

Rory McTurk

University of Leeds

Tolkien's *Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*: Creative Drama or Scholarly Exercise?

Abstract: J. R. R. Tolkien's *Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* consists of two long narrative poems on the major events of *Völsunga saga*, making use, where possible, of eddic sources as well as the saga, and accompanied by notes written by Tolkien himself, but edited and augmented by his son. The poems, written in eddic metres and consisting to a large extent of dialogue, are amenable to analysis in terms of Terry Gunnell's concept of dialogic eddic poetry as a form of drama; hence the use of the term "drama" in the paper's title. The first of the two poems partly fills the gap left by the lacuna in the Codex Regius, the manuscript in which the edda poems are mainly preserved, but with a much smaller number of stanzas than the 200–300 stanzas that Tolkien evidently believed the lost leaves contained (221), the reason for this apparently being that the smaller number of stanzas accords better with the overall structure of his poem. The book as a whole thus shows a tension between scholarly and creative impulses. Tolkien's treatment of his sources is considered in the context of his fondness for "creating depth" (identified by Shippey 272–81). Tolkien's exclusion from his poems of the figure of Áslaug, presented in *Völsunga saga* and its sequel, *Ragnars saga*, as the ancestress of a line of kings and the daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, who nevertheless claim to have had chaste relations, leads to a discussion of the relations between these two and their equivalents in related narratives: the Faroese ballads of Sjúrdur, the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, and the German-influenced Old Norse *Þiðreks saga*. The prominence of Sigurðr's horse in these various narratives in turn raises the question of whether the presentation of relations between Sigurðr and Brynhildr in Germanic and especially Scandinavian tradition may owe something to a distant memory of the Indo-European ritual associated with the installation of kings, in which, as indicated by M. L. West, the queen lay with the corpse of a stallion while verses were chanted encouraging it to impregnate her (414–19).

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, consists of two long poems entitled *Völsungakviða en nýja eða Sigurðarkviða en mesta* ("The New Lay of the Volsungs, or the Longest Lay of Sigurd") and *Gudrúnarkviða en nýja eða dráp Niflunga* ("The New Lay of Gudrún, or the Slaying of the Niflungs"). The poems are inspired by various monuments of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, most especially the Poetic Edda, a thirteenth-century collection of poems of varying date, some as old as the ninth century; and two thirteenth-century writings: the anonymous prose *Völsunga saga*, and the prose *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241). Tolkien's poems are composed in convincing modern English imitations of metrical forms found in

Old Norse eddic poetry. The form predominantly used by Tolkien is *fornyrðislag* (“old story metre”), the metre reflected in all the stanzas of both his poems, with the exception of three stanzas in *Völsungakviða en nýja*, which reflect the form known as *ljóðaháttur* (“chant-metre”). Tolkien’s use of these two forms is illustrated below; the English terms “old story metre” and “chant-metre” are borrowed respectively from Tolkien himself (45) and from Phillpotts (*Edda and Saga* 40). Bold type is used in both quotations to show examples of alliteration, and in the right-hand quotation underlining is used in addition to bold type to illustrate Tolkien’s recognition that, in *ljóðaháttur*, the alliteration in the third and sixth lines of the stanza is independent of the alliteration in the lines preceding them. The left-hand quotation (in *fornyrðislag*) has moreover been chosen to illustrate his recognition that, while consonants alliterate with themselves in Old Norse poetry, one vowel may alliterate with another, witness the third and fourth lines of the stanza:

fornyrðislag (“old story metre”):

Forth sprang the wolf
by fear blinded
of awful eyes
that opened wide.
Gram was brandished,
gleaming handled,
hissing **h**urled aloft
at **h**asting beast. (172)

ljóðaháttur (“chant-metre”):

‘Who a foe lets free
is fool indeed,
when he was **h**ane of **h**rother!
I alone would be lord
of linkéd gold,
if my **u**ielded sword had **u**on it.’ (114)

In this paper I am mainly concerned with the first of Tolkien’s two poems, *Völsungakviða en nýja*, which brings together in more or less harmonious form the different versions of the story of Sigurðr and Brynhildr that are found in the three main sources specified above. I say “more or less” because Tolkien’s poem, magnificent though it is, does to some extent reflect the difficulty of harmonizing the different versions of the story, as will be shown below. One reason for this difficulty, among others, is the fact that some eight leaves are missing from the principal manuscript of the Poetic Edda, the so-called Codex Regius (Gammel kongelig samling 2365 4to), dating from the second half of the thirteenth century. The result of this is that, in the Poetic Edda, a gap is left in the story of Sigurðr from the point at which he first meets Brynhildr up to the point at which the sons of Gjúki plot to kill him (Hollander 239–43; cf. Neckel 195, 198). The likely content of the missing leaves may be tentatively deduced from the prose of *Völsunga saga*, which is based on a fuller version of the Poetic Edda than that which survives. Tolkien himself believed that the missing leaves contained 200–300 stanzas (221), but rather surprisingly covers the relevant part of the story (in *Völsungakviða en nýja*) in only 125 stanzas (124–68). This is presumably because the relatively small number of stanzas is better suited to the

overall unity of Tolkien's poem than the relatively large one. In other words, the demands of the creative imagination seem to have taken precedence here over the demands of scholarship: Tolkien the creative writer has apparently reduced the number of stanzas that Tolkien the scholar believed were contained in the lacuna.

