svaava or Sigruun in "Helgi Hundingrbane's Lay" II. Men can also call them by naming special runes of battle, like in "Helgi Hundingrbane's Lay" II, 10. One can make a Valkyrie surrender by stealing her feather guise (Vööl, 1; BrJ, 6). Alvittr, Hervör, Svanhviit, Svaava, Sigruun and finally also Brynhildr become wives of heroes. Their new position does not mean the end of their Valkyric activities: only Brynhildr is excluded, but for a different reason.

Natural forces and attendant spirits. The Sun, named also the "girl-friend of Moon", is met in "Völuspaa", 5 already. We learn about her fate that she must become "black" and be destroyed at the end of times (Völ, 56). Her daughter becomes the new lightener afterwards (Vafth, 47). The Moon is also described as the laughing one; her fate is quite similar to that of the Sun (Völ, 32). By another explanation the Moon is not personified but made by friendly gods (Vafth, 25).

The Night is female, too (ORC, 7). She is also named by the kenning 'the lady holder of wines' (ibid., 11). She is silent (not able to speak?) and answers no questions about the Ragnarök (ibid., 12-15); the Aesir get no knowledge from her when visiting her place, not even by cunning (ibid., 21). The sex of the Night is also marked by Sigdríifa, naming her holy sister (Sgdrf, 3).

The Field is female; Sigdríifa declares her holy and pregnant (ibid., 4). The Earth is Thor's mother; her death can be understood as the beginning of winter (Haarb). The femininity of the Earth is also mentioned in "Helgi Hjörvardsson's Lay", 40: "...we never meet any more on Mother Earth's breast." One cannot be sure, if the name is only poetical adornment or marks a real natural spirit.

Among the spirits of water, one of Heimdallr's tutors, Uulfruun, is named by name in "Odin's Raven Charm", 26.

The attendant spirits can be of the Giant origin (Vafth, 49); they are named Daughters of Mógthrasir and appear in three groups; their function is to be protectresses of homes (ibid.).

The personal attendant spirit is mentioned only once in the epic: the trollwoman offers herself to take this function over Hedinn (HHj, between 30 and 31). As Hedinn refuses, she promises to revenge. Later Helgi thinks that the trollwoman was the attendant spirit of his own, leaving him before his death; in that belief he prepares to die.

## 2. GIANTESSES

As one could see in the case of goddesses, their characteristics are quite human and not impeccable. They are cruel, selfish, revengeful, etc. So the exposition of *dramatis personae* seems to be psychologically well grounded in the Poetic Edda as the black-and white division is lacking. The same words are applicable when Giantesses are under discussion.

Two of them, Skadi and Gerdr, become wives of the Aesir. Skadi's courtship is not described in the epic; the Prose Edda tells us that she chose her husband herself as a compensation for



her father's death (Bragi' Speeches, LV); as the marriage was not successful, she later returned to her father's house Thrymrheimr (Gylfaginning, XXIII). In the Prose Edda she is also named "ski goddess". In the Poetic Edda they still live together with Njördr and are presented together in "Lokasenna" (33-36 and 49-52). Like all other women except Frigg, she is said to have been Loki's mistress. It seems to have happened before Thjassi's death in which Loki had a part. In "Lokasenna", learning his presence at the time of father's death, Skadi turns against him and swears an oath to revenge (52) which she keeps (epilogue). So her behaviour shows the real "jöötun's anger" (Grott, 22). In "Grimnir's Lay", 11, Skadi is said to have returned home. The Prose Edda XXIV announces that the children of Njördr, Freyr and Freyja, have been born after her departure. Controversially, in "Skirnir's Ride" she is still there when Freyr is grieving for Gerdr. Because she calls Freyr "our son" (Skirn, 1), the fact remains doubtful.

Gerdr, Freyr's beloved, is shown in a more amiable light. Only good is told of her appearance, attracting even the god of fertility and love himself. She, too, shows a firmness of character, refusing the love of Freyr until Skirnir makes her surrender, using especially important runes. By the side, Munch explains the love of Freyr as a punishment of Odin (Munch 1968: 16), so the entrance of the second Giantess to Asgard is unnatural, too. Later Gerdr has no function in the epic, although she appears in Hyndla's list of the ancestry of Ootarr (Hyn, 29). Anyway, she is the cause of the fact that Freyr goes to the last battle without his sword and is slain, as is noted in the Prose Edda, "Gylfaginning", XXXVII.

Although some of the Giantesses are wives or mothers (Tyyr's mother in Hyym, 7-8), their appearance in Asgard is sinister and ominous (Völ, 8): joy and peace had a place there only until their arrival. They are impure, having been born of dead men's blood (Grott, 19). Munch explains their entrance as a crime against Asgard's sanctity and beginning of corruption among the Aesir (Munch 1968: 49-50).

It seems that the Giantesses possess also prophetic power and knowledge about the past and the future (Hyn; Grott). Völva is said to be "the mother of three thursar" (Vegt, 13). If it is not an attempt to disgrace her, it seems that she had been a Giantess in her earthly life. Fenja and Menja have been educated in many things (Grott, 11). They also possess magic armour; Giantess Sinmöora has a magic sword in "Fjölsvidr's Lay", 26 - 30.

In the epic, we have two notes about the sense of honour of the Giantesses. In "Sigvördr Faafnirbane's Lay" II, 10-11, Giantess Lyngheidr will not let her brother kill the other brother; she is the only one in the Poetic Edda who does not want to take revenge on the death of her relative (ibid.). One more Giantess demands justice, stopping Brynhildr on her way to the nether world (BrJ). In the same lay we learn that the places where the Giantesses live are close to the way to Hel on the rocks (BrJ, 1).

The relations between Giantesses and men are frequent; the ties are generally based on sexual intercourse. In "Grimnir's Lay", Agnarr lives with a Giantess who has borne several children to him. Hriimgerdr demands Atli's love as a compensation for her father's death as Skadi does Njördr's (HHj, 20).

The appearance of the Giantesses is hardly ever described. Gerdr is beautiful, as has been said already. Hriimgerdr has a tail (HHj, 21). The most characteristic peculiarity common to all of them is their physical force. In "Grottasang" they are strong enough to move the basic rocks

(11-12). It is possible to turn their force into one's benefit: king Guthormr of Sweden uses them in battles and hunting in one year (Grott, 13-14); later king Froodi makes them work in his magic mill.

They have also power over winds and storms: Eggdir, the storm Giant, is named by the kenning "shepherd of the Giantesses" (Völ, 34). Hriimgerdr's mother does not allow Helgi's ships to move (HHj, 19).

The Giantesses can be dangerous as drowners of ships (ibid.) or castrators of men (HHb I, 39). One can find several ways to get rid of them: Thor kills them (Thr, 33); Freyja promises to protect Hyndla from Thor, although he has not got used to mildness with Giantesses (Hyn, 4). The sunlight makes them turn into stone (HHj, 30). Brynhildr makes the trollwoman disappear with simple words, "Disappear, monster!" (BrJ, 14).

Generally, it seems to be shameful to be a Giantess: one may scoff his enemy as the daughter of a Giantess (HHb I, 42) or mother of three *thursar*, as mentioned above. Although the Giantesses are not loved, they have a place of their own in the Eddic world-view: one of the signs that the end of the world is approaching is their leaving their places (Völ, 45), and in the apocalyptic final they disappear completely (Völ, 51).

### 3. BETWEEN THE TWO SIDES

The Völva is the most controversial character in the Poetic Edda: although she appears several times nothing more exact is said about her. We never know her origin, her looks or her age; never know about her activities except for some hazy notes by Loki (Ls, 24) that Odin himself has wandered as Völva in Saamsey, chanting spells. The place name can be interpreted as a Finnish (Lappish, Saami) one; it was generally believed that namely Lapp sorceresses possessed especially powerful magic. As Odin's cult was known among the Lapps in later times (Dumézil 1968: 29), the explanation can be accepted. In the next verse Loki states that the synonym for Völva is 'witch'; so sorcery is one of the activities of the Völva. Völva as a prophet introduces and concludes the epic. In "Völuspaa", 44, she says about herself: "She /Frigg/ sees a lot but I see more". Völva's knowledge about the past and the future is really respectable in that lay. Other female seers have only half of her wisdom: Hyndla specialises in the past and the Night in the future, although she, like Frigg, says nothing about it (ORC, 11-15).

We met Völva personally in "Völuspaa" only. She is twice awakened from death sleep by special words (Vegt, 4). The awakening motif seems to be alike to the same in "Hyndla's Lay", 1. In "Grooa's Charm" we learn that Völva has been married and has had a son; so the virginity is not obligatory to the Seeress. Völva's other function is given at the same place, 6-15: she is not only the one who sees but is also able to charm. By the way, the contact of Völva and her son is similar to the meeting of Kalevipoeg with his father on the grave in the Estonian national epic by the same name. The motif can hardly be borrowed from the Edda, so it must be *generatio spontanea*.

We never know if Völva is a human being or a celestial one. Nevertheless, her attitude towards mankind is respectful: she asks for the permission to begin "Völuspaa", addressing

the mankind as "the holy stock" (Völ, 1) and kneels in front of them after the end of her prophecy (ibid., 64). So she is conscious her exceptional status between gods and men.

If we accept Völva as a witch or sorceress, we can include Gullveig or Heidr (Völ, 25-26) into this list, too. The holiness of Völva gets a special colour, as the war comes into the world for the very first time precisely because of Völva's murder. The awakening, too, gets a special light: Gullveig's rising for three times is like the behaviour of two other Völvas.

In the ancient Germanic society the priests did not form a special class (Dumézil 1968: 119). Everyone had a right to make private sacrifices (Munch 1968: 274). In the epic, for example, Brynhildr commands to lay human sacrifices at the funeral pyre of her and Sigvördr (SF III, 63-67). Dagr sacrifices to Odin for getting his magic spear to kill Helgi (HHb, II). Even the gods make sacrifices: Freyja promises to make a sacrifice for Thor (Hyn, 4).

The only priestess about whom the Poetic Edda allows better knowledge, is Menglöd in "Fjölsvidr's Lay". She is the most important and the most honoured one, too. Her holy place of living is guarded by Odin/Fjölsvidr himself. Menglöd's father is said to be Svafthorinn's son and her houseyard is situated at the thursar's places (Fjölsv, 1). It is said that reverence is worshipped there (ibid., 5). Except Odin, the place is secured by the falling door Thrymgjöll, paling Gastropnir, dogs Giifr and Geri and cock Vidofnir whose wings and feather of tail are necessary to get into the place. The yard is called Hyrr and it is always pivoting on the spear, like the house of Baba Yaga in Russian fairy-tales. Ten dwarfs, Odin and Loki constructed the building. In the midpoint of the yard the holy tree Miimameidr is growing; its branches can make unfertile women conceive (ibid., 22). As the tree is also called "Miimir's", the place can probably be situated near Urdr's well; Urdr herself is noted in stanza 47. Menglöd and her ten maids are sitting on the holy mountain Hyljaberg, while Menglöd is talking with herself (chanting spells?). The mountain is a joy for the wounded; every woman, even suffering from a fatal disease, is healed by climbing to its top (ibid., 36). Every summer the sacrifices are brought to every holy place on earth, as they can protect peasant houses and take away pains (ibid., 40). So one meets the priestess, doubtless taking care of healing and peace.

Menglöd is married to Svipdagr; her further fate is not told. The marginal about the "necklace-necked" priestess Hleediis, Ootarr's mother (Hyn, 13), lets us know that virginity was not obligatory to the priestess or Seeress.

#### 4. MORTAL WOMEN

In the epic one meets two primordial mothers of the human race. First of them is Embla in "Völuspaa", 17. She has been an elm-tree; Odin and two other gods have given her and her husband the mood of life and the characteristics of a human being. Paul Frischauer translates the name not as "elm-tree" but with the adjective "*geschäftig*" (Frischauer 1970: 9). The other primordial mother can be found from "Vafthruudnir's Lay", 45. She remains alive, together with her husband, after the end of the world and new mankind arises from this couple.

The division of people in ranks is described in "Riigr's Lay". Heimdallr, naming himself Riigr, spends nights in different places with the terrestrial married couples. Later each of the hostesses gives birth to a son who symbolizes a rank of ancient Northmen's society: Thrääll



('Bondsman') becomes the ancestor of slaves; Karl ('Peasant') of freemen and Jarl ('Noble') of noblemen. The youngest son of the last, young Konr (ON 'Kon ungr') seems to become a king (ON 'konungr'). G. Dumézil interprets the story as an explication of the general Indo-European structure (Dumézil 1968: 118-125). On the other hand, the interpretation can be based on the theory of evolution, IF we pay attention to the difference of the looks and property of the landlords' sons. The steps of the development of the human race can be seen in the lay as a very old tradition, to my mind.

The classification of women is given in "Riigr's Lay" as well.

Bondswoman. The first peasant house where Riigr rests is habited by a very old couple. The woman is called Edda (ON 'Great-grandmother'). Only her cap is described of her dressing as ancient (Riigr, 2). The food is simple in the house. The successor of Riigr and Edda is unseemly (ibid., 8). His future life companion is not a fair one, too (ibid., 10). She comes to the place by foot; her feet are covered with wounds and her face is burnt by sun (ibid.). The children of her and Thrääll wear only pejorative names (ibid., 12 - 13). So the origin of *thräälls* is given without mercy.

In the epic bondswomen are seldom met. One can include into their list Herborg, war-prisoner from the land of Huns, maid-servant of Gjuuki's wife and tutor of her children (G I, 6-12), although she has been born free. Fenja and Menja, the Giantesses, are war prisoners, too. Helgi Hundingrbane saves his life, disguising himself as a bondswoman (HHb II). Hagall thinks him a war-prisoner of the king of Ylfingrs (Völsungrs) (ibid., 3). So the transformation of ladies of upper classes into bondswomen was possible.

It is not clear if the maidens promised by Griimhildr to Gudruun are bondswomen or free-born (G II, 26). Two of them are named by personal names Vinbiörg and Valbiörg (ibid., 32); they are also named women of Valland (ibid., 34). Atli, too, has gifted seven maidens to Gudruun (Gr St of A, 94); their status is also not clear.

The only time when a bondswoman becomes the leading character of the lay (if Fenja and Menja are excluded) is in "Gudruun's Lay", III: Herkja, having been Atli's mistress, accuses Gudruun unjustifiably of having been mistress to King Thjoodrekr. Gudruun demands God's Judgement by boiling water. She is successful and her honour is restored while Herkja is sent to the morass. One never learns the true motif of Herkja's behaviour. Is it jealousy, revenge for her lost position, hope to change her fate? Nevertheless, she does not achieve a better position in Atli's court; eventually, everyone fails trying to change the order set by the Gods.

We meet servant maids in Aesir's places (Beyla in Ls, 56; Loki disguising himself as a servant- maid in Thr, 21) and in the houses of the Giants (maid of Gerdr, Skirn, 15; Hyymir's maids, Ls, 34). The weeping maids in "Vegtamr's Lay", 12, can be attendants of Hel. We do not know if the seven sisters whose lover Odin/ Haarbardr claims to have been (Haarb) are of the same rank.

In "Riigr's Lay" Riigr enters a better house next. The hostess, too, is better looking: she has an amulet on her breast, a necklace, a coloured kerchief (Riigr, 16). Later her daughter-in-law is dressed in a goat's skin and has keys hanging on her girdle (ibid., 20). The hostess is named Amma ('Peasant woman'). In the epic representatives of the rank are met as servants or shield-

bearers of noblemen; the women are maidservants or attendants of the ladies. We get to know Sigrúun's maid (HHb II, 38-40); maids of Menglöd, called by personal names (Fjölsv, 37-38). Svanhildr has maids of her own (G In, 15).

Generally, the situation to the servants, including maidservants, is not a good one. The example can be Loki's taunting of Byggvir and Beyla (Ls, 44; 46; 56). Loki says to Beyla simply, "You are the most wretched waste at the Aesir, you're full of ordure, maid!" (Ls, 56). None of the maid-servants is characterized in the epic; their function is to add dignity to their mistresses or to bring news.

Lady. As the main characters of the heroic side of the Poetic Edda are noblemen, kings and daughters of kings, it is understandable that their list is of the greatest number. One can take the bearer of Odin's child Rindr "of western side" (Vegt, 11) just as an example. "Hyndla's Lay" gives a long list of the ancestors of Ootarr: many noblemen and -women, Hleediis the priestess and also god Baldr's wife Nanna are mentioned among them (Hyn 13, 15; 17-21, 25-27; 29; 35). The ties between noblewomen and Odin can be seen by another, non-sexual side, too: half-earthly Valkyries, like Alvit, Svaava, Sigrúun and Brynhildr, are daughters of kings. Menglöd is Odin's charge.

In "Riigr's Lay" the last house, entered by Riigr, belongs to Fadír and Moodir, Father and Mother. They are good-looking. Moodir pays special attention to her dressing (Riigr, 25-26); her appearance is thoroughly described: high cap (see also: Thr, 17 and 20); long shirt, blue skirt (blue colour was a symbol of nobility among the ancient Celtic and Germanic tribes). Her brows are bright, her neck and breast are white; white is also the main colour of the place: towels and bread are told to be white. Jarl, born after Riigr's visit, has light hair and gets silky napkins (Riigr, 31). Jarl's consort will be Erna, a fair and a clever one. One can emphasize that Erna is the first maiden in the lay who does not come to the house herself but to whom court is paid (ibid., 36-37).

If we do not include into the list Gjuuki's kin, it seems to be important that almost all noblewoman are either queens (Niidudr's consort; the wives of Hjörvardr; Borghildr, who is the queen of Denmark and rules alone; Atli's mother; Svanhildr) or princesses (Sigrlinn; Svaava; Sigrúun; Borgnyy, Oddruun). The exceptions are Aalof, jarl's daughter (HHj) and Thoora Haakon's daughter (G II, 13).

As far as their appearance is concerned, they are mostly said to be beautiful. Their skin is light (Vööl, 1); their hair is bright (SF III, 61). Svanhildr, like her mother (Griip, 33) has hair "as golden as sun" (G In, 16). Their dressing seems to have been of no consequence to the creators of the epic. We only learn that Brynhildr demands that shields and clothes and cloaks from the south should be put to the funeral pyre of herself and Sigvördr (SF III, 63). The South and the southern goods are symbols of property in the epic; many queens are also of southern origin. Brynhildr also promises good clothing to her court maids, if they only agree to accompany her on her quest to the netherworld (ibid., 66). By way of comparison, the dressing of women is also very briefly described in the *Nibelungenlied*, having been composed much later (see, for example, "Avanture" V, 276) or has a symbolic meaning as the white shirt of Brunnhilde ("Avanture" VII, 392; X, 632). As a curious fact, the dressing of men has far more importance in the *Nibelungenlied*, for example, in "Avanture" VI in which the question of dressing must be solved at first when Gunther and Siegfried decide to have a

court-paying journey to Isenstein. Maybe the dressing bears the significance of power (also magic) and functions rather as a marker of wealth than as a poetic ornament. The presenting of Brynhildr's kerchief shows her status as a married woman (SF III, 49).

Adornments, having more magical meaning, can be found more frequently in the epic. Alvir's bracelet, made by Vöölundr, plays the most important role in "Vöölundr's Lay". Skirnir offers Gerdr a magic ring for her love (Skirn, 21). Atli wants to buy himself free from the guilt of the death of Gudruun's brothers by silver (Gr L of A, 39).

The disposition of the Lady: one can note that they do not possess any good reputation. Niidudr's consort is groundlessly evil; Borghildr and Atli's mother become killers in their revenge. Sigrun and Brynhildr cause the death of many men, etc.

The social position of the woman remains unclear in the case of the crone living at the East in the Iron Forest (Völ, 32). One only learns her negative function as the feeder of werewolves.

## 5. FAMILY RELATIONS

Comparing goddesses and mortal women by their ties with their relatives, the difference is not remarkable. All human feelings are known to the goddesses as well. Frigg and Skadi mourn their relatives (Ls, 27; 51); the last gives an oath of revenge as well (ibid., 51). Thor's daughter is married off without asking her opinion, as was the custom (Alv). The Giantesses, too, behave according to the general model (Hyym, 7-9; 11-12; HHj, 14-30). Let us observe the main familiar ties one by one.

Great honour is paid to the position of mother in the family. One can also note signs of defining families after the mother's name, as Loki Laufeysson (Ls, 52 ff.) or in "Hamdir's Lay", 25: "Two sons of the same mother". Generally children obey their mother. Gudruun surrenders to the insistence of her mother (G II, 21-32). So do Gudruun's sons, against their own will (G In, 2-8). The murder of Griimhildr is one of the reasons Gudruun kills Atli (Gr St of A, 53). The only time when a son does not acknowledge his own mother is in "Faafnir's Lay", 2. We do not know the reason: either Sigvördr wants to hide his descent or he disavows his mother because of her new marriage. However, he calls his mother "noble Hjördiis" at Griipir's place (Griip, 3).

The attitude of mother to her successors is different. Grooa seems to be the only one who takes care of her son. Niidudr's wife remains passive in looking for her lost sons (Vööl). Tyyr's mother does not hesitate to betray her son and his friend to her husband (Hyym, 12). Griimhild wants her daughter to forget her first love. Gudruun herself gives her daughter to wife to wicked Jörmunrekr, although she says having loved Sigvördr's daughter most of all her children (G In, 15-16). She is also able to kill her own son (Gr St of A, 73-75; Gr L of A, 36-38). This fact can be connected with child-murder, characteristic to those times. In the end she sends the grown-up sons of herself and Joonakr to sure death (G In; Hamd).

The disposition of stepmothers is not so evil as in fairy-tales. Skadi names Feyr "our son" (Skirn, 1) although he has been born before her marriage to Njördr. Hyymir's second wife shows kindness to Tyyr and Thor (Hyym, 9) and even advises them about how to fulfill a

difficult task (*ibid.*, 30). Borghildr kills Sinfjötli but only in revenge for her brother's murder (Sinfj).

The status of mother-in-law is presented once in the epics: Gudruun complains that she has not got even a daughter-in-law who could sacrifice for her (G In, 18).

In the epics we often meet two or more sisters together: King Hlödver's daughters (Vööl); Gudruun and Gullrönd (G I, 12); Gudruun and her two sisters (Gr St of A, 97). Lyngheidr and Lofnheidr (SF II, 10). Fenja and Menja are possibly sisters (Grott). Seven sisters are mistresses of Haarbardr (Haarb). Sisters have always the same function at the beginning; later one of them gets a different one: Alvittr becomes the consort of the main character; Lyngheidr gives birth to the revenger, etc. Sometimes one names the other her sister just so, because of friendship or kinship, as Freyja names Hyndla (Hyn, 1) or Brynhildr names Gudruun (SF III; 59).

The relationship of sister and brother is based on the kin fidelity or, to be precise, chiefly on breaking of that principle. Dagr (HHb II, 28) and the Gjuukingsr (SF III) kill their sister's husband but the wives do not revenge. Sigrúun only claims to be longing for Helgi's death (HHb II, 29-31) but remains passive. Gudruun even knows the murder plan of Gjuukingsr (Sigv, 10) but does not try to change the fate. Getting the news of Sigvörðr's death, she condemns Högni, quite like Sigrúun (G II, 9) but afterwards only goes out to be alone with her departed husband (*ibid.*, 11). Both times, either in the case of Sigrúun or of Gudruun, brothers remind their sisters about the obligatory kinship obedience (HHb II, 32; G II, 10). Later it is Gudruun who warns her brothers about Atli's plans and becomes the revenger of their death. She also adds the death of her sister's daughter to the list of accusations presented to Atli (Gr St of A, 53). Atli accuses her of the death of his own sister (*ibid.*, 52), so the revenge principle could have been one-for-one. The holiness of consanguinity stated explicitly in "Sigvörðr Faafnirbane's Lay" II, by Lynghildr's words: "It is hard for a sister, even if her father dies, to avenge her brother's guilt". So one can conclude that brother was even more important a relative than father. In "Lokasenna", 17, too, Loki tells about Idunn's intercourse with her brother's murderer as about a most shameful one.

One more possible relationship is given by Loki in "Lokasenna", 32 and 36: he tells that Freyja has been mistress of her brother and Njörðr has begotten his son with his sister. One can accept the fact as a note about the ancient custom spread among the Vanir gods but not among the Aesir.

The relationship of father and daughter is different in different families. Thor takes care of his daughter, saving her of Alviiss; he is also not pleased that the girl was promised to a goblin without asking his paternal permission (Alv, 4): father "has the first say" (*ibid.*). So it is understandable why Vöölundr makes namely Niidudr pledge the oath that he will not send his daughter to death, although she is dishonoured (Vööl, 31) and Niidudr is the first to ask his daughter about the intercourse (*ibid.*, 38). Father, of course, was the one who determined the social position of the daughter. In "Hamdir's Lay", 20, Jörmunrekr and Bikki are told: "You let the daughter of the very powerful ones to be trodden," which illustrates Svanhildr's position. Svaava, Brynhildr, Gudruun and Gullrönd, just for example, are called by the names of their fathers. Still step-father is important: Brynhildr is also named "Heimir's stepdaughter" (Griip, 29; 31). Close relationship demands special behaviour from a daughter as a revenger,

too: Hriimgerdr and Lyngheidr are the examples, although the first does not succeed and the second does not want the deed.

As for the ties between mother and daughter, they are mostly presented from the aspect of mothers planning the best future for their daughters. Unfortunately, their plans are not fair, for example the memory drink given to Sigvördr and later to Gudruun, or the marriage of Svanhildr to Jörmunrekr, and thus they eventually cause the fall of their beloved daughters.

One finds almost only married women in the epics; the single ones become married during the action earlier or later. If a wife is widowed, she marries again soon, as Gudruun does. Polygamic marriages have also taken place: Hyymir has two wives; King Hjörvardr has four; Gunnarr wants to have a second wife, although he already has one at home. The causes of marriage are different: love, as between Svaava and Helgi Hjörvarðrsson; magic, as in the cases of Freyr and Sigvördr; compensation, as giving Gudruun to Atli; political idea (?), as marrying Svanhildr to Jörmunrekr. Wars are waged for getting the chosen maiden to wife, like in the lays of both Helgis. Breaking of the marriage oath is a severe transgression, as in the cases of Hedinn (HHj, 32-34) or Gudruun and King Thjoodrekr (G III). Randveer and Svanhildr are both put to death for the accusation of adultery (G In, Prologue). Generally, wife and husband remain true to each other, like Sigvördr and Gudruun who sail together to conquer the new lands (Gr St of A, 97-98), even until the very death: in Brynhildr deciding to follow Sigvördr to the Nether World the parallels with ancient Indo-European *sati* tradition can be seen. Brynhildr thinks the act of self-sacrifice natural and cannot understand why Gudruun does not follow her husband (SF III, 59). The exceptions of that rule are Alvit and Gudruun in her marriage with Atli. The first is unable to change her Valkyrie mind although she has lived a married life for years, and for two more years she tries to remain with her husband (Vööl, 3). Gudruun's tie with Atli has always been overshadowed by Sigvördr, Gudruun's knowledge that she has been married unwillingly, and later the death of her close relatives caused by Atli. So it is easy for her to destroy her new family in revenge for the destruction of her own kin.

In the important activities, wives can be cleverer and more active than their husbands. Frigg is able to see through her husband's (Odin's) favourite king (Grimn). Kostbera (Gr St of A, 14-15; 17-19) and Glaumvör (ibid., 21-22) warn their husbands, having solved the warning runes sent by Gudruun. Niidudr's wife finds the best way to render Vöölundr helpless (Vööl, 16).

If we do not include the tauntings of Loki in "Lokasenna", four mistresses can be found in the epics: Bödvildr, Herkja, Oddruun and Borgnyy. Two false accusations can be added. One of them is presented on purpose of sending a *persona non grata* to death: Herkja accuses Gudruun in the intercourse with Thjoodrekr. The other indictment is the unclear cause of Sigvördr's murder: it is not stated in the epic, unlike the *Nibelungenlied* ("Avanture" 14), that Sigvördr could not have been Brynhildr's lover before Gunnarr became her husband. The accusation comes entirely from Gudruun and causes Sigvördr's death indirectly.

Bödvildr is seduced or violated in a state of unconsciousness by Vöölundr for vengeance; their intercourse has no more importance than dishonouring Niidudr's daughter. Herkja's earlier ties with Atli remain unexplained; we only learn that she has been his mistress. The fates of Oddruun and Borgnyy are quite similar: both have become mistresses because their relatives, Gudruun's brother and Borgnyy's father, have refused to let them to be married with



their beloved. Oddruun's tie with Gunnarr lasts until his death, immediately before that Oddruun even tries to save her sweetheart (Odd, 31-32). One never learns why Atli refuses to give his sister to Gunnarr, himself having married Gunnar's sister: either he deems him too weak (see also SF III, 33) or he knows him to be married already and does not want to have his sister in the second position in Gunnarr's house. Borgny lives with her lover secretly for five years. It is not stated what happens to Vilmundr. Does he leave his mistress because of her pregnancy? Is he killed? At least, we know his absence at the childbed; by the folk tradition of the ancient Northmen the presence of the father of the child conceived without wedlock could help at delivery. By the way, the "runes of mother-in-law" (meant to help women in childbirth) were taught to men, too (Sgdrf, 9). So it is understandable why Oddruun and her powerful runes are badly needed. The ties of two women become more intimate after the given aid.

## 6. TRANSFORMATION OF MEN

In the Poetic Edda five men can be found about whom it is said that they have been transformed into women. No cases to the contrary of turning women into men can be met. Sometimes women can change only their primary function. In "Sigvördr Faafnirbane's Lay" III, 48, women reply to Brynhildr: "... courtwomen hold the court fire"; so one can conclude that there can be also women of other kind, behaving not like women, such as Brynhildr. In "Gudruun's Lay" III, 8, Gudruun says that as Högni, her previous guardian, is dead, "now I must stand up myself for my own". No direct disguise of women into men is noted in the epics.

As for the transformation of men, Odin himself is the first who sets the example: Loki accuses him to have been transformed into Völva and wandered as a witch (see also 3: "Völva"). Two warriors, Gudmundr and Sinfjötli, follow his pattern, as we learn in "Helgi Hundingrbane's Lay", I: Sinfjötli taunts that his enemy has spent times as a sorceress on the island of Varin (HHb I, 37), that he has also been a vixen (*ibid.*); that he has been a dirty woman and a Valkyrie witch (*ibid.*, 38) and has also given birth to nine wolves (*ibid.*); at last he names Gudmundr "bride of Grani", (Grani - Sigvördr's horse) and "trollwoman" (*ibid.*, 41). Hödbroddr, Gudmundr's brother, by his side, names Sinfjötli "daughter of thursar" (*ibid.*, 42). The motif of castration is also added in the same lay, as Gudmundr declares that Sinfjötli was not able to have an intercourse with him as the one who has given birth to nine wolves, because he has been gelded by the daughters of thursar in Thoorsnes (*ibid.*, 39). In "Helgi Hjörvarðsson's Lay", 20, Hriimgerdr, too, taunts Atli as a pitiful castrate.

As for the allusion to homosexual relations between Sinfjötli and Gudmundr (HHb I, 38; 41), they can be interpreted in several ways. At first, it can be just shameful taunting. The fact that Gudmundr does not refute the accusation contradicts it. Homosexuality seems to have been extant among ancient Germanic tribes, at least we know the hardest punishment for that: both culprits were drowned in mud (Schlette 1976: 256). So it was an existing fact, taking place especially at campaigns when men did not meet women for long periods. It seems to be probable that the relation announced in the lay is one of those ties.

The next instance of the transformation is Thor's change into "Thrymr's bride Freyja" in "Thrymr's Lay". Later we learn that woman's disguise was used by Helgi Hundingrbane. So this kind of transformation is based on peril: Helgi saves his own life and Thor the lives of the

Aesir this way. Different is Loki's appearance as a woman in the lay. One must keep in mind that while Thor refuses to take on a woman's aspect (Thr, 18), Loki wants to transform himself voluntarily (ibid., 21). As we learn from the Prose Edda ("Gylfaginning", XLIX), Loki takes the appearance of a woman twice to cause the destruction of Baldr: once as an old woman to discover the secret of Frigg; another time as Giantess Thökk to destroy the plan of liberating Baldr. Moreover, Loki is said to have borne several children: some when he lived eight years as a milkmaid in the Nether World (Ls, 23); Odin, presenting the fact, adds that probably it is bad to become a woman (ibid.). Loki also becomes pregnant as he appears as a mare, later giving birth to Sleipnir, as we learn from the Prose Edda ("Gylfaginning", XLII); the fact is also mentioned in "Hyndla's Lay", 37. At the end of the third time of his pregnancy, having been impregnated by the half-burnt heart-stone of a wicked woman, he gives birth to all the gloomy faces of the world (Hyn, 38). So even lesbian intercourse with an absurd result has taken place in the epic!

## Conclusion

The Poetic Edda seems to be the poetry of men. So women, goddesses and noblewomen mostly, are introduced from their point of view. Their appearance is not of importance; it is rather their fidelity to their husband and/or their kin and their status as mothers of the family that is emphasised. Wisdom is also respectable, as we see in the case of Sigdríifa, Glaumvör and Kostbera. Generally, women can reveal a stronger character than men (Niidudr's wife, Brynhildr and Gudruun). A mild and lovely woman, feminine in the contemporary sense, does not succeed, like Svanhildr. Effeminacy is most shameful for a man. Women, however, are held in honour, they behave independent enough and have an acceptable right to speak about all the things of life.

## Abbreviations and Literature

- Alv: Alviiss's Lay
- BrJ: Brynhildr's Journey to the Nether World
- Cluny Ross, Margaret. Skaldskaparmal. New York, 1970.
- Davidson, Hilda R. Ellis. Gods and myths of the Ancient Northmen. Harmondsworth, 1964.
- Dumézil, Georges. Gods of the Ancient Northmen. California, 1968.
- Faafn: Faafnir's Lay
- Fjölsv: Fjölsvidr's Lay
- Frischauer, Paul. Moral und Unmoral der deutschen Frau. München, 1970.
- G I: Gudruun's Lay I
- G II: Gudruun's Lay II
- G III: Gudruun's Lay III
- G In: Gudruun's Initiation
- Griip: Griipir's Prophecy
- Grimn: Grimnir's Lay
- Gr L of A: Greenlander's Lay of Atli
- Gr St of A: Greenlander's Story of Atli

Grooa: Grooa's Charm  
Grott: Grottasang  
Haarb: Haarbardr's Lay  
Hamd: Hamdir's Lay  
HHb I: Helgi Hundingrbane's Lay I  
HHb II: Helgi Hundingrbane's Lay II  
HHj: Helgi Hörvardsson's Lay  
Hyn: Hyndla's Lay  
Hyym: Hyymir's Lay  
Ls: Lokasenna  
Morris, Catherine. Sorceress or Witch? New York, 1970.  
Munch, Peter Andreas. Norse Mythology. Michigan, 1968.  
Nibelungide laul. Tallinn, 1977.  
Noorem Edda. Tallinn, 1990.  
Odd: Oddruun's Complaint  
ORC: Odin's Raven Charm  
Riigr: Riigr's Lay  
Schlette, Hermann. Germaanlased Thorsbergi ja Ravenna vahel. Tallinn, 1976.  
SF II: Sigvördr Faafnirbane's Lay II  
SF III: Sigvördr Faafnirbane's Lay III  
Sfj: Sinfjötli's End  
Sgdrf: Siigrdriifa's Learnings  
Sigv: Sigvördr's Lay  
Skirn: Skirnir's Ride  
Thr: Thrymr's Lay  
Vafth: Vafthruudnir's Lay  
Vanem Edda. Tallinn, 1970.  
Vegt: Vegtamr's Lay  
Völ: Völuspaa  
Vööl: Vöölundr's Lay