Divine Women's Esteem in Late Antiquity and Their Later Representations in Literature

by

Holly Farley

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Holly Farley

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By

Rebecca Munoz-Moore
Committee Chairperson

Committee Member

Jeaneen S. Canfield
Committee Member

Committee Member

Abstract

The Late Antiquity period and the stories that emerged from it were some of the most impactful narratives for future authors and their writing. This period encompassed many types of communities, languages, social customs, and polytheistic religions. What scholars know of these subjects is limited; therefore, much of their expertise is through interdisciplinary research, analysis of existing texts, archaeological remains, and epigraphy. These areas of study have contributed to what we know about these civilizations, which help scholars understand these communities—particularly the roles of women and what their lives would have looked like compared to those of today. Authors also draw from this period for narrative inspiration, especially regarding women's roles in their stories. Three women characters from this period are The Morrigan, Signy, and Brynhild, women who played important roles within their sagas and myths but were portrayed differently in later literature to suit the author's needs.

In Chapter One, I analyze The Morrigan, a Celtic Goddess, a woman who is accredited with fighting alongside the Tuatha de Danaan against the Firbolg in Irish Mythology. Later, she appears throughout Arthurian literature with many names, including Morgana or Morgan Le Fey; she is best known as King Arthur's bitter half-sister and is always desirous of finding a way to kill him out of petty spite. Chapter Two covers Signy, a seer and princess in the *Saga of the Volsungs*, an Icelandic Saga which centers around the heroic deeds of the men within her family. Through this analysis, I challenge why Signy was treated poorly by the men in her family and why this behavior contradicts what scholars understood about how respected women were during this period in Icelandic history. Chapter Three addresses Brynhild's role in Eddic poetry and the German poem the *Nibelungenlied*. Brynhild is a Valkyrie and Shieldmaiden of Odin, a woman gifted with divine abilities to bring those who died in battle to Valhalla, where their souls would

rest forever with the gods. This significant rendering is vastly different from the portrayals of her life in later poetry, which opposes her role as an immortal woman. In every story, she loses her position amongst the Valkyrie and falls in love with a man, Sigurd, who does not love her in return. In summary, these women are intended to represent lost stories, narratives that were changed to fit the aspirations of the growing Christian and patriarchal proclivities of the cultures that followed their own.

My research is part of a literary movement that desires to see these ancient stories of women conserved, acknowledge their popularity with authors through time, and, with this admittance, implore that their image be used in a manner that would be a credit to their original stories. There is much work ahead to continue to consider the roles of women in Late Antiquity and the ways that intervening texts might distort our views of the true spirit of these women. Through archival work and linguistic study, I can expand these ideas by exploring a more firsthand account of their lives within narratives that do not maintain an authentic portrayal.

Contents

Introduction

The Late Antiquity period for the Indo-European people was one of the most diverting periods in history, spanning across regions and comprising many languages, communities, polytheistic religions, and social customs. While knowledge and expertise of this period are limited, authorities acknowledge that the roles of men and women varied remarkably across these regions of people, notably the roles of the women and the positions they held within their communities. This thesis will consider three women characters from areas that historians predominantly agree consisted of people who valued and respected women, particularly those with divine abilities. If, through a historical lens, one could step into their communities, they would see vibrant women with, to some extent, equal rights to men. They would see a community full of women who could obtain political power and influence and contribute to their family and society in a manner equivalent to their male counterparts. The most honored of these women were those with divine abilities, such as prophesy or healing.

The three women characters this thesis will analyze are Signy, The Morrigan, and Brynhild, individuals who would have been valued by their communities and cherished for their connection to their respective gods. Despite these women originating from different areas, their polytheistic societies were similar in that their abilities would have complemented the religious beliefs already in place. Their cultures had celebrations not only to honor the gods, but also to honor those they believed the gods used to do their bidding. Despite this knowledge, this was different from how their stories would be told for future readers. These once-honored women would not be remembered as women celebrated for their connection to their gods. Instead, they become small and inconsequential roles in narratives about "heroic" men.

Examples of such narratives include *The Saga of the Volsungs*, various stories about The Morrigan, particularly after the Christian conversion of Ireland, and tales about the Valkyrie Brynhild throughout Norse and German poetry. The stories about these women were transcribed by authors hundreds to thousands of years after these women were said to have lived, a great deal of time after storytellers and others shared their stories for entertainment. This thesis challenges their portrayals within these stories. It disputes the disparaging way these authors chose to use them as antagonists and resentful women so that the "hero" of their story may be appropriately challenged and worthy of his renown. The most transparent of the explanations for the authors' positions concern patriarchal and Christian influences. Christian authors worked diligently to displace paganism during the Medieval period, before and at the time these stories were transcribed. Due to prevailing fear and suspicion of pagan religions, Christian authors and scribes, even those with the best of intent, would remain prudent and mindful of receiving criticism from ardent Christians. This concession demonstrates that these epic hero stories, myths, and poems were not untarnished and proper representations of these pagan women.

Despite the centuries separating the Late Antiquity civilization from when their stories were recorded and used for inspiration in other stories, these women have endured, regardless of the inconsistencies in their portrayals. Further complications lie in the period's lack of written evidence, which limits what scholars understand about this period and leaves a great deal up to speculation. These ancient societies relied on oral accounts and verbal narratives, as many of these women's stories were deeply interwoven with spiritual practices. From this understood appreciation comes the acknowledgment that these women were loved and respected by their society, reflected in their deities and spiritual practices. Not only were they respected as divine interpreters with a link to the gods, but also, as women, they would have been respected in their

communities. Signy is a descendant of Odin of Icelandic mythology; The Morrigan is a warrior goddess and skilled shapeshifter of Old Irish mythology; and Brynhild is the greatest of Odin's Valkyries.

While these women originated from different areas, all would have been valued and honored and were central figures in their respective countries. As the Late Antiquity period faded, their importance to these people lessened. With little regard for their previous relevance, authors and scribes would change their characters and include them in narratives that supported their interests.

The most significant force for changing their respective positions was the spread of Christianity, in which many individuals played a part. Hutton adds to this conversation by explaining the shifting opinion amongst scholars, many of whom believed, "In the first half of the twentieth century ... Christianity represented no more than a veneer" (236). Later, Hutton further claims that Christianity was used as an instrument for the repression of pagan populations. At the same time, there is no doubt amongst scholars that these attempts were made by the "pious" Christians to root out these earlier, pagan practices, amongst those who were believed to have held on to the old ways. Hutton asserts that earlier origin stories remained at least in some part relevant to the common people, even surfacing in folk medicine and science, which would have kept stories about women like The Morrigan, Eostre, and Signy relevant in their lives (Hutton 244). Geoffrey Coulton continues this sentiment by stating, "In church, the women crowded around Mary, yet they paid homage to the old deities by their nightly fireside, or at the time-honored sacred haunts, grove or stone or spring" (quoted in Hutton 236) another indication of the oppression of women by certain institutions in power and the ways less recorded practices may have kept more woman-centered traditions alive.

Despite the limited written record during the Late Antiquity period, studying the women portrayed through literature inspired by these myths and folklore gives scholars a sense of the environment in which these women lived. It also helps scholars understand the cultural climate for authors throughout the Medieval period, and even to the modern day, and what could have motivated them to use women like The Morrigan and Brynhild and royal prophets like Signy in their writings. To accompany this is Schibanoff, who states that "medieval authors in part derived their views of women in the early Christian theologians, whose own views were influenced by Ovid and other late Roman writers" (10), especially the proverbs and folklore of the Late Antiquity.

To the best knowledge of scholars, Late Antiquity poets spoke of women as being adept and strong-minded "unless and until, that is, the wars and feuds of men victimize her" (Belanoff 822), a result of their origins being influenced by Christianity. While most scholars feel that attempts to lower the status of women were more apparent in the long run rather than at the time, Klinck disagrees, "what is important is not whether such theories existed, or even how often they were repeated, it is the extent of their actual application within society as a whole, both secular and ecclesiastic" (quoted in Belanoff 827). All theories suggest that later authors and storytellers would have used women like Signy, The Morrigan, and Brynhild without care for the earlier interpretations, for the success of their narrative.

The Saga of the Volsungs: Icelandic Contradictions Regarding Signy

The Saga of the Volsungs, translated by Jesse Byock, is based on an Old Icelandic saga about the origin and the fall of the Volsung clan. One of the earliest examples of a heroic tale, its foundation is in the historic Elder Edda,[1] a type of epic poetry passed through storytelling. While

[1] Also known as the Codex Regius.

this family might begin with Sigi, the son of Odin, it is Signy, princess and prophet, whose place within her household contradicts what scholars understand about the Norse pagan society. This Saga is a rendition written in the 13th century, covering many generations of the Volsung clan, including the story of the dragon Fafnir, slain by Sigurd, from whom he obtained the cursed ring of Andvaranaut. While there is equal cowardice and heroism throughout the Saga, Signy is the bravest of those within her family, acting on behalf of her family's best interests even as she prophesizes their doom. Through the translation of this old Saga, inconsistencies lie within Signy's narrative and what she would have represented as a woman and a seer to the Icelandic people.

Signy was the only daughter of King Volsung, who had promised her in marriage to Siggeir of Gautland despite her opposition. Signy was a well-known seer within her society; despite this knowledge, the men in her family continue to ignore her often fatal premonitions for their pride. The primary contradiction within this translation is that these Norse pagans often turned to their seers to understand the will of the gods, making divination a respected practice. This knowledge of Icelandic culture provides a foundation for the conversation that Signy would not have been treated disrespectfully; therefore, any narrative that suggests otherwise is unreliable. In the Saga, the Volsung family ignored Signy's warnings on multiple occasions, even after tragedy befell their family; the one remaining brother never respected her position, divine abilities, or the sacrifices she made for a family that did not value her.