In using in my title the word "creative" to refer to these poems I have in mind the way in which Tolkien, while following his sources carefully and closely, nevertheless makes them very much his own, and with the word "drama" I am drawing attention to the fact that each of his two poems consists to a large extent of speeches taking the form of dialogue, thus reflecting the interplay of character in the manner of drama. I give below some tables illustrating by number and percentage the proportion in each poem of lines taken up with speeches spoken by the characters, and marked off by quotation marks in Tolkien's text:

<i>Völsungakviða en nýja</i> :	339 stanzas	=	2,720 lines, including	1,283	lines of speech (47%)
<i>Gudrúnarkviða en nýja</i> :	166 stanzas	=	1,336 lines, including	571	lines of speech (43%)
Both together:	505 stanzas		4,056 lines, including	1,854	lines of speech (46%)

(both poems are in *fornyrðislag* apart from 3 *ljóðaháttir* stanzas in *Völsungakviða en nýja*: 5.42–44)

I am mainly concerned here with *Völsungakviða en nýja*, as already indicated, and most especially with the part of it that covers the gap in the story left by the leaves missing from the Codex Regius. I would note, however, that both poems, with the speech passages they contain, are amenable to analysis in terms of Terry Gunnell's concept of dialogic eddic poetry as a form of drama, as advanced in his book *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*. It is true that their proportions of speech passages are by no means as high as in eddic poems composed in *ljóðaháttir*, which consist almost exclusively of speeches and which form the main basis of Gunnell's argument, but there is no reason why eddic poems in *fornyrðislag* containing, like Tolkien's poems, "dialogue between identified fictional characters" should not be used in support of that argument, as one of Gunnell's reviewers has indicated (McKinnell 322). I cannot do justice to Gunnell's argument here, but would quote his translation of the questions sceptically raised by Andreas Heusler in his review of Phillipotts' *The Elder Edda*: "Is there any evidence of ritual plays having existed in pagan Scandinavia? Is it possible to say that the myths behind the poems dealing with the gods and heroes were based on such plays? Could such plays help to explain the artistic form of the poems?" (Gunnell 8n47). Gunnell's book is essentially a cautious answer in the affirmative to all three of these questions, and in the present context, where my space is limited, I cannot resist quoting the dust jacket of his book: "The probability is that the manuscripts of the Eddic poems contain

some of the earliest examples of popular drama in the vernacular in Europe, works which with little doubt have much earlier roots in dramatic pagan ritual.”

I give below summaries of the relevant parts of *Völsunga saga* and Snorri’s *Edda*, placed side by side in columns in such a way as to show the main similarities and differences between their two accounts. Reference may be made to the combined edition and translation of *Völsunga saga* by Finch (30–61); to Faulkes’s translation of Snorri’s *Edda* (*Edda* 102–03) and his edition of the relevant part of it (*Edda Skáldskaparmál* 47–48); to Örnólfur Thorsson’s combined edition of *Völsunga saga* and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (101–05, 109–22, 148); and to Schlauch’s translation of *Völsunga saga* and *Ragnars saga* (185–91, 198–215, 251).

Part of *Völsunga saga* (c. 1250):

Sigurðr slays the dragon Fáfnir, takes its gold (on which there is a curse), and travels until he meets Brynhildr on a mountain; she has sworn never to marry a man who knows fear. They plight their troth, whereupon Sigurðr leaves, travelling now to the castle of Heimir, Brynhildr’s foster-father. He finds Brynhildr there too and they renew their betrothal; he gives her a ring from the dragon’s goldhoard. Sigurðr then leaves again, travelling this time to the castle of King Gjúki and his wife Grímhildr, who have three sons, Gunnarr, Högni, and Guttormr, and a daughter, Guðrún, who has been having prophetic dreams about a hawk, a stag and a wolf-cub. Sigurðr forgets Brynhildr after being given a magic potion to drink by Grímhildr, swears oaths of mutual loyalty with Gunnarr and Högni, and marries Guðrún. Gunnarr now seeks to woo Brynhildr, but cannot cross the barrier of fire surrounding her hall, either on his own horse, Goti, or on Sigurðr’s horse, Grani. Sigurðr exchanges shapes with Gunnarr and, mounted on Grani, crosses the fire. He and Brynhildr (who believes him to be Gunnarr) sleep together for three nights with a drawn sword between them, and Sigurðr takes from her the ring from the dragon’s hoard that he had given her earlier (at Heimir’s), replacing it with another. He and Gunnarr resume their own shapes and Brynhildr, after entrusting her daughter by Sigurðr, Áslaug, to Heimir, marries Gunnarr. Sigurðr now remembers his betrothal to Brynhildr, but gives no sign. Later, when bathing with Brynhildr, Guðrún shows her that she, Guðrún, has the ring

Part of Snorri’s prose *Edda* (before 1241):

Sigurðr slays the dragon Fáfnir, takes its gold (on which there is a curse), and travels until he meets Hildr (also known as Brynhildr) on a mountain. Sigurðr then visits King Gjúki and his wife Grímhildr, who have two sons, Gunnarr and Högni; two daughters, Guðrún and Guðný; and a stepson, Gothormr. Sigurðr marries Guðrún. Gunnarr and Högni swear oaths of brotherhood with him, and Gunnarr seeks to woo Brynhildr, who has sworn to marry no one but the man who can ride the flickering flame surrounding her hall. Gunnarr cannot do this on his own horse, Goti, but Sigurðr, after exchanging shapes and names with Gunnarr, succeeds, riding on Grani, who will move for no-one but Sigurðr. He and Brynhildr spend a night together with a drawn sword between them, and Sigurðr gives her a ring from the dragon’s goldhoard, receiving another from her in return. Sigurðr and Gunnarr resume their own shapes [and Brynhildr marries Gunnarr]. Later, when bathing with Brynhildr, Guðrún makes plain to her that she, Brynhildr, is wearing the ring from the hoard won by Sigurðr from the dragon, thus revealing that it was Sigurðr and not Gunnarr who had entered the flame-encircled hall. Brynhildr urges Gunnarr and Högni to kill Sigurðr, and Gothormr (who is not bound by the oaths of brotherhood) eventually does so. Brynhildr then commits suicide. Later, after Guðrún’s two further marriages and the deaths of her children by all three marriages have been related, mention is

from the hoard that was taken from Brynhildr by Sigurðr, thus revealing that it was he and not Gunnarr who had entered the fire-encircled hall. Brynhildr feels herself betrayed and perjured, as she had sworn to marry no-one but the man who could brave the fire. She urges Gunnarr to kill Sigurðr, implying misconduct with her by Sigurðr in the fire-encircled hall. Sigurðr is eventually slain by Guttormr (who is not bound by the oaths of loyalty), whereupon Brynhildr denies Sigurðr's misconduct and commits suicide. After Guðrún's two further marriages and the deaths of her children by all three marriages have been related, *Völsunga saga* is followed by a sequel, *Ragnars saga*, in which Áslaug, the daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, first suffers the loss by death of Heimir, her foster-father, but later becomes the second wife of the saga's hero, Ragnarr loðbrók, and the great-grandmother by this marriage of Haraldr hárfagri, the first sole ruler of Norway.

made of a surviving daughter of Sigurðr, Áslaug, who was brought up by Heimir and from whom important lines are descended.

We may notice at least four differences between these two accounts. Firstly, Snorri's account shows doubt as to the name of the figure met by Sigurðr on the mountain, calling her Hildr as well as Brynhildr. Secondly, Snorri makes no mention of Sigurðr's visit to Heimir, with the result that the ring is treated differently in the two accounts, ending up on Guðrún's finger in *Völsunga saga* and on Brynhildr's in Snorri. Thirdly, in *Völsunga saga* Guttormr/Gothormr is a full brother of Gunnarr and Högni; in Snorri's account he is their stepbrother. Fourthly, in Snorri's account Áslaug, who in *Völsunga saga* is the daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, is not mentioned until the end of the account, and is then said to be the daughter only of Sigurðr; the question of who her mother was is left open. These differences give some idea of the difficulties with which Tolkien must have been faced in seeking to give a unity to his poem. A particularly surprising feature of *Völsunga saga*'s account is that Sigurðr promptly leaves Brynhildr on each of the two occasions that he becomes betrothed to her: strange behaviour for a newly engaged man! This almost certainly indicates, as do the two names Hildr and Brynhildr in Snorri's account, that in early versions of the story, now lost, Sigurðr visited, and parted from, more than one woman, and that the author of *Völsunga saga* is here combining two women into one (cf. Andersson 83–84). *Völsunga saga* in particular raises the question of what exactly were the circumstances of Áslaug's conception. Was she conceived at the first meeting of Sigurðr and Brynhildr on the mountain, or at their second meeting at Heimir's castle, or at their third meeting

in the flame-encircled hall? If the third, how did they overcome the difficulty of the sword between them?

I shall now give a summary of the relevant part of Tolkien's poem, *Völsungakviða en nýja*:

Sigurd slays the dragon Fáfnir and takes its gold (including a ring, on which there is a curse) and travels until he meets Brynhild on a mountain; she has promised to marry only "the World's chosen". They plight their troth, but Brynhild bids Sigurd depart until he has won honour and a kingdom. Guðrún, daughter of King Gjúki and Queen Grímhild and sister of Gunnar and Högni, dreams of a stag and a wolf. Sigurd arrives at Gjúki's court; Gunnar and Sigurd sing of former exploits; with the help of the Gjúkungs Sigurd avenges his father's death. Grímhild gives Sigurd a drink which, it only later emerges, causes him to forget Brynhild. Óðin foretells a royal marriage for Brynhild. Sigurd marries Guðrún and swears oaths of mutual loyalty with Gunnar and Högni. Gunnar now seeks to woo Brynhild, riding on his horse Goti, while Sigurd rides on Grani. Neither Goti nor Grani will carry Gunnar across the flame-barrier that surrounds Brynhild, but Sigurd, mounted on Grani after assuming Gunnar's likeness, succeeds in crossing it. Sigurd and Brynhild lie together with a naked sword between them, Brynhild believing him to be Gunnar, and Sigurd takes a ring from her finger, substituting the ring from the dragon's goldhoard. Gunnar then marries Brynhild. Sigurd now remembers his betrothal to Brynhild, but gives no sign of doing so. Bathing with Brynhild, Guðrún makes plain to her that she, Brynhild, is wearing the ring from the hoard won by Sigurd from the dragon, thus revealing that it was Sigurd and not Gunnar who had slept with her in the flame-encircled hall. Seeing herself as betrayed and perjured, Brynhild urges Gunnar to kill Sigurd, claiming that he betrayed Gunnar's trust when sleeping with her. Grímhild's son Gothorm, who is not bound by oaths of loyalty to Sigurd, is prevailed upon to kill him, whereupon Brynhild denies Sigurd's misconduct and commits suicide. (*Guðrúnarkviða en nýja* then follows, covering what it presents as Guðrún's sole further marriage, to Atli, and her subsequent death by drowning). (99–180)

This summary seems to point to a tension in Tolkien between the demands of the creative imagination and those of scholarly accuracy. It is the creative impulse, surely, which prompts him to provide a reason for Sigurd leaving Brynhild after becoming betrothed to her (he must first win honour and a kingdom), and to tidy up the whole story by completely leaving out any mention of Áslaug. It seems to be the scholarly impulse, on the other hand, which makes him reluctant to emphasize the motif of the potion of forgetfulness, perhaps because of a sense that this is an interpolated motif, introduced to absolve the hero of blame (cf. Andersson 74–75; Tolkien 139–40, 154, 229), and which also leads him to follow the tradition, found in the eddic poem *Hyndluljóð* as well as in Snorri (see Tolkien 170, 239), that Gothormr was a stepbrother rather than a full brother of Gunnarr and Högni, thus leaving open the question of who was Gothormr's father. This resistance by Tolkien to a wholesale tidying up of loose ends is consistent with his notion of "depth," to which Tom Shippey has drawn attention. Shippey, indeed, discussed this notion of Tolkien's in relation to *Völsunga saga* in the second edition of his book, *The Road to Middle-Earth*,

published in 1992, long before *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* was published. Shippey's remarks, which are remarkably prescient in relation to the poem now under discussion, may be quoted:

Now this, I would suggest, is "depth" as Tolkien understood it: to repeat his words on *Sir Gawain*, the quality "which compensates for the inevitable flaws and imperfect adjustments that must appear, when plots, motives, symbols, are rehandled and pressed into the service of the changed minds of a later time". It is a quality which may exist in one text, but is produced by a complex of them. It is intensified by age, by loss, by reconstruction, by misunderstanding. A vital part of it is the sense that even the authors of texts like the *Völsunga* did not understand their own story, but were doing the best they could with it. And the charm of it, the sense of puzzlement, of a factual base, of a better and richer and truer story somewhere in the hinterland but never yet told, may in fact be created not by literary success but by literary failure. (276)

I would not accuse Tolkien of any serious "literary failure" in *Völsungakviða en nýja*, and I doubt if Shippey would either. I would agree, however, with Shippey that Tolkien "was attracted by the thought of deepening what he had written by presenting it from an unfamiliar or half-comprehending perspective" (280). Tolkien's presentation of Sigurd's forgetfulness and of Gothormr's parentage do indeed seem to be written from such a perspective. If, in reading his poem, we want answers to the question of why Sigurd appears to forget Brynhild and to the less important question of who was Gothormr's father, we have to go beyond the poem itself to its sources, to delve deeply into the "complex frame of tradition" (Shippey 276) that lies behind it. This quality of depth is one that Tolkien appears to have inherited from medieval writers, such as the authors of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Völsunga saga*, but is perhaps more consciously exploited in his case than in theirs.

In the published version of Tolkien's poems, most of the questions that they leave unanswered are in fact answered in commentaries written by Christopher Tolkien, partly on the basis of notes written by Tolkien himself. From these it is clear that there was one set of unanswered questions in Tolkien's sources, most especially *Völsunga saga*, with which he was not prepared to engage in his poem, namely the questions of when, where and how Áslaug, the daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, was conceived. The function of Áslaug, as the Tolkiens note (232), and as the left-hand summary above indicates, is to link *Völsunga saga* to its sequel, *Ragnars saga*, where she becomes the second wife of Ragnarr loðbrók and ultimately, as a result, the great-grandmother of Haraldr hárfagri, so that Sigurðr and Brynhildr thus become the ancestors of the kings of Norway. According to Tolkien, the inclusion of Áslaug in *Völsunga saga* is "a fatal addition" to the saga, because it takes away from the dramatic effect of Brynhildr *lying* to Gunnarr when she implies to him that Sigurðr slept with her, an insinuation she later withdraws (243). If indeed she is telling the truth in

making this insinuation, then she is guilty of lying when she withdraws it, and so would Sigurðr be, since in *Völsunga saga* (see Finch 59) and also in Tolkien's poem (174–75), Sigurðr and Brynhildr each indicate, just before dying, that relations between them had been chaste. That Sigurðr and Brynhildr were both lying at this later stage would hardly make for an appropriate end to their tragedy. It was considerations of this kind that led Tolkien to leave the figure of Áslaug out of account altogether in his poem.

Völsunga saga gives no clear idea of the circumstances of Áslaug's conception, as we have seen, and the Poetic Edda is of no help in this respect, since the relevant part of it is lost. It is noteworthy, however, that in *Völsunga saga* and in Snorri's *Edda* Sigurðr's horse, Grani, is present with Sigurðr and Brynhildr in the flame-encircled hall, since it is on Grani's back that Sigurðr crosses the flame barrier. Also noteworthy is the fact that in one of the Faroese "Dvørgamoy" ("Dwarf-maiden") ballads, recorded in the nineteenth century but reflecting, according to de Vries, a relatively early version of the story of Sigurðr and Brynhildr (286–89), the hero, Sjúrdur, after sleeping in a forest with a dwarf-maiden, Ása, and begetting a daughter by her, finds that his horse, Grani, is missing, whereupon Ása lends him a substitute horse, instructing him to send it back to her after leaving the forest, at which stage he will find Grani, as indeed happens. He later revisits the forest, only to find that Ása has died in childbirth and that their newly-born daughter is dead also; the ballad ends with him burying them (see Hammershaimb 92–100, 190–95; Djurhuus and Matras 283–94). The implication seems to be that, on Sjúrdur's first visit, Ása, the figure corresponding to Brynhildr in this ballad, knows where the horse is, and is keeping it to herself for purposes of her own before returning it to its master. I would ask whether these various details reflect a memory of the Indo-European ritual known as *asvamedha*, in which, as indicated most recently by West (414–19), the queen lay with the corpse of a stallion while verses were chanted encouraging it to impregnate her. This ritual, it should be noted, was associated with the installation of kings, and here it may be remembered that in *Ragnars saga* Áslaug, the daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, becomes the great-grandmother of a dynasty of Norwegian kings.

In a monograph published as long ago as 1917, Johansson (115–16) identified four main characteristics of this ritual, known in Sanskrit as *asvamedha*, or "horse sacrifice," as described in ancient Indian sources, as follows:

Firstly, the stallion that is chosen for the sacrifice is initially allowed to roam free for a year, guided by nobly-born youths. In some accounts the horse is hitched to a cart or chariot and takes part in a chariot race, and in some accounts also it is washed in a lake or river. The purpose of the roaming exercise, according to Johansson, is to bring fertility to the land by sympathetic magic.

This preliminary feature of the sacrifice led Johansson (115) to make a connection with Tacitus's account of the cult of the goddess Nerthus in chapter 40 of his *Germania* (AD 98), where the goddess travels around the countryside in a cart pulled by cows and is washed in a lake (cf. Puhvel 205); and also with the Roman October Festival at which the right-hand horse of the winning two-horse chariot in a race held on the Campus Martius was deemed sacred to Mars, and its head and tail were offered sacrificially in thanksgiving for the success of the harvest (Johansson 116–17, 123; cf. Puhvel 272).

Secondly, the sacrifice itself, according to Johansson, was also intended to induce fertility by magic (115–16). The king represents the fertility god symbolically, as does the stallion also, while the queen symbolizes the earth-goddess, or Mother Earth. The queen lies with the body of the stallion after it has been smothered to death and manipulates its generative organ in a manner suggestive of intercourse, to the accompaniment of obscene incantations uttered by those in attendance. This central part of the sacrifice, according to Johansson, confirms the bestowal of the god's procreative power on the earth and on human beings (116); and it was also this part of the sacrifice that led Schröder to make a connection with the twelfth-century account by Giraldus Cambrensis, in chapter 102 of his *Topographia Hiberniae*, of how, in Donegal, in the north of Ireland, the incoming king, declaring himself to be a horse, copulated with a mare in front of the assembled people (310–12). The mare was then sacrificed and dismembered, its meat was boiled, and a large barrel was filled with the broth. The naked king climbed into it and supped the broth, while gobbets of boiled meat were distributed among the spectators (cf. West 417–19).

Thirdly, among Johansson's four features of the sacrifice are such details as the bathing of the stallion, already mentioned, the boiling of its blood, and the cutting off of its tail, apparently for medicinal and purificatory purposes; and fourthly and finally, a marked feature of the sacrifice is the exchange of obscene, riddle-like questions and answers among those in attendance, notably between the priests and the women present at the ritual mating of queen and stallion.

It is these last three features of the sacrifice, the manipulation of the stallion's member, the cutting off of part of its body, and the exchange of riddling obscenities, that led Johansson to find its influence in the anonymous Old Icelandic *Völsa þáttr*, preserved in the late fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók*, with its account of how the Christian king Óláfr Haraldsson witnesses members of the still pagan household of a remote farm in northern Norway passing from one to another the chopped-off phallus of a horse, and reciting while doing so more or less obscene verses relating to the procreative power of animals and humans (117–23). There is disagreement about some of the details of this account, but there is little doubt that it reflects a ritual associated with the fertility god Freyr, as Näsström has shown (129–31); and Steinsland, noting in

particular *Völsa þátrr*'s emphasis that King Ólafr Haraldsson is present in disguise at this performance and puts a stop to it, has seen it as reflecting a pre-Christian ritual marriage associated with kingship (631).

The writings of O'Flaherty and Puhvel, both religious historians, and Roberto Calasso's carefully documented novel *Ka*, bring to light three interesting possible connections between the *ásvamedha* ritual and the story of Sigurðr and Brynhildr (O'Flaherty 149–212; Puhvel 269–76; Calasso 127–53). Firstly, it appears that in the case of the *ásvamedha* there had to be water at the place of sacrifice, usually a pond or a pool (Calasso 129–30); the bathing of the stallion has already been mentioned. Chapter 13 of *Völsunga saga* tells how Sigurðr, well before he meets Brynhildr, chooses his horse Grani from the stud of King Hjálprekr on the advice of an old man with a beard, who turns out to be the god Óðinn (see Finch 22–24). They drive all the horses into the river Busiltjörn, and all make for the shore except one. Óðinn explains that this horse is a descendant of his own horse, Sleipnir, and Sigurðr names him Grani. What is interesting here is the name *Busiltjörn*, described as a river in the saga, though the second element in the name, *tjörn*, in fact means “tarn,” “pond,” or “pool” (the first element, *Busil-*, may be related to the verb *bysja* [past tense *busti*] “to gush”; see Heggstad, Hødneø, and Simensen 69; cf. also 70, 439). It may be noted that *Völsunga saga* is the only one of Tolkien's sources (207) that presents Grani as descended from Sleipnir and associated specifically with Óðinn. This may reflect the tendency of the author of *Völsunga saga* to give walk-on appearances to Óðinn as a unifying motif, and does not exclude the possibility of Grani being associated with Freyr.

Secondly, the stallion used in the *ásvamedha* sacrifice was supposed to be a white horse, and, according to Hindu mythology, all white horses have red mouths, as a result of the creator god Prajāpati having his lips singed by the fire god Agni while he, Prajāpati, was in the form of a white horse (Calasso 130–31). Now the name *Grani*, as Finnur Jónsson notes, is not related to the adjective *grár* (“grey”), as might perhaps be expected, but rather to the feminine noun *grön*, meaning “upper or lower lip,” and referring in the case of Grani to the pink lips of a white horse (200).

Thirdly, it appears that part of the *ásvamedha* sacrifice involved capturing wild animals and placing each of them in a circle of fire before releasing them (Calasso 140–41). A circle of fire of course plays a prominent part in the story of Sigurðr and Brynhildr.

Sacker has drawn attention to the horse symbolism in the seventh *âventiure* of the Middle High German epic poem, *Nibelungenlied* (c. 1200) (279; see de Boor 71–73; Hatto 60–61). Sacker sees the horses belonging to Sívrit and Gunther, who correspond to the Sigurðr and Gunnarr of Norse tradition, as symbols not so much of fertility as of virility. He notes that on their arrival in

Islant, where Sívrit will help Gunther to win Brünhilt (who corresponds to the Norse Brynhildr), Sívrit leads Gunther's horse and does not lead his own horse until he has seen Gunther safely mounted on his. According to Sacker, this symbolizes, on the one hand, Gunther's dependence on Sívrit, whose help he needs in winning Brünhilt, and, on the other, Sívrit's dependence on Gunther, who has promised him, in return for his help, the hand in marriage of his sister, Kriemhilt, who corresponds to the Guðrún of Norse tradition. As far as I can discover, these horses in the *Nibelungenlied* are not named, whereas in Norse tradition, as we have seen, Grani and Goti are the names of the horses belonging to Sigurðr and Gunnarr respectively.

Andersson speaks of the "fluidity of the motif" of Sigurðr's acquisition of Grani in Norse tradition, noting that it differs from one version of the story to another (144). We have seen how it is handled in *Völsunga saga*, where Sigurðr obtains the horse from King Hjalprekr with Óðinn's help, well before he meets Brynhildr. It is handled altogether differently in the early to mid thirteenth-century *Piðreks saga*, an anonymous prose work in Old Norse which contains mainly German narrative material, and which, according to Andersson, shares with the *Nibelungenlied* a lost source, **Brünhildenlied* (21–23), which also formed, indirectly, a source for *Völsunga saga*: indirectly, that is, by way of a poem now lost and originally contained in the missing leaves of the Codex Regius. In *Piðreks saga* (Bertelsen 1: 313–19), Sigurðr's foster-father, the smith Mímir, after being foiled in an attempt to kill Sigurðr, seeks to make amends by offering him, among other things, the horse Grani, which belongs to Brynhildr. Sigurðr then breaks into Brynhildr's residence, meeting her now for the first time, and requests the horse. Brynhildr dispatches men to catch it, but they fail to do so, and Sigurðr is hospitably entertained that night. In the morning he goes out with twelve men who once more try in vain to subdue the horse. However, when Sigurðr takes the bit, the horse approaches voluntarily and submits to its new rider. Sigurðr then thanks Brynhildr for her hospitality and leaves. After later marrying Gunnarr's sister, Grímhildr (called Guðrún elsewhere in Norse tradition), Sigurðr assists Gunnarr in the wooing of Brynhildr (Bertelsen 2: 37–43; see below), but the horse plays no part in this later stage of the story.

The motif is handled differently again in the Faroese ballad "Regin smiður" ("Regin the smith," recorded in the nineteenth century; see Djurhuus and Matras ix-x), which like the "Dvørgamoy" ballads forms part of the Faroese ballad cycle relating to Sjúrdur/Sigurðr, and which, like them, may reflect earlier stages in the development of the story of Sigurðr and Brynhildr than those reflected in *Völsunga saga* and Snorri's *Edda*. In this ballad Sjúrdur obtains Grani as a result of following the advice of his mother Hjördís to choose the horse that does not shy away from his throwing a stone into a river. Here, as in *Völsunga saga*, he obtains the horse well before he meets Brynhild (Hammershaimb 8, 148–49; cf. Djurhuus and Matras 1–8, 34–40, 57–64, 86–91, 106–14, 140–45, 164–74, 191–96).

It is not just the motifs involving Grani that may be described as fluid in the traditions relating to Sigurðr and Brynhildr, however. The complex relations of Sigurðr, Guðrún, Gunnarr and Brynhildr, and their equivalents differ considerably from one text to another, and not only in the case, already illustrated, of *Völsunga saga* and Snorri's *Edda*. In the *Nibelungenlied* (*âventiure* 10), on the second night following the marriages of Sîvrit and Gunther to their respective wives Kriemhilt and Brünhilt, Sîvrit with Gunther's consent enters the latter's bedchamber, wearing a cloak of invisibility, and successfully quells the physical aggression with which Brünhilt had rejected her husband's advances on their wedding night. Sîvrit thus convinces her, since she believes him to be Gunther, of the latter's dominance over her. In subduing Brünhilt Sîvrit does not have intercourse with her, but takes from her a ring and a belt which he later passes on to his wife. Gunther meanwhile consummates his marriage with the ready consent of Brünhilt, whose physical strength is now greatly reduced (de Boor 111–18; Hatto 89–94). Much later, after Sîvrit and Gunther have had by their wives sons named, respectively and reciprocally, Gunther and Sîvrit (in *âventiure* 11; de Boor 122; Hatto 98), Sîvrit's wife Kriemhilt, arguing (in *âventiure* 14) with Brünhilt about the merits of their respective husbands, calls her a "kebse" ("concubine"), declares that it was Sîvrit who took her, Brünhilt's, virginity, and produces the ring and the belt as proof (de Boor 137–47; Hatto 111–18). The accusation leads eventually to Sîvrit's death (in *âventiure* 16) at the hands of Hagen, the equivalent of the Norse Högni, who is here presented as a vassal, rather than a brother, of Gunther's.

In *Piðreks saga* Sigurðr, after acquiring Grani from Brynhildr (see above), marries Grímhildr (alias Guðrún) and proceeds to assist her brother, Gunnarr, in wooing Brynhildr. Brynhildr gives Sigurðr a cool reception on this, her second meeting with him, however, since it now emerges that, at their first meeting, Sigurðr and she had each promised to marry the other and no-one else. To Brynhildr Sigurðr justifies his marriage on the grounds that Grímhildr, his wife, is the sister of Gunnarr, with whom he has exchanged oaths of brotherly loyalty. Brynhildr reluctantly accepts Gunnarr as a husband, but on the first three nights after their wedding resists his attempts at consummation, overpowering him with physical violence. Sigurðr assures Gunnarr that the loss of her virginity will reduce her strength to that of a normal woman, and Gunnarr asks him to bring this about. Sigurðr exchanges clothes with Gunnarr, takes his place in the bridal bed, and takes Brynhildr's virginity. He exchanges rings with her and he and Gunnarr then resume their own clothes, no-one suspecting what has happened (Bertelsen 2: 37–43). When Brynhildr later claims Gunnarr as her first lover in an argument with Grímhildr about their respective statuses, Grímhildr contradicts her, saying that it was Sigurðr who took her (Brynhildr's) virginity, and produces as evidence the ring, which Brynhildr recognizes. This revelation eventually leads to the death of Sigurðr at the hands of Högni, who is here

presented as Gunnarr's half-brother (Bertelsen 2: 259–68; 1: 319–23). No child of this union of Sigurðr and Brynhildr is mentioned in *Piðreks saga*.

We may now briefly summarize “Brynhildar táttur” (“the ballad of Brynhild”), another ballad in the Faroese ballad-cycle relating to Sjúrdur and arguably reflecting, like others in the cycle, a relatively early stage or stages in the development of the story of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, albeit not recorded until the nineteenth century. Brynhildr has set her heart on Sjúrdur because of his reputation as a hero, and seeks to attract him by dwelling in a hall surrounded by a flame-wall which only he can cross. Riding on Grani, he succeeds in crossing it, and he and Brynhild sleep together, begetting a daughter, Ásla (cf. Áslaug). Sjúrdur now leaves, despite Brynhild's warning that Guðrun, the daughter of Júki and Grimhild, will trick him by magic into marrying her. Brynhild gives him a ring at their parting. Sjúrdur visits King Buðli, Brynhild's father, to ask for her hand in marriage, but Buðli also foretells Sjúrdur's marriage to Guðrun. Bemused by magic, Sjúrdur's horse Grani now carries him to Júki's court, where Sjúrdur drinks of a magic potion and, as a result, forgets Brynhild and marries Guðrun. Guðrun and Brynhild later meet while bathing in a river, and Guðrun shows Brynhild the ring, claiming to have triumphed over her in having received it as a gift from Sjúrdur, who took Brynhild's virginity. Brynhild says that because of Guðrun's words Sjúrdur must die, and retires to bed in a state of great distress. Sjúrdur visits her, and at the sight of him Brynhild gives birth to Ásla. She at once gives orders for the child to be cast into the river, since she does not wish to see it. The child is then set afloat on the river, where it is borne away by the current. Sjúrdur's death is eventually brought about by Júki's sons, Gunnar and Högni; it is not clear whether Gunnar is married to Brynhild in this version of the story. When Gunnar mounts Grani after Sjúrdur's death, the horse makes no move until Sjúrdur's body is placed on its back (Hammershaimb 16–36, 152–62; Djurhuus and Matras 8–22, 40–50, 64–76, 91–99, 114–27, 145–52, 174–82, 196–205).

We may recall, in conclusion, the extraordinary sequence of events in *Völsunga saga*: Sigurðr meets Brynhildr twice before he drinks the magic potion that makes him forget her, once on the mountain and once at Heimir's castle. On both occasions he vows to marry her and on both occasions, inexplicably, leaves her. He then marries Guðrún as a result of drinking the potion, and after Brynhildr has married Gunnar he remembers his vows to Brynhildr, but does nothing. These events, for which the Poetic Eddic sources are largely lost, thanks to the lacuna in the Codex Regius, are reported somewhat differently in Snorri's *Edda*, as we have seen, and it is my belief that in medieval Iceland there was considerable doubt and uncertainty about the order and nature of the events in question, and about the reasons for Sigurðr's behaviour. The confused nature of the account in *Völsunga saga*, to which Tolkien has drawn attention (232, 241–45), and its discrepancies with the account in Snorri's *Edda* that we have noted, suggest to me that, at the turn of the twelfth to the thirteenth century, a number

of conflicting options were open to those seeking to transmit traditions of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, whether orally or in writing; and it was during the thirteenth century that *Völsunga saga* and Snorri's *Edda* were composed, and the Poetic Edda was codified, as we have seen; *Ragnars saga* also dates from this century. The general impression of a multiplicity of options to choose from and/or combine is by no means dispelled by a comparison of the Icelandic versions of the story with its German and Faroese versions, as I hope to have shown. The Faroese "Dvørgamoy" ballad further suggests to me that, when it was felt necessary to link traditions of Ragnarr loðbrók to those of Sigurðr and Brynhildr by making Áslaug, their daughter, Ragnarr's wife, and the ancestress of a line of kings, one of the options considered, and inspired by distant memories of the Indo-European horse sacrifice, was the idea that Áslaug was the fruit of a union of Brynhildr with the stallion Grani. This idea was almost certainly considered only to be rejected, partly on grounds of pudency and partly because of its fantastic nature, but if it can be accepted as having been a contributing factor, however minor, in the development of the story of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, we can say, firstly, that it would have solved one of Tolkien's problems in enabling him to include the figure of Áslaug in his poem without laying Sigurðr and Brynhildr open to the charge of lying when they maintain that relations between them were chaste; and secondly, that it could be used in support of Terry Gunnell's view, referred to above, that the edda poems had their origins in ritual.

Works Cited

- Andersson, Theodore M. *The Legend of Brynhild*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980. Print. *Islandica* 43.
- Bertelsen, Henrik, ed. *Piðriks saga af Bern*. 2 vols. København [Copenhagen]: Møller, 1905–11. Print. *Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur* 34.
- Boor, Helmut de, ed. *Das Nibelungenlied*. (On the basis of Karl Bartsch's edition.) 13th ed. Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1956. Print.
- Calasso, Roberto. *Ka*. Trans. Tim Parks. London: Vintage, 1999. Print.
- Djurhuus, N., and Chr. Matras, eds. *Føroya kvæði: corpus carminum Faeroensium a Sv. Grundtvig et J. Bloch comparatum*. Vol. 1. København [Copenhagen]: Munksgaard, 1951–63. Print.
- Faulkes, Anthony, trans. *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*. London: Dent, 1987. Print. *Everyman Classics* 499.
- , ed. *Snorri Sturluson: Edda: Skáldskaparmál*. Vol. 1. London: Viking Society, University College London, 1998. Print.
- Finch, R. G., ed. *Völsunga saga. The Saga of the Volsungs*. London: Nelson, 1965. Print. *Icelandic Texts*.
- Finnur Jónsson. *Lexicon poeticum antiquæ linguae septentrionalis: ordbog over det norsk-islandske skjaldesprog oprindeligt forfattet af Sveinbjörn Egilsson*. 2nd ed. København [Copenhagen]: Møller, 1931. Rpt. København: Atlas Bogtryk, 1966. Print.

- Gunnell, Terry. *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*. Cambridge: Brewer, 1995. Print.
- Hammershaimb, V. U., ed. and trans. *Færøiske kvæder*. Vol 1. Kjøbenhavn [Copenhagen]: Brødrene Berlings Bogtrykkeri, 1851. Rpt. Tórshavn: Thomsen, 1969. Print.
- Hatto, A. T., trans. *The Nibelungenlied*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982. Print. Penguin Classics.
- Heggstad, Leiv, Finn Hødnebo, and Erik Simensen, eds. *Norrøn ordbok*. 4th ed. Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1997. Print.
- Heusler, Andreas. Rev. of *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavina Drama*, by Bertha S. Phillpotts. *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 38 (1922): 347–53. Print.
- Hollander, Lee M., trans. *The Poetic Edda*. 2nd ed. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990. Print.
- Johansson, K. F. *Über die altindische Göttin Dhiśāṛṇā und Verwandtes: Beiträge zum Fruchtbarkeitskultus in Indien*. Skrifter utgifna af K. Humanistiska Vetenskaps-Samfundet i Uppsala, 20:1. Uppsala: A.-B. Akademiska Bokhandeln, 1917. Print.
- McKinnell, John. Rev. of *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, by Terry Gunnell. *Saga-Book* 25: 3 (2000): 318–22. Print.
- Neckel, Gustav, ed. *Edda: Die lieder des codex regius nebst verwandten denkmälern, I. Text*. Rev. Hans Kuhn. 4th ed. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1962. Print. Germanische Bibliothek 4: Texte.
- Näsström, Britt-Mari. *Freyja – the Great Goddess of the North*. Lund: Department of History of Religions, University of Lund, 1995. Print. Lund Studies in History of Religions 5.
- O’Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Print.
- Phillpotts, Bertha S. *Edda and Saga*. The Home University Library. London: Thornton Butterworth, 1931. Print.
- . *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920. Print.
- Puhvel, Jaan. *Comparative Mythology*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. Print.
- Sacker, Hugh. “On Irony and Symbolism in the *Nibelungenlied*: Two Preliminary Notes.” *German Life and Letters* 14: 4 (1961): 271–81. Print.
- Schlauch, Margaret, trans. *The Saga of the Volsungs, the Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok together with the Lay of Kraka*. New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1930. Print. Scandinavian Classics 35.
- Schröder, Franz Rolf. “Ein altirischer Krönungsritus und das indogermanische Rossopfer.” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 16 (1927): 310–12. Print.
- Shippey, T. A. *The Road to Middle-Earth*. 2nd ed. London: Grafton, 1992. Print.
- Steinsland, Gro. “Eros og Død – de to hovedkomponenter i norrøn kongeideologi.” *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck* (Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde 11). Ed. Heiko Uecker. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994. 626–47. Print.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, 2009. Print.
- Vries, J. de. “Die westnordische Tradition der Sage von Ragnar lodbrok.” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 53 (1928): 257–302. Print.
- West, M. L. *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Print.
- Örnólfur Thorsson, ed. *Völsunga saga og Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1985. Print.