The inconsistencies lie in the knowledge that seeresses were considered valuable members of society, and their predictions were treated with great respect and caution. In many cases, they were used to settle household and communal disputes. Bryan is one of many scholars who add to this accusation of mistranslation, considering the need to "reconcile the memory of a

past with a newly introduced Christian religious structure" (169) and the importance of an authentic representation. The Icelandic people turned to these seers to translate the will of the gods, whose worship played an intimate role in their lives, "where visions were the most natural thing in the world" (Holdsworth 144). Nonetheless, Signy is treated poorly by her family, who arrange an unwanted marriage for her to with an evil king. Earlier Icelandic women were considered valuable members of society, well-known for working and fighting alongside their husbands. Not only were they free to marry whom they chose, but they were also respected members of their community, partaking in social and political pursuits. The earlier culture does not fit with the later narrative of a weak Signy who gets pushed around by her family. The first chapter of this project explores the influence of later Christian and patriarchal expectations on the apparent inconsistencies in Signy's story.

Old Irish Contradictions Regarding The Morrigan

The Morrigan is a warrior goddess and skilled shapeshifter in Old Irish mythology. Her story begins by fighting alongside the Tuatha De Danann for the freedom of Ireland against the evil races that dwelt there before their arrival on its shores. Her mythology would inspire authors of Arthurian literature; they would call her Morgan le Fey or Morgana, and she would often be portrayed as a villain who set herself against King Arthur. The book *The Guises of The Morrigan* by David Rankine and Sorita d'Este will provide the foundation for establishing what The Morrigan's role was in Ireland's mythology, her original position in the invasion myths, and her role in the Ulster Cycle.

In all of her guises, The Morrigan is a symbol of the divine feminine and an inciter of battle. She is a complex figure in mythology, one which has many titles as well as many associations, one being her union with two other goddesses, Badb and Macha, which make up

the triple goddess the Morrigna, "an important and widely worshipped deity for many centuries" (Sharpe 36). She could predict futures, especially when warriors were to experience a violent death. She also acted as a mentor to the hero Cu Chulainn throughout the Ulster Cycle. Her pleasure with and connection to wars links her to the banshee and lamia, mentioned in the Book of Exodus. She is also adept at casting spells, perhaps the only aspect of her identity maintained throughout her associated stories in Arthurian literature. Like many stories, adaptations and contradictions emerged due to the political climate and social changes within the surrounding culture.

The Morrigan's later portrayal in the Arthurian legends is evidence of this shift, when one discerns that the bitter Arthurian Morgana is vastly different from this archetypal figure in Irish mythology. Authors of Arthurian literature used her likeness to tell their stories. A sorceress once respected in Irish mythology became a feared woman when a predominantly Christian society shunned pagan practices. She first appeared in Arthurian literature in the twelfth century in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* as a goddess-type figure with no relation to Arthur, taking him to Avalon after he was brought to near death in battle. From this point, The Morrigan becomes an entity of interest and gains popularity as authors use her to portray a variety of sorceresses, each one a more significant deviation from her original position in Old Irish mythology. In *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, she is portrayed as a hag responsible for dangerous events. In other stories, she is described as a seductress, or enchantress, who is angered by trivial offenses and seeks to use her power to harm innocent people. As explored in the second chapter, through these later transmissions and to the detriment of her original personage, The Morrigan, once the hero of Ireland, became a bitter woman bent on destroying the "noble" King Arthur.

The Denigration of Brynhild and Her Loss of Distinction in Norse Mythologies

Brynhild is a notable figure in Old Norse mythology. She is a Valkyrie, a divine being given the privilege of traveling to Earth, choosing the worthiest of those who died on the battlefield and taking them to Valhalla. In exchange for this distinction and eternal life, the Valkyries must always obey Odin and remain chaste. Some sources note that Brynhild is distinguished among the Valkyries because Odin is her father. The most well-known stories involving Brynhild are *The Saga of the Volsung*s, *The Poetic* and *Prose Eddas*, and the German poem *The Nibelungenlied.*

However, Brynhild's role as a Valkyrie is primarily absent in these stories. Instead, she is portrayed as a woman who has been jilted and continuously misused by men. Her role within these stories is within the narrative of Sigurd, and, while a crucial character, her contribution to these stories is to be betrayed by Sigurd and to advance his role as a hero. Once considered the main character of the surviving Eddic poems, her import has become overshadowed by the male figure. Gildersleeve adds to this discussion of Brynhild's transformation that "a heroine who would live through so many centuries of literature must submit to various fortunes" (1). The final chapter explores how the devolution of Brynhild's character and position, shifting from a mighty sword maiden and Valkyrie to a resentful woman of unrequited love, reflects Christian and patriarchal influence on Norse mythology.

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My research contributes to the Late Antiquity field of study in that it focuses on women's lives during a time when the stories of heroes were abundant, and it has been their ventures on which academia focused in earlier decades. While this research is from a literary perspective, it gives scholars an idea of what women's lives might have looked like through the lens of what is

already understood about the social constructs of the narratives' respective periods. It also offers modern readers an idea of some of the contradictions that surfaced over time and why this would have occurred. In brief, what I am contributing to their narratives and this reinterpretation of these texts goes beyond challenging stereotypes and assumptions about women during this period. There is also an opportunity to recognize their agency as women, resilience, and contributions to narratives where they may appear compliant and irrelevant.

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Old Irish Contradictions Regarding The Morrigan

The Morrigan was a multifaceted goddess in Old Irish mythology, originating in invasion myths throughout the Ulster Cycle. Her role as a fertility goddess and instigator of battles illustrates her wide range of abilities, reflecting how mythological figures change and adapt based on society and how she was modified to meet a storyteller's or author's purpose. This modification happens frequently in folklore and mythology; "Women, often believed to be "the other" gender[,] has always been understood and explained in terms of binary opposites, as whatever the man is the woman is not" (Kapoor 79). This patriarchal spin sheds light on why The Morrigan would continue to evolve through literature due to authors influenced by societal and religious pressures.

Those who shared The Morrigan's story knew her as a goddess and faerie queen who shapeshifted, becoming a young child, animal, and the wind throughout Irish myths. Her presence in these mythologies encompasses various narratives, most significantly attributing her to themes surrounding battle, fate, fertility, and alliance with the Tuatha De Danann.[1] As she was also associated with fate, The Morrigan could predict the fortunes of those in battle, having premonitions for particularly violent deaths. This connection with predicting the fortunes and fates of warriors added to her mystique. Her multifaceted nature sheds light on the complexity of ancient mythological characters.

The shifting of The Morrigan's character from an ancient Irish goddess to the Arthurian figure of Morgan le Fey is a fascinating example of how society can alter and modify mythological characters over time. Her revision is a testament to the shifting of mythology and folklore and how these stories can be changed to suit the needs and interests of different cultural pressures. Her first appearance in Arthurian literature is in the twelfth century in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*

[1] A supernatural race in the origin of Irish Mythology and its defenders against primordial beings. Found in Ellis's *Celtic Myths and Legends*.

as a goddess-type figure with no relation to Arthur, acting on behalf of Avalon's healers and ensuring his safe passage after he falls in battle. From this point, The Morrigan becomes an entity of interest and gains popularity as authors use her to portray a variety of sorceresses, each one a more significant deviation from her original position in Old Irish mythology.

In the context of Arthurian legend, Morgan le Fey (or Morgana) is regularly portrayed as a character with various roles and motivations. While in some stories, she is depicted as a sorceress seeking to harm King Arthur, in others, she is written as a more ambiguous figure. This shifting of character and her diverse roles within Arthurian literature reflect the many authors who have used her image for their narratives. The Morrigan's shift from a Tuatha De Danann warrior goddess to the Arthurian Morgan le Fey illustrates how characters can adapt and evolve in response to the changing beliefs, values, and interests of the societies that embrace them.

These variations also draw attention to the significance within the historical and cultural conditions of her original myths and legends when attempts are made to explain and interpret them. It serves as a reminder that her stories are not fixed and will continue to be modified as she is met with ever-changing societal narratives. Many authors employed The Morrigan character in both negative and positive contexts. Her evolution was deeply influenced by changing social and political landscapes that held sway at each particular time. Predominantly, the rise and spread of Christianity created conflicts; it often conflicted with older pagan beliefs and practices. Many attempts were made by religious and political authorities to discourage people from following these older beliefs; the most prevalent of these discouraging strategies was to indoctrinate and instill fear and misgivings about practices that were considered unorthodox.

The Morrigan’s changing representations reflected this fear because this prior landscape of religious and political influence would not have disregarded her for having gifts not originating

from a Christian god. Religious authorities sought to solidify their authority by discouraging the practice of pagan customs. They accomplished this in numerous ways, primarily by demonizing and condemning all deities and practices not approved by the church. This strategy of weakening her legitimacy was applied by those who used every opportunity to weaken pagan deities, even creating a link to The Morrigan in the Vulgate Old Testament translations, most notably in the book of Isaiah where the "Morigain [sic] is an early Irish gloss for lamia (Isaiah 34.14)" (Clark 224), a child-devouring female monster.[2] Her name first appears in a glossary to the books of the Old Testament, where once again as a lamia, she is a "monstrum is femine figura" (Rankine and d'Este 14); the reference to The Morrigan in these texts further ingrains fear that she is a phantom woman who seduces men and will kill them for their blood and flesh.

The King James version of the Bible relates her name to references to a "night hag" or "screech owl" by translators who "thought of a lamia as a creature like The Morrigan, who often appears in bird shape" (Clark 225) and was associated with death and misery.[3] This new representation of The Morrigan vastly differs from her goddess role in Old Irish mythology. Christian influence and its desire to eliminate practices that did not worship the Christian God affected her role in literature. As a result, The Morrigan becomes subjected to a reinterpretation of these myths with a Christian framework; this new emphasis on Christian values vilifies any pagan influence.

Prior to this biblical connection, The Morrigan is an impenetrable and often forbidding figure associated with war, fate, and sovereignty in Irish mythology. The Morrigan has many

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[2] The Latin reads *et occurrent daemonia onocentauris et pilosus clamabit alter ad alterum ibi cubavit lamia et invenit sibi requiem.* A translation "(and demons and monsters shall meet, and the hairy ones shall cry out one to another, there hath the lamia lain down, and found rest for herself)" is available from Douay-Rheims on Vulgate.com.

[3] See Rankine and d'Este; they spend more time on this topic, though not with scholarly intentions, just a desire to provide general information.

representations, from a single Goddess to a part of a trio of divine sisters or other Goddesses, which comprise varying attributes. Regardless of how her mystical origins come to be understood, she remains a crucial figure in Ireland, symbolizing their independence and defense against natural and supernatural threats.

Her character represents qualities of courage and perseverance, making her a prevailing figure in Irish folklore. The Cath Maige Tuired,[4] or the Battle of Mag Tuired, is a significant event in Irish mythology involving the Tuatha Dé Danann and their conflicts with various opponents, including the Fir Bolg[5] and the Fomorians.[6] The Morrigan's role in these battles was to symbolize death and conflict rather than any position in direct fighting or leading armies.

However, there is some discrepancy about whether she arrived with the Tuatha de Danaan or was already in Ireland; in any instance, her coupling with the Dagda[7] encouraged her to fight for Ireland. He was walking along and saw a woman washing in the river, an encounter quickly followed by intercourse with her; this first encounter quickly moved to "When they drew apart at last and looked at each other, she saw that it was the Dagda who had given her such pleasure, and he saw that it was The Morrigan" (Caldecott 134). She swore to this ancient god that she would support him: "I will bring you the heart's blood of those who threatened you," she said, "Yours will be the victory" (Caldecott 134). Then they all gathered to fight in the battle of Magh Tuired.[8] The river where this is said to have taken place is still known as "The Bed of the Couple" in Ireland.

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[4] Cath Maige Tuired (modern spelling: Cath Maighe Tuireadh; transl. "The Battle of Magh Tuireadh") is the name of two saga texts of the Mythological Cycle of Irish Mythology. See Stokes's translation of this mythology.
[5] In medieval Irish myth, the Fir Bolg (also spelled Firbolg and Fir Bholg) are the fourth group to settle in Ireland. See Yeats for more about their battles with the Tuatha de Danann.
[6] The Fomorians or Fomori (Old Irish: *Fomóire*, Modern Irish: *Fomhóraigh / Fomóraigh*) are a supernatural race in Irish mythology, often portrayed as hostile and monstrous beings. See Nitz and his narration of the origin of these "sinister beings."
[7] The Dagda is an essential god in Irish mythology. One of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the Dagda, is portrayed as a father figure, king, and druid. See The Corpus of Electronic Texts.
[8] The main battle that took place between the Fir Bolgs and the Tuatha De Danann.

Dindschenchas is a word that translates to the lore that gives birth to these names and places in Ireland; this specific part of the riverbed is understood to be the most important one of these locations (Oxford Reference).

While this association is a local legend and not relegated to any specific myth, it does provide a link between her later associations with being a fertility goddess. When people talk about the meeting of the Dagda and The Morrigan, it's often framed in the context of the Dagda seeking The Morrigan out, as if he had gone on a quest to find her. However, it's clear from the myth that this meeting occurred every year around the time of Samhain.[9] Myths also put forward that their union extended beyond this: they were often married and had children due to these yearly encounters. Dagda and The Morrigan are legendary; "their powerful relationship […is] so central to the Irish Tradition that the Mór Rígain is often simply called in ben, 'The Woman' or ben in Dagda, 'The Dagda's Woman'" (Carmody and Thompson 3). Such a characterization lent to the assurance of her place as a fertility goddess.

Having sex with Dagda is considered a symbolic gesture of victory, which she does in another story of Irish kingship, Echtra Mac nEchach,[10] by lying with Niall. These occurrences were taken as an act to symbolize her approval as a fertility goddess, as Irish Kings were inaugurated with a festival that celebrated their "'sleeping' symbolically with the land or the goddess of the land, who will bring good fortune, victory, and fertility" (Clark 230). In this way, her choices make her equal to men throughout these myths, able to take liberty without negative consequences attributed to her gender. This position of equality and her association with fertility lead to the argument that these characteristics are genderfluid, which are contradictory to her being

[9] Rankine & d'Este dedicate some of their research to this holiday and how Samhain plays an integral part in the Druidry practices of Ireland.
[10] A composite text about Níall Noígíallach, his early life and accession to the kingship of Ireland. See the list of Irish Sagas that The University College Cork of Ireland has collected.

referenced as "Dagda's woman." This is a relationship that, in some cases, demonstrates her sexual agency, but, in other cases, positions her as a possession of men. This controversial portrayal is an essential note; it would either indicate that The Morrigan was nonbinary or that these roles are not meant to be allocated to one gender or the other.

The Morrigan and the Tuatha de Danaan were significant to ancient Celtic society, which accounted for the stories and myths that incorporated them into their narratives. Old Irish myths are closer to being considered anthropology of lore rather than literature because their beginnings are centered in oral tradition. Within anthropology, the scientific study of humans and their academic work is based on how societies and behaviors are explored and how these cultures express and communicate their beliefs, values, and traditions through storytelling. This anthropology of lore is different from literature in the traditional sense, which are written as entertainment to convey narratives that are both fictional and real. This distinction is essential to note when considering that The Morrigan is a work of many authors rather than one individual. Understanding this distinction clarifies how The Morrigan shifted from battlefield deity to cattle.

The Morrigan's many aspects and associations, acting as a dichotomy common in mythological figures, are references of the ways "Celtic goddesses combine destructive characteristics with those of nurturing, sexual power, and fertility" (Clark 228). Later, these associations are contradicted when she is portrayed as either a hag or a spiteful sorceress in Arthurian literature. These new attributes reflected the shift within the cultural context when these stories were written, explaining her character's evolution.

Old Irish mythology is a legacy of oral tradition with the benefaction of many storytellers, each contributing to the story uniquely. While innovative, it makes attributing these stories to a single source impossible, assigning these myths to anthropological or cultural lore rather than a

literary work. As previously mentioned regarding The Morrigan's connection to cattle, in "Dindsenchas,"[11] she steals a cow that belonged to Odras[12] and the cow of Aingen in "Tain Bo Regamna."[13] She initiates a great cattle raid by mating his Otherworldly cow with a god-like bull, Donn Cuailnge.[14] Later, she approaches Cu Chulainn[15] by driving the cow and challenging him over its ownership. After participating in these raids, she appears as a cow at the battle of Cu Chulainn and Loch Mac Mo Femi. Cows are accepted as symbols of power, fertility, motherhood, and knowledge; with this distinction, they have a unique place within Old Irish mythology.[16] The part a cow played in the creation of the gods underscores the importance of them throughout belief systems in Late Antiquity, which would prioritize elements that contributed to the creation of the world and those who ruled.

Her lore also intertwines with a trio of goddesses, frequently interpreted as different aspects of The Morrigan: Badb, Macha, and Anu (or Nemain).[17] Badb is the war goddess aspect of this trio, and, like The Morrigan, she also takes on the form of a crow. Known to create distress and confusion amongst those in battle, she arrives before the conflict to signal the death of an important person. These ancient myths and representations have had a lasting impact on literature, notably this visage of the crow, which would continue to be an attribute to how these feminine identities

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[11] Dindsenchas or Dindshenchas, meaning "lore of places", is a class of text in early Irish literature recounting the origins of placenames and traditions concerning events and characters associated with these places. See the Corpus of Electronic Texts for this tale and translation.
[12] A mortal woman who was transformed into a pool of water by the Mórrígan. See Rankine and d'Este for this story.
[13] Part of the Ulster Cycle: "The Cattle Raid of the Important Calf" or" The Cattle Raid of Regamna." Stempel's article has more on this practice of raiding cattle, which was common among Indo-European tribes.
[14] In the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythology Donn Cúailnge, the Brown Bull of Cooley, was an extremely fertile stud bull over whom the Táin Bó Cúailnge was fought.
[15] Cú Chulainn is a warrior hero and demigod in the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythology and Scottish and Manx folklore. See Rankine and d'Este's first chapter for more about his adventures.
[16] Cows are mentioned throughout Norse stories, as well, further evidence of their importance to multiple cultures during this period. Audumla was a primordial cow who licked salty, primeval ice for three days until she shaped Buri, the grandfather of Odin and his brothers. She, in turn, nourished him with her milk. She is part of the origin story from the Prologue in Sturluson's *Prose Edda*.
[17] There is more about Badb and these different aspects in the introduction of the novel by Rankine & Sorita.

are portrayed. With reference to this portrayal of a crow is an excerpt from an unpublished Irish dictionary by Peter O'Connell:

> Badb-catha: Fionog, a female fairy, phantom, or spectre,[18] supposed to be attached to certain families, and to appear sometimes in the form of squall crows, or royston crows.
>
> Macha; i.e. a royston crow.
>
> Morrighain; i.e. the great fairy.
>
> Neamhan; i.e. Badb catha no feannog; a badb catha, or a royston crow. (cited in Clark 226)

The Morrigan's involvement in the tales of the hero Cu Chulainn is an essential event in Old Irish mythology. This description is noteworthy because it illustrates her connection to her triple goddess persona, Macha and Badb; in other interpretations, they are her sisters, a trio of war goddesses known as the three Morrigna. Regardless of how she is interpreted, the tales of her and the hero Cu Chulainn only describe her as one entity. In these stories, The Morrigan is depicted as a tangled figure who not only plays a role in warfare but also serves as a mentor and guide to the hero, Cu Chulainn. Her interactions with one of the most famous individuals in Irish mythology highlight her role as a goddess and her ability to influence and condition the destinies of these important figures. Her role in providing him with advice and instruction shows she can serve as a formidable adversary or powerful ally. Her portrayal of feminine strength in both castes highlights her multifaceted nature. She represented war and death as well as the significance and wisdom of women in Irish mythology. The fact that she could teach a notable warrior and guide men in battle corresponds with the equality and strength of women in this Celtic society, proving that martial prowess was valued amongst women.

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[18] The banshee mentioned in Clark's article is a well-known figure in Irish folklore, known for its plaintive wails. This female fairy figure, like Badb, foretells the death of those within a household as the crow of the Morrigan did on the battlefield.

These stories involving Cu Chulainn and The Morrigan highlight the depth and complexity of Celtic mythology, showing the earlier iterations of the heritage in which "Morgan Le Fay is identified with a succession of female figures from very different cultures, eras, and literatures, ranging from Irish Sovereignty and other goddesses, the figures of the Mabinogion,[19] Loathly Ladies, Breton fairy mistresses, the mother of Gawain, the Lady of the Lake and so on" (Larrington 332). This representation of gender and power dynamics gives one a better understanding of why her appearances differ, further providing insights into her role as a mentoring goddess.

The Morrigan's first appearance to Cu Chulainn was when he was young and was searching for a druid mentor. During this first encounter, she appeared to him in disguise, testing his courage so that he may prove his worth to her; "[p]rovoking warriors to action by insulting and ridiculing them was a common practice among the Celts" (Rankine and d'Este 25), also known as gressach, and so considered a reasonable response. These types of encounters were recurring themes throughout his tales, also revealing her role as a goddess who shapes the hero into a worthy warrior. These types of challenges are common themes in mythology, not only demonstrating the hero's strength of character but also his level of success for future conquests.

The Morrigan and Cu Chulainn's relationship was unusual; this is reflected in their shared dark humor. Despite being his mentor, she wasn't a motivator in the classic sense, nor was he a traditional pupil. A primary example of this is on the way to Cu Chulainn's final battle when he comes across three bards of Queen Medb's[20] and kills them with his three spears after they threaten his honor. As he is dying, The Morrigan flies to him, and "Cu Chulainn has his last laugh when ‘a raven of the Badb’ lands at his feet, and a loop of his intestines falls out of the wound and onto the

[19] The earliest Welsh Prose Stories, translated by Davies.
[20] Medb, later spelled Meadhbh, Méabh, and Méibh, and often anglicized as Maeve, is queen of Connacht in the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythology. See Rankine and d'Este for a further look into her affiliations.

raven, who trips on them and falls over" (Rankine and d'Este 35). Even as he dies, he ties himself to a standing stone rather than falling over, a more fitting death for a hero than laying on the ground, just as The Morrigan would have expected of him. Her involvement in his adventures strengthens her role as one who guides heroes, emphasizing her potential to be both antagonist and mentor.

With the emergence of Christianity in Ireland, The Morrigan would have been adapted or redefined to fit the agenda of Christian ideals and their worldview. What she had previously been honored for would have been considered formidable to those who lived by Christian values. These would have been viewed as negative traits and attempts to demonize her pagan powers would have been underway in favor of more Christian values.

The Morrigan and her representation in Old Irish mythology and Arthurian literature show noteworthy differences and evolving attitudes on female characters within stories, influenced by social perspectives and cultural climates of their various times. Her presentation in Old Irish mythology reflected Celtic beliefs in unifying the natural and supernatural. She is an embodiment of this period, mysterious and ancient. In Arthurian literature, the first story to incorporate her is Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*. Morgan is a fay woman who resides with other enchantresses, able to fly and heal others, who "dwell on the island of amazing fertility, which we easily recognize as the Isle of Avalon" (Loomis 183), the place which, according to Geoffrey, King Arthur was said to have gone to after he was mortally wounded. While this personification also embodies mystical abilities, she takes on a more passive role than her previous position within Ireland's mythology. Instead, she has become a healer and nurturer, classic aspects of a more subdued feminine divinity.

This portrayal is the kindest she will receive from future Arthurian tales, reflecting future shifts in cultural beliefs concerning women and their roles within society. As this new type of literature gains popularity, authors continue to modify characters to fit the narratives and ideologies of their time. Her role in Old Irish mythology and her portrayal in Arthurian literature differ as perceptions of women's place within a story are influenced by and reflect societal agendas.

This second appearance in which this new agenda is reflected was in the *Roman de Troie*, composed ten years after Geoffrey's first work by Benoit de Sainte-Maure. Her lover rejected her in this story; she was also rejected later on in the *Vulgate Lancelot*. In this narrative, Lancelot arrives at her castle to be detained and is approached by three enchantresses, Morgain being one of them; they “offered him his freedom on condition that he would take one of them for his love. He angrily rejected them all" (Loomis 186). In this text, Morgain is fulfilling the role of enticer and providing the necessary evidence of Lancelot’s role as an honorable hero. This role contradicts her earlier place within hero stories as a mentor and guide to the protagonist rather than a woman who seduces the hero to commit an offense against his pure nature. This aptly reflects how society began viewing women, especially those with a supernatural nature.

The Morrigan's portrayal will continue to shift away from her complicated and ephemeral figure in Celtic mythology. Her rendering as an antagonist in Arthurian literature will continue to drift further away from this image as she becomes commonly portrayed as a hag in many stories or a sorceress who disguises herself as a hag, a common theme throughout some Arthurian adaptations and interpretations. Notably, her depiction varies widely depending on the author's interpretation and source.

In *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, she is blamed for the misfortunes that befell Sir Gawain—"Morgana sent me to your king's castle, to test your pride, to determine the truth of the

Round Table's fame, and the tales that tell it" (lines 2456-2458) —despite her lack of presence at those times. This claim contradicts her actual role and connections within this story, where there is no other evidence that she was the instigator of the various trials Sir Gawain faced. In other stories, such as the *Le Morte Darthur* by Thomas Malory, she is described as a seductress and enchantress who seeks every opportunity to harm King Arthur, detesting him to the extent that she is unafraid to involve other knights in her plots. Sir Accolon of Gaul, her love interest, defends himself, offering the claim that "Morgan le Fay, King Uriens' wife, sent it to me yesterday by a dwarf, to the intent to slay King Arthur" (Malory 68) and so maintaining his lack of agency or personal ill intent despite having the sword meant to kill the King. In this story, she is portrayed as a petty and jealous woman, not only with her desire to kill her brother but also with her willingness to kill her husband, King Urien, so that she may be with Accolon.

Concerning her association with hags, in the Welsh story *Kulhwch and Olwen*,[21] she is a woman named Mabon, often called Modron, and was said to be the mother of Yvain by Urien. Later in Yvain's story, in *The Knight with the Lion* by Chretien de Troyes, she disguises herself as a hag, even for her son, creating the potion to cure him of his madness. She claimed that "it could drive from the head any madness however great" (Troyes 332), ridding him of the guilt brought on by his misconduct. The Morrigan being portrayed as a hag is a common theme, even used as an act of foreshadowing in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In that text, her presence as a hag with a beautiful young woman, the “softest woman on earth-lovlier than Guenevere” (945), is meant to symbolize a trap for the hero, as she was “older than her, ancient and old" (948), a type of bait intended to prove the infallibility of the hero. The Morrigan becomes portrayed as a hag,

[21] *Culhwch ac Olwen* is a Welsh story about a hero associated with Arthur and his warriors. See Hunter’s article for a more complete explanation of this Welsh prose narrative.

used by authors to test the virtue and integrity of their knights, a trap that they must overcome to prove their worth. This image is far from the goddess who trained heroes to overcome these tests.

Now, having entered the realm of antagonist with sinister tropes, she is embarking on a new title of seductress and temptress. In later Arthurian stories, she has multiple lovers, many of whom she is said to have taken against their will. The most well-known of these affairs occur in *Lancelot* and *Ogier the Dane*,[22] about a Danish king she had abducted and taken to Avalon. In Old Irish mythology, she does have sex with men but is not depicted as someone who abducts men for this pleasure. These stories are a reflection of how shallow The Morrigan's character has become; rather than having sex with men for pleasure, her character stoops to kidnapping and raping men.

While making interpretations concerning literature, it is crucial to remember that they can be subjective and open to scrutiny. Religious institutions have shaped cultural portrayal and political events, and a woman who was once a mysterious ally to the story's hero becomes an antagonist in King Arthur's narrative to fulfill the need for suspense in stories, which ensures that the knight is worthy of his position. Throughout Arthurian Literature, Morgana is portrayed as a woman scorned; "her motivations for undermining her brother are never made clear by Malory, her determination to do so is always apparent: as Arthur says, his sister is 'always about to betray me'" with no prior context or explanation from the author (Robeson 73).

Furthermore, these intricate ties would not have only influenced depictions of The Morrigan but of Arthur as well. Arthur's "roots are found among the Celts. As the Celts made their transition from paganism to Christianity, so did their literature, and their heroes" (Koenig 4). Arthur's newfound role as the Christian hero and king would have motivated authors to fashion a pagan archnemesis to prove his worth as a good Christian. Whether or not this was an unconscious

[22] Professor Trond K. Salberg is accredited with finding these old texts; however, his article is in French. Hieatt wrote an article about the manuscripts where he is mentioned, I used this to reference him in my research.

move by authors, they still needed someone who was both a miscreant and an evil witch, fulfilling the story's need to have a villainous woman tempt the hero but also to provide an ending that would demonstrate that a witch would never win, that a Christian hero would always prevail.

The Arthurian story with the most evidence of this influence is Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, which is framed as an account made by a knight after King Arthur lost his battle. The knight tells his audience of "strange adventures, as it is before rehearsed" He then shares his recounting of Morgan le Fay's plot to ensure her lover, Accalon, received the sword meant to kill Arthur, mentioned above. Despite making such a confident statement, the knight does not share many details of what happened, and the author never suggests what might have happened to inspire Morgan. Otherwise, it seems she was simply blamed for King Arthur's hardships; it seems the author and the knights were content with leaving no explanation for her crimes; they were "astonished by her many deceits" (73) and shared their desire that she be burnt at the stake rather than having any desire to uncover the truth. This story was not the first to represent her as two-faced, a woman who seems to mean well initially but is later blamed for the hero's misery when she is not present to defend herself. Through this, Malory becomes the forerunner in a literary trend where Morgan deceives everyone, even her family, who cannot trust her.

This narrative became so well-liked that "[e]ven in England, such images spread and appeared in writing, such as Malory's, that became popular and widespread. She is not simply Morgan in Malory's text, but rather Morgan Le Fey, meaning of the fairies, conveying that she was looked upon as an evil enchantress" (Sharpe 39), further promoting the image of good versus the evil Morgana. The Catholic church and its priests also took up this movement of finding guilty women where there were none.

In literature and narration, authors and bards would have been influenced by existing religious beliefs and societal views when creating these narratives. Depicting a woman like The Morrigan, someone who had ties to "pagan" or non-Christian traditions, as a sinner and antagonist, would have aligned them with the dominant religious attitudes of the time. This rendering would have reinforced the idea that Christianity was righteous, and other practices would have been corrupt. Just as Morgana's stories in Arthurian Legends place her in a position where she can bring "dishonor" to the honorable knight, "[i]t is no easy task to disentangle what is religious from the motifs and fancies of storytellers, and of course to separate what is pagan from what is Christian" (Ross 40) creating a tangled web between Arthurian literature and her Old Irish mythology.

This Christian lens influences authors from every era, especially as patriarchy took a firmer hold on society, as evident as early as Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*. Historical and fictional explanations have drawn attention to the difficulties women faced when they challenged what society deemed as expected, often suffering terrible consequences. Women were regularly accused of witchcraft or heresy for their practices and wisdom. Even midwives and simple healers were not an exception; they were used as propaganda by the church to instill fear. The Morrigan's first post-Christian appearances reflected this, as the "Morgan seems identified with the Wise Woman aspect of the goddess" (Sharpe 37), when she is portrayed as the healer without ill intentions who only sought to save King Arthur after he was mortally wounded. Spivack accuses Christian influence of being the primary catalyst of The Morrigan's changing reputation; "the arts of healing with herbs and other natural remedies became in the middle ages [sic] and early Renaissance associated with older women who were accused of witchcraft" (Sharpe 38). The acts of a “wise woman,” while innocent and well-meaning, would only instill fear in those who did not understand

the nature of their practices. Women associated with these acts, both fictional and real, would become shunned by society and sentenced to the worst fates.

Another factor that must be taken into consideration is the gender of the authors who used a woman as a weak scapegoat in their stories: primarily men "and rather mysogynistic [sic] males at that ... as a result, the women of the Arthurian mythos usually are presented as wicked witches and adulteresses, fascinating and horrifying figures" (Urrutia 39) yet another thing to consider when one considers why The Morrigan did not play any part in a positive narrative. As the Church desired to establish and conserve its influence, it would encourage these portrayals of non-Christian practices. She was the perfect scapegoat "constantly opposed to Christianity" (Urrutia 43), which, as depicted in her stories, is why she always loses, and the Christian hero always succeeds. The Morrigan provided the perfect literary sacrifice as both a woman and a goddess, lending proof to the prevalent religious and social attitudes of the time.

The Morrigan has had a lasting effect on literature, remaining relevant despite the perceptions of her having been altered permanently. Despite this, there is no disagreement surrounding the impact that she had during this time of most significant change for her; "[i]n her infinite variety, she enthralled the fancy of the Middle Ages, and has lived on to our day not only in literature but also in folklore" (Loomis 183) affecting not just literature, but even the way that the Middle Ages is remembered. While just as mysterious as Old Icelandic origin myths, this new Arthurian Morgana is without the more undaunted Goddess aspects.

Ironically, this interest in using Morgana as a pagan scapegoat during a time when Christian propaganda was encouraged did not discourage individuals in their fascination for her character and various portrayals. Continuing this sentiment of interest is Sayers, stating, "We then have the complicated and somewhat paradoxical situation of a medieval Christian antiquarian

interest in the Dark Age pagan past which was, supposedly, both more primitive in its customs ... and more heroic and splendid in its ethos and material culture" (49). Sayers offers an amusing statement that solidifies the fact that despite a religious and social desire to condemn a woman like Morgana, individuals were still attracted to her, making her an archetype for women during the Medieval Ages, despite efforts to condemn her.

Despite having once been a powerful and enigmatic woman, though, this would not become what she was known for past the Middle Ages. An evil sorceress will always be her staple with non-academics, with only medieval scholars appreciating her vast contribution to literature; this is evidence that despite the evolution of her character outside of her original position, she has fixed her place in history. This notoriety is a testament to the enduring impact of myths and legends despite social and religious attempts to influence the public.

The early inhabitants of Ireland believed that life existed through cycles, a truth demonstrated through The Morrigan's cycles as a goddess and literary character. Regardless of her evil narrative and rendering of a petty witch throughout Arthurian legend, she was still a goddess and fay queen who inspired those who wished to use her in their stories. From powerful shapeshifter to bitter half-sister, The Morrigan has ventured throughout time in literary prose. So great was her literary position that even the renowned Tolkien used her in his story to shape the beloved elf Queen, Galadriel.[23] Despite having been influenced by negative aspects of Arthurian literature, modern pagans have altars and practices dedicated to her.

The Morrigan has found herself a long way from her ambitious roles in the Ulster Cycles, and addressing why a figure like her would have modified sheds light on the recognition that myths

[23] The characterizations of the women share hints of magic that are both subtle and fearful; it is the gaps of mystery that make them compelling figures. Carter argues that "a productive textual absence places Galadriel on a vector with Morgan; like Morgan, Galadriel is more agentive than what we can tell from her performance in this text" (73). Both women are sorceresses who remain enigmas for readers.

and stories are not immutable. They will change based on the needs of the author and those who commissioned them. While this paper is not an exhaustive record of the Old Irish myths in which she appears, these are the ones for which she is most well-known and the literary works that best express her shift from goddess and healer to a witch and seducer of men.

The academic development behind her displacement helps readers understand the nature of man, the direction of human history, and why it is essential to perceive the relationship that Arthurian legends have with present and future readers. Acknowledging this also assists readers in recognizing that if a woman like The Morrigan can change to this extent, so will other women like her. Other women of influence will likely have been affected by the same forces, giving readers an appropriate awareness that not all might be as it seems within a literary context, especially ones based on women. In brief, what I am contributing to their narratives and this reinterpretation of these texts goes beyond challenging stereotypes and assumptions about women during this period. There is also an opportunity to recognize their agency as women, resilience, and contributions to narratives where they may appear compliant and irrelevant.

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The Saga of the Volsungs: Icelandic Contradictions Regarding Signy

The Saga of the Volsungs is an epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer, an Old Icelandic heroic saga that traces the lineage of the Volsung family and the misadventures that befall them. The saga's focal point is the men in this family; the most famous tale is the battle between Sigurd and the dragon, Fafnir. The pattern of male importance within these stories lends to the argument that these sagas were recorded during a time when male superiority took precedence over the stories and experiences of women. Signy was the aunt of the great Sigurd and a prophet who predicted the ill fates of her family but to no avail. Her family did not listen to her, something those within the pre-Christian Icelandic community would not have done because prophecy was considered a cherished gift of the gods. There were "many instances of powerful priestesses, mediators between men and the divine, among continental [Icelandic] tribes" (Crawford 100). This attestation supports the argument that Signy would have been valuable to her pre-Christian friends and family rather than disregarded. The way Signy is represented in the *Saga of the Volsungs* contradicts what scholars know about the life of Icelandic women, especially ones with gifts of prophecy.

Women like Signy are valued within pagan societies to the extent that Odin sought them out for guidance throughout Eddic poetry. They played indispensable roles, with tragedies happening to those who did not believe them. Scholars like Borovsky, Belanoff, and Koester explain why a society with deep-rooted pagan beliefs would have ignored Signy's omens. Borovksy insists that the presence of the "strong woman is evidence of an ancient female hegemony-an oral tradition-that was later ... submerged by the Christian hierarchy" (6). With this evidence, an analysis can begin to be undertaken to understand the depths of Signy's misrepresentation through the Saga.

Koester adds to this academic consensus that women's position in ancient society was an essential standard for medieval communities. Not only could women run their households, own property, and divorce their husbands, but they also played significant roles in society, proving their importance (574). Furthermore, women in ancient Icelandic society are more highly regarded than their Greek, Roman, and Hebrew counterparts (Koester 574), which negates and challenges Signy's obscure role within her narrative.

Before going into other scholars' interpretations of these misrepresentations, we can begin with Byock, the Old Norse expert and the individual who translated this version of the Saga. Regarding this larger conversation of why Signy was rendered as a second-rate character, he challenges those who dispute Signy's treatment by her family within the story. He insists that Iceland's government was different from others at this time. It was not as simple as Koester and Borovsky portrayed it to be; instead, the treatment by her family, where her marriage to King Siggeir was concerned, is more complex than they claim. Byock insists that arranged marriages did take place on account of what he calls political bonds (155) and that Signy's family had no choice but to honor these types of agreements. Byock’s disagreement with the alternative theory is evidence of the controversy surrounding a woman's place in Icelandic society.

While Byock's explanation explains why Signy was forced to marry a man against her will, it does not explain why her family wrote off her prophecies as a paranoid attempt to escape her obligations. He also defends that this Saga was not meant to mirror actual events, that "these repetitive stories of feuds [were] written during a period of over one hundred years in different parts of the island by different kinds of people" (Byock 154-155). While Byock approaches the work first as a translator, his arguments recognize Iceland's position and the plausibility that upper-class individuals such as Signy's family would have been expected to partake in these

political bonds of marriage, a practice from which most women would have been exempt. However, this acknowledgment does not provide evidence of why her gifts as a seer, or at least an acknowledgment of them by her family, were not evident in the Saga.

Historians of the Icelandic period question whether this saga properly reflected how women, particularly seers, were treated by their pagan society. While scholars have varying opinions on Icelandic women, the majority believe that "Within the resources available to Anglo-Saxon poets was a traditional image of the female: an intelligent ... verbally adept woman whose actions are resolute and self-initiated—unless and until, that is, the wars and feuds of men victimize her" (Belanoff 822). This statement only contradicts Signy's story in that she was not respected before she was married, with Belanoff's point proving that men and their rules of honor were more important than she was. History reflects that these pre-Christian women were honored. Still, The *Saga of the Volsungs* portrayed Signy as a woman whose sole role in the novel was to be forced into a marriage for an alliance, and her divine gifts were denied.

When considering the autonomy of pagan women, it's important to note that timelines overlap, and Norse practices are often confused with Viking laws. Norse men were not warriors; they were farmers, traders, and settlers, and the governing of their people differed from the Vikings, warriors employed by Jarls and Chieftains (N. Price 21). While there were clear gender roles for Vikings, there were still laws against touching a woman against her will and recognition of "a woman's claim to the integrity of her body and person" (N. Price 167). Very defined laws "acknowledge female independence and agency, and the individual culpability of perpetrators" (N.Price 168). Considering a pre-Christian woman's self-rule is essential in advocating for the respect that Signy would have received as a woman. While sex crimes did happen, there was severe punishment for those who mistreated women. Another fascinating thing to note

concerning the practice of divine women is that seers during Signy's time also participated in sex magic; "sorcery and cult[s] involved sexual performance" (N. Price 174). This angle proves that Signy would not have been treated like a silly and distrustful girl during the pre-Christian period. The truth is that her words would have held merit for those within her community.

Acknowledging the overlapping timelines also removes any uncertainty that Signy is poorly represented in her saga. A more productive uncertainty applies to modern scholars' desire not to "assign specific dates to saga characters" (Byock 158) or designate an exact date where there is uncertainty. Instead, studying the evolving society itself would "offer a key to an understanding of the literature it produced" (Byock 158), with each iteration naturally making Signy more vulnerable to misinterpretation later. Not only would Signy's character have to navigate through overlapping ideas of Viking and Norse social order, but her story would also have to contend with the growing Christian influence that began to overshadow Norse societies.

This growing influence created a great deal of trouble for the pagan societies, which was made worse by the vast differences between the principles of Christian belief and pagans. Christian missionaries, in the beginning, were more discreet; they encouraged the worship of both their god and pagan deities on the same altar (N. Price 212).[1] Rather than being forthcoming about their objectives in ultimately removing pagan practices, it made the pagans feel more comfortable adding another god instead of replacing or removing theirs altogether (N. Price 211).[2] Rather than encouraging them to remove pagan symbols, early Christian missionaries chose a more delicate approach. Another example of this religious coexistence was finding textual similarities between Pagan mythology and Christian teachings. Odin hung on Yggdrasil

[1] Price presents this information in his fifth chapter; he also talks about some of the things on these altars, like the Christian cross next to Odin.
[2] This information concerning anti-pagan propaganda is from Price's book. The section about altars is on page 212, but he goes into more detail about these religious parallels in the “Meeting the Others” section.

for nine days to gain the wisdom of runes, while Christ hung on a cross for three days as an act of penance for the sins of his people (N. Price 212).[3] Rather than denouncing Odin as false, Christians found ways to appropriate his stories so that he resembled a Christian worldview. While it is evident that there were religious changes taking place, these kinds of overlap would have explained why Signy was openly a seer in the Saga but was treated as a woman within a patriarchal system would have been treated.

This later recording of these pagan myths by Christian authors would explain why Signy's gifts would have been presented in the same breath that they would have been dismissed. Gronlie adds, to this topic of religious conversion, "We see this [tension] in the narratives in which the Germanic peoples of Medieval Europe ... needed to remember and reconstitute their past in such a way to assert a new Christian identity" (125). Reconstituting their history would have meant letting go of old beliefs; in this instance, one belief or value would have been how essential women once were to their pre-Christian society. This precedent would explain why an Icelandic woman with divine abilities would have gone unnoticed by the men in her stories.

Bryan adds to this claim of Christian misrepresentation by explaining that "Iceland's social memory was also reshaped in the need to reconcile the memory of a past with a newly introduced Christian religious structure" (Bryan 169), making it difficult to give women a distinctive position in their histories. Furthering this claim is Árnason, who clarifies that these sagas were not later recorded for the glorification of heroes; they were meant to preach peace as well as an acceptance of one's life, which they have interpreted to be the "spirit of medieval Christianity" (159). With this spirit of restructuring, readers can better consider what remains faithful to earlier Icelandic culture and what has become a Christian likeness.

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[3] While these examples are from Price's work, the preface to the Poetic Edda is similar in form to that of the book of Genesis. The similarities are uncanny; it is evident that one origin story was written to look like the other.

These pre-Christian women married for love and were respected by their husbands. Women were so esteemed by society that they did not require protection from their husbands (Jostens 144). Even if their husbands passed, a woman would still have retained his property and standing within her community; "women did inherit, and a variety of evidence confirms that women could ... become considerable landholders" (Clover 3). Clover continues that they could also become "traders and business partners" (3); one of the most significant Scandinavian ventures in North America. This type of freedom for women would only begin to change once outside influences began to infringe on their independence.

It was also during this time that sexual purity for women became an expectation; no longer seen as being able to provide for the community, she became only necessary for her ability to reproduce and take care of the household. Before this religious influence took hold, these tribes respected their men and women to such a degree that once they had been accepted as adults, both men and women had to wait for marriage (A. Price 435). However, due to a lack of written record, there is uncertainty among scholars as to its exact purpose, "while this fact is reported, the institution or procedure by which this was accomplished is not" (A. Price 434) whether to encourage social maturity or the ability to provide for a family. This domestic role, an ideal of Christian purity, would also have extended to Signy's divine abilities and secured itself with the desire to preserve feminine purity.

The Icelandic people believed that mystic women could envision a different future and should be admired for their connection with the gods. With historical scrutiny, it can be surmised that Christianity played the most significant part in the submission of pagan women. With Christianity having such a deep foundation in fear of being associated with anything not seen as holy, the old gods would inevitably start fading from their society. Bryan maintains that women

are typically more spiritual than men and, therefore, would have been most affected by any attempts to dissolve it; “women often exhibit a solid opposition to the conversion of Christianity" (Bryan 165) and, in the beginning, rejected its presence.

This Christian expansion of influence would reject Signy's abilities and set precedence for following her father's demands, giving her little choice but to honor his edicts. An example of Signy's silencing in the text is when Signy accepts her father's decision to marry her to King Siggeir: "Nonetheless she let her father have his way in this, as she did in all matters concerning her" (67). Signy's diminished role in her household is also evident through how her twin brother is treated after it was made known that "both of them were the foremost and the most beautiful in every way of the children of King Volsung" (66). Her twin brother, Sigmund, is free to do as he pleases and is never silenced or ordered to marry someone by their father. While a great warrior, Sigmund did not have gifts like his sister. A comparison of the respect shown to them by their father is evidence of a Christian influence. Previously mentioned was the academic inference that pre-Christian women were more likely to have a spiritual experience than their male counterparts; this is included in the history of seers and women with divine abilities, a leading development topic in Apps and Gow’s article (123). Christian preachers used these claims to justify their belief that this made women more susceptible to Satan's influence. Signy was expected to obey the men in the family and was chastised when questioning their judgment. Despite having just as much to contribute to the family, she was not valued as an equal, which was acknowledged in the Saga.

This apathy towards Signy continues even as she experiences her first ill-fated premonition after she has already wed Siggeir. She begs her father to let her remain at home, saying "I don't want to go away with King Siggeir ... And I know, thanks to my gift of second

sight ... that this decision will cause a disaster for us" (69). Schofield maintains a different interpretation: King Volsung "will not hear of a covenant being broken and insists that the bride shall accompany her lord" (263) and is simply afraid of losing honor. While that might be true to an extent, it does not fully explain why he ignored Signy, rather than being wary and making plans to protect his family as he should have.

Throughout the Saga, it is evident early on that ignoring a seer's premonitions is fatal; Signy is the Cassandra of her story. These Christian authors and their choices to create their narrative rather than honoring a past disempower Signy. Whether or not they intended to enfeeble her intentionally, she has become collateral damage. Bryan adds to this argument that "however they were collected, they have the potential to say something about [the] background context ... that gave birth to them" (167). This concession gives a more precise explanation regarding a Christian author's impression concerning seers. Despite this negligence, there is an endeavor to respect her power; the text states, "All of Volsung's children were great, as has been told in stories" (66). The text is confirmation that while Signy was acknowledged culturally, the men in her family made conscious choices to act as if her contribution to the family did not matter. If anything, this further establishes the claim that every man in the Saga misused Signy.

Icelandic women would have to fight these social restrictions to maintain some semblance of equality in their communities. After Signy and King Siggeir are married, Signy pleads to her father a second time after he accepts an invitation to enjoy her new husband's hospitality: "I do not wish to go away with Siggeir ... I know through my foresight and that special ability found in our family that if the marriage contract is not quickly dissolved, this union will bring us such misery" (Byock 39). Volsung refuses, "All peoples will bear witness that unborn I spoke one word and made the vow that I would flee neither fire nor iron from fear,

and so I have done until now" (Byock 40), accepting whatever fate has in store for him. This behavior towards Signy's warning was contested among scholars, those who took a "romantic" approach to these circumstances and those who took a "humanist" approach to understanding why the heroes in Signy's story ignored her warning (Árneson 164). A romantic view of this saga hero prioritizes the archetypes of physical and righteous duty, a "view [that] was popular among non Icelandic [sic] scholars in the early decades of this century" (Árnason 159) and a view which sought to conserve these pagan ideals.

This romantic view does not attempt to analyze King Volsung through a Christian lens, as the humanist perspective does, as a man who maintains a "positive" and peaceful view in the sagas despite evidence to the contrary, a stark contrast to the romantic study of the source of his moral values (Árnason 159). Understanding King Volsung's ethos is critical to understanding his position with Signy, especially when also considering how Christian and heathen influences abound in the various sagas and to what extent it is a necessary endeavor to understand the characters' actions (Árnason 160). In this light, King Sigurd is a man who must abide by a "hero's" codes of honor, regardless of whatever ending may await him. Reading the Saga through these overlapping, if also competing, lenses and this desire for a hero narrative for both King Siggeir and his sons would inevitably leave Signy in the position of a woman who does not respect their actions when she tries to sway them from following through with their plans. Given this stance, Signy's depiction would still be poor as she tries to keep her family from obtaining prestige as heroes.

Through the humanist and romantic approaches, then, another event will be considered, one in which Signy does not take part despite it taking place at her wedding feast. During this feast, an unknown elderly man enters—a barefoot man with a spotted cloak, walks into the hall,

and stabs a sword into the trunk of an apple tree in the center of the room.[4] Before anyone speaks, this mysterious figure proclaims, "Whoever draws this sword out of the tree trunk will receive the sword as a gift from me, and he will say truly that he never held a better sword in his hand" (68). All the men stood and attempted to remove this sword, and Signy's twin, Sigmund, alone was the victor. King Siggeir asks to purchase the blade, "three times its weight in gold" (68), and Sigurd refuses, stating that he already had an opportunity and that it was not meant for him.

Readers can observe Arneson's suggestion of a "hero's code" proceeding through this competitiveness as they compete for the right to the sword. Furthermore, they can see that King Siggeir's actions place him outside this code, proving that he does not wish to honor this understanding because he is not an honorable man nor a "hero." This response angers King Siggeir; he becomes defensive because he thinks he has "received a mocking reply" (68) and begins his revenge at this perceived slight. King Siggeir has already been established as a "man of underhanded character" (68-69), making it hard to understand why Signy would have married him. His behavior in front of everyone in the hall would have been a red flag, and the fact that it was dismissed does not align with the pagans' already established rules of honor.

This event shows an apparent moral discrepancy between honor and the implied suggestion that all these warriors ignored King Siggeir's poor reputation. It plays a part in a larger conversation about the character parallels between those in this family saga and these Christian authors' preconceived notions and what they wanted to believe about the men during this time. When Icelanders composed these old stories "of the fornöld, they needed to reconstruct and to elaborate their collective memories of what Vikings were and what they did, for Vikings

[4] This guise of a barefoot older man with one eye would have been known to those who read this as the preferred image of Odin. He often showed up to test people so that they might prove their worth to him.

featured prominently, both as heroes and as villains, in the fornaldarsogur" (Larrington 270).[5] Many of the sagas, including *The Volsung Saga*, might have later been influenced by Norwegian translations. These preconceived notions would have extended to Signy; if other Icelandic women were in this story to compare her with, it would have been easier to place her within this context. What is evident is that Signy was not involved in this "hero's code" challenge, nor did she seem to even be in the hall during her wedding feast. If she was, she was not mentioned, proving that the only woman in the Saga, by the time of this transmission of the story, played little importance in the grander scheme of a tale about men.

A notable example of inconsistencies within the text is when King Volsung first builds his hall for his family. In the beginning, the tree in the hall's center is referred to as an oak; later, it is called an apple tree. While this might seem a small change, it is evidence that misrepresentation can occur when translating texts, whether intentional or not. The acceptance of a king's dishonorable conduct and the marginalization and mistreatment of Signy represent "a code of ethics which is strikingly unlike the understanding of Viking activity in the tales of Icelanders or kings' sagas" (Larrington 271). This disjunction is more evidence that there was more misrepresentation in this translation beyond the type of tree standing in the center of their hall.

It is evident that with no one to believe Signy, she is alone in her suffering and with this knowledge that, despite her powers, she is still powerless against men. In Icelandic society, with evidence that divine abilities were godsent and valuable, it would be easy to argue that Signy would not have been in this position. However, her father, after having been warned about the

[5] A legendary saga or fornaldarsaga is a Norse saga that, unlike the Icelanders' sagas, takes place before the settlement of Iceland. There are some exceptions, such as Yngvars saga víðförla, which takes place in the 11th century.

ambush awaiting his family, still spurned Signy's attempts to save them, gendering his rejection when he says that "no women will mock my sons, saying that they feared to die" (71). These are her father's last words to her. When her father and his army are killed, she begs her husband to spare the lives of her brothers. King Siggeir grants her this request and places them in stocks outside, but he agrees so that their suffering be prolonged, saying "I'll like it better if I subject them to worse and make them suffer longer in dying" (73), rather than out of love for Signy. This event is just one of many throughout this story which show Signy has no value to anyone. It says a great deal about Signy's worth to people when someone only grants her request so that they may be malicious.

Signy's desire for vengeance would only continue to grow after this betrayal from her husband. Her brothers' fate did not improve in the stocks, with a she-wolf coming nightly to eat one brother at a time. After nine nights have passed, with only Sigmund remaining, Signy devises a plan to save him. She puts honey on his face so the she-wolf will lick him instead. Sigmund bites the tongue of the wolf and, freeing himself, runs off to hide in the forest. Once her twin was safe, the siblings would spend the next ten years waiting for an opportunity for vengeance. By this time, Signy has two sons with King Siggeir, and she sends them one after another to have their strength and bravery tested by Sigmund. However, they both fail the test Sigmund places before them: bake bread from flour, which seems to have something moving within. They are both too afraid to put their hands inside. When they fail these tests of courage, Signy requests that Sigmund kill them, stating that they "need [not] live any longer" (76) because they do not have what it takes to uphold her plan for revenge. While it is evident that Signy's desire for revenge is more significant than her brother's, her willingness to kill her children for a

family that did not value her is not logical. The only thing this situation serves to do for Signy is to make her look like a villain while her brother remains blameless.

Now childless, it is evident that Signy's desire for retribution is more significant than her love for her children, regardless of how she feels about their father. At this time, a witch comes to her and makes her a deal that she does not refuse. Byock, the Saga's translator, comments on this meeting concerning Signy's response, "I would like for the two of us to switch our forms." The witch answers, "That's for you to decide" (76). What takes place next is not Signy's proudest moment; she does switch places with the witch and sets out in disguise to seduce her brother so that they might have a child together who is "brave enough" to be a part of their plan of justice. The level of loyalty that she shows to a family who did not extend that same to her is thought-provoking. Not only did they not support her when they had an opportunity to, but now she is acting on behalf of a family that is mostly dead. She even chose them over her living children, which is more in line with the honor system of the Norse Pagans than the behavior of the men in her family (Jeep 105).

With this new plan for revenge, she successfully fools her brother with this new disguise and becomes pregnant with a son who passes the test that Signy's other sons did not. It is worth noting that her brother did not share this same level of commitment toward vengeance that she did. He only killed her children because she asked, and he is not aware that Sinfjotli is their son until she tells him before she kills herself, later in the narrative. Signy sacrifices a great deal for her family, but Schofield has a different perspective, saying that Sigmund "would never have agreed to his sister's shame, even as a last result" (269). However, this is speculative because Sigmund never says this; he doesn’t seem to have many opinions or show remorse or acknowledgment for what Signy has endured. He does as he is asked, which is a bit wry,

considering the strength of the Volsungs, which was supposed to be legendary. If anything, Sigmund seems weak; his efforts are minimal, even for himself. Signy is the only one who tries to fix circumstances that were not her fault. While the men in her life have treated her as inferior, her actions prove the strongest.

The irony that lies within this insight is that Signy's strength makes her a great representative of Icelandic women. While authors and oral performers did not remain faithful to other aspects of her character with this community, it is evident that, at this moment, her actions make her a more significant figure than the men in her life. Oral performers' religious and social preferences are evident when they have a "passion for their favorite heroes and a degree of involvement that blurs the boundaries between [the] fictional and corporeal world" (Rankovic 294). Adding further to this conversation of inattentive storytelling, Rankovic states that "In an oral situation (with no possibility of recourse to a text materialized on paper), attention is a precious commodity" (296). Therefore, with this growing hero trend, pre-Christian audiences and, by extension, storytellers were unconcerned with an authentic representation of her Icelandic culture. *The Saga of the Volsungs* is evidence of this; there is a great deal about the men and what they do, but Signy is only spoken of within the context of her family's troubles. Nonetheless, traces of different priorities in the depiction of women remain, particularly in Signy’s actions.

Despite this fondness for a male hero narrative, then, everyone faced terrible consequences when they ignored Signy. Their fates are at least some consolation for those who believed her Icelandic society would have esteemed her rather than ignored her warnings. Despite this comfort, the Saga does not end well for Signy. When they are finally ready to take revenge after years of waiting, Signy is "betrayed" by her two newest children, whom she had

with King Siggeir after having Sinfjotli with Sigmund. When these two children see Sigmund and Sinfjotli moving towards the castle, they run to tell their father. Signy requests that they be killed for their perceived betrayal, and Sigmund obliges: he "drew his sword and killed both children, casting them into the hall in front of King Siggeir" (Byock 46). Signy becomes obsessed with rage, but Sigmund does not want to kill those children and swears that he will never do it again, even for betrayal.

Signy is so consumed with this desire for vengeance that she acts in ways inconceivable to another. Schofield believes, "In all her doings, she had thought not of her happiness but of his, not of her husband but of her father and brothers" (270). While Schofield believes it was for her family, it would be easy to question why she would go so far for a family that had been dead for years. It would almost seem that the Christian authors would have put her in this crazed position so that the ending would be as Signy and Sigmund desired, but that he would also come out as the hero who did want to kill innocent children. It is evident through her actions and requests that she has taken on the position of tormented villain, to be sacrificed for the greater cause so that the Volsung family may triumph.

Signy's dedication to her family, which was mostly dead, is noteworthy, and yet no credit is given to her level of commitment in this version of legend. Not only does her remaining brother not acknowledge her sacrifices, but she is also stuck in a loveless marriage with the man who killed her family. Schofield enumerates that their marriage was a "mockery" (270), the union of contempt, for which she never complained, which is only a testament to her strength. This final scene with Signy is more a monument to the Volsung family than her suffering as a sister, wife, and mother. After they light the palace on fire, Signy confesses to her brother that she had seduced him, that "Sinfjoth is our son" (Byock 47), and that everything she had worked

towards was to end King Siggeir. She then walks into the fire; now that "her life's work is done" (Schofield 271), she no longer needs to fulfill the role of avenger. She dies in the fire that kills her husband. Despite Signy's tragic life, this type of martyr ending solidifies the second-rate life the author gave her. For Signy to kill herself once she has avenged her family is a testament to this worthless state—that the little value she had was lost once her family did not need her anymore, that her life was no longer worth living. She never received the respect she deserved, whether through her divine abilities or her royal position as the daughter of one king and the wife of another.

This refusal to acknowledge Signy's position as a princess with divine abilities and insistence on instead using her as a supporting character in a male narrative says much about the Christian authors who transcribed these stories. It helps readers recognize the influence of Christian authors when there are "fewer women as main characters" (Borovsky 10) and hardly any stories of Icelandic women with which readers may begin to compare their position and the way they were honored. The Norse social fabric would have recognized a joining of the physical and spiritual and that "the transition from oral to written culture was a misfortune (ei ulukke) for women" (Borovsky 10). Borovsky continues this argument for pre-Christian women's presentation in literature: "They could only participate in the anonymous oral tradition, thus making their contributions invisible" (10). Turner directly blames politics rather than religion and says that one must acknowledge this shift from "independence to dependence as a disastrous submission" (10) to the role women played.

With no surviving written records before a certain point in history, it isn't easy to agree on matters concerning women in Icelandic culture. Even the best-educated guesses are speculative at some level. It became a theoretical venture when the original stories in an

undiluted form were lost with those who shared them by the fireside. Modern readers must consider the performance of these oral traditions and narratives and their many transitions: "Old Norse poets ... under the abiding influence of foreigners, must have gradually assimilated foreign ideas" (Schofield 273). Schofield's position concerning influence is valid, though, later, he contradicts himself by claiming that they "have been kept wholly pure from outside elements only by a miracle of chance" (273). This confidence seems too optimistic, for it has already been proven that Christian authors had a level of influence over these sagas with social and religious pressures to contend with.

While Signy's strength and loyalty to her family are still central to her narrative within the *Saga of the Volsungs*, how others treat her directly reflects these patriarchal Christian expectations. When these authors have her step into the fire with her husband, her life and destiny are erased, with nothing to show for her suffering. With no reasonable explanation for her suicide, readers are left confused about why a proud Icelandic woman would kill herself. The only plausible explanation is this Christian patriarchal desire that she must sacrifice everything for her family, as was expected of Christian women.

Signy's portrayal in *The Saga of the Volsungs* reflects political, social, and religious influence when these Christian authors transcribed these oral accounts into a written work. Comparing how Icelandic women were treated during her time with her narrative in the Saga helps better understand contradictions and discrepancies with her position. Recognizing differentiations keeps readers mindful of mistranslations and prevents them from becoming universal expectations. The objective is to avoid further marginalization of women in old myths by being upfront concerning possible deviations from their original communities. Icelandic Saga enthusiasts should be realistic about patriarchal and religious influence on work that is credited

with being factual. Rather than writing off these old stories as tales of male heroes, the women within their stories should also be a part of the conversation.

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The Denigration of Brynhild and Her Loss of Distinction in Norse Mythologies

Brynhild is an indispensable figure in Old Norse mythology from The *Poetic Edda*,[1] The *Prose Edda* by Snorri Sturluson, *The Saga of the Volsungs,*[2] *and The Nibelungenlied.*[3] Brynhild was a Valkyrie; in this position, she would have served Odin and been responsible for bringing select warriors to the afterlife in Valhalla. Despite her importance to the gods, she remained a tragic figure throughout these saga and poems. Throughout these narratives, which center around the hero Sigurd, her role is one of a jilted and resentful woman. Regardless of conflicting differences between what it meant to be a Valkyrie, her position throughout these stories vastly differs from any presumptions regarding how one would be expected these figures to be portrayed. Brynhild is a divine woman, having pledged allegiance and physical purity in exchange for her gifts; she becomes an antagonist in many of these stories, evidence of patriarchal and religious influence.

Throughout this chapter, the way Brynhild is presented in these myths will be used to consider the deep-rooted Christian and patriarchal influence on her character by the time of the Middle Ages. In due course, it would become a common practice to use lore to write stories that "further one's own ideological and thus political beliefs" (Waha 1), prioritizing promoting patriarchal agendas over the more egalitarian context suggested by early Norse stories. In the German poem *The Nibelungelied,* she is associated with the Burgundian queen, Kriemhild, an immigrant of Icelandic descent; she is exposed to more misuse than in her original stories, which were still lacking in proper representation of her Goddess-like position as a Valkyrie.

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[1] *The Poetic Edda* is a collection of Old Norse myths that date back to the 13th century but is recognized as an attempt to preserve the older oral traditions.
[2] *The Saga of the Volsungs* is a prose narrative written during the same period; it is a more extended version of the Volsung family that includes others such as Brynhild.
[3] An epic poem originally written in Middle High German that was rediscovered in the 18th century (Schutte 291).

Before considering why Brynhild fell from grace as a godlike maiden, it is essential to note that the Valkyrie as literary inspiration is widespread throughout Indo-European myths. She is commonly used in stories, with connections to many individuals, like "the Irish war-goddess The Morrígan, the Vedic Divo duhita (daughter of the sky), and the Teutonic idisi" (Waha 33), which are always positive, symbols of the ideal woman. Eddic poetry portrayed their Valkyries with the characteristics of being valiant and unassailable. In contrast, Skaldic poetry "tended to strip them of any heroic deeds and clear agenda to become otherworldly and dream-like creatures" (Waha 33), which had them fulfilling a domestic role.

Germanic literature differs from these in that "masculinity is privileged... [it is] not to the elimination of the female sex and female gender; rather, masculinity enjoys privilege through the segregation of sexes and genders" (Waha 107). While Norse traditions respect and do not discourage masculine traits amongst their women, Brynhild is seen as "monstrous within the medieval German mindset in that she embodied any male features at all" (Waha 34), unsuitable to be a "masculine Queen" and was quickly demoted. Within these accounts lies the transparent attempt to debase a woman who refused to submit to a man, with no expectation that he would be honest with her per her request. This discernment provides evidence of Christian influence and patriarchal aspirations for women within this Eddic poetry, especially women who would have faced a certain amount of retribution simply for being pagan. Self believes their mythological origin "could be tucked away in a pagan past that was valued, but not identical to the 'us' of a thirteenth-century Iceland" (146). These authors would not have considered that readers would question the gender roles of Valkyries and why men would have mistreated a divine woman.

The Saga of the Volsungs accounts for this tragic tale with Sigurd, the dragon slayer, and the cursed ring of the Nibelungs.[4] This text is foremost when considering future discrepancies that Brynhild's character experiences throughout other narratives where she accompanies the hero. Despite being trained from a young age to be a shieldmaiden, Brynhild is tricked by King Agnar, who steals her magical swan shirt,[5] forcing her to pledge loyalty to him and Odin. During a duel between King Agnar and Hjalmgunnar, King Agnar uses this leverage to force her to kill Hjalmgunnar despite Odin having already promised him victory. This outcome angers Odin, and he punishes Brynhild: "Odin stabbed me with a sleeping thorn in revenge. He said I should never afterward have the victory" (67). Odin ensures this outcome by taking away her powers, putting her into a deep sleep to only be awoken by a man that would marry her.[6] This introduction to her part of the story sets a precedent for how she would continue to be treated by men in Sigurd's narratives.

Brynhild is manipulated and then punished for outcomes beyond her control. She pledges loyalty to Odin, is forced to pledge again to a mortal man, and is further punished after King Agnar exploits her. These are inescapable situations in which Brynhild never wins anything for her loyalty. Instead, her obligations are used against her, and everyone uses her only as long as it suits their needs. These conditions prove that Brynhild has no agency over her life; even after her powers are taken away, other men will find a way to use her until they no longer need her. These actions by men testify to the larger conversation that Brynhild is the victim of a patriarchal

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[4] A magical ring that would inspire the ring of power in Tolkien's novels about Middle Earth. Berube has a more in-depth compare and contrast between the Epic poetry and sagas and the aspects which inspired the work of Tolkien.
[5] This mention of a swan shirt is a point of contention amongst scholars due to the story not mentioning the shirt in the beginning, only towards the end. Gildersleeve states, “Other scholars consider that the lines say nothing at all about Agnarr or swan garments, interpreting them variously as referring to her life with Heimi, her early betrothal to Sigurd, Odin's placing her under her shield in slumber, or otherwise” (9).
[6] This curse would inspire *Sleeping Beauty*. See Gildersleeve.

narrative that a woman, no matter how powerful, only exists to further the needs of the men in her life.

From this point on, Brynhild's fate is controlled by men. She is no longer the confident warrior; she is a woman whose happiness and welfare are left up to men. Recognizing this, Brynhild's last claim for sovereignty in her life is to supplicate before Odin puts her into a deep sleep that she "would marry no one who knew fear" (67), making a last desperate attempt to reclaim some sense of authority over her person. When Sigurd reaches her, he cuts off her armor "down from the neck opening and out through the sleeves, and it cut like cloth" (67) in the act of claiming her body for himself. Gildersleeve describes this incident as removing her "dignity" (13), subserving her to Sigurd. Her behavior after this becomes contrary to her prior role as Valkyrie; when asked to teach him the "ways of mighty things," she replies, "You know them better than I" (67), evidence of her new submission to him. This scenario shows that Brynhild has little autonomy as a woman, "illuminates the ways Eddic poets imagined gendered social power to be asserted in heroic contexts" (Batten 292), and is far removed from her role as a Valkyrie. This loss of personal power would not be the extent to which Brynhild would lose herself to the desires of men; instead, "she must continue to negotiate autonomy, asserting, losing" (Batten 292), becoming a woman barely recognizable from her original position. She is lost in a narrative poem written for men and would continue to be portrayed similarly throughout other Eddic and German poetry.

Now a willing supplicant to the man who "conquered" her, she willingly relates insight and predictions to future events concerning Sigurd, behaving as a vanquished vassal. While praising her for her wisdom, he makes another promise: "I swear to marry you, for you are to my liking" (71). This comment indicates that to Sigurd, only an obedient woman is worth loving,

adding to this altered portrayal of Brynhild as a compliant seer, which will later extend to this image of the dutiful and simpering woman who is loyal to a man who has "awoken" her.

Shortly after this, Sigurd is tricked into drinking a potion that would make him forget his love for Brynhild, marrying Gudrun instead. This interpretation would be one of the kindest that Brynhild would receive, considering their vows to each other. Sigurd is offered an ale of forgetfulness, and once he drinks from the horn, he "could not remember Brynhild" (79). Another man, Gunnar, Gudrun's brother, aims to win Brynhild's love. However, per her earlier promise not to marry a fearful man, she challenged him to ride through the flames surrounding her tower. When Gunnar cannot complete this task, Sigurd "exchanges shapes" (80) with him and rides through the fire as Gunnar. Though Brynhild is still reluctant to marry Gunnar, Sigurd reminds her of her promise, and they wed.

Unaware of his betrayal, Brynhild becomes devastated when Sigurd's wife, Gudrun, who is also angry with him, loses patience and confides their plan to Brynhild. Gudrun shows her a ring on her finger that used to belong to her, which Sigurd had taken when "He lay with you" (82) after he had wed her as King Gunnar. She became "pale as death" (82) and would not speak for some time until she demanded vengeance for Sigurd's betrayal. Gudrun tries to soothe her by reminding her that her husband has "abundant wealth and power" (83); however, Bryhnild maintains that brave deeds are more important than gold and power. Her grief was great, and she took to her bed "and lay as if dead" (84); nothing King Gunnar offered would soothe her broken heart and wounded pride. Through this patriarchal lens, readers would recognize this broken woman, as her spirit and ego were stripped away so that she might become the vassal and obedient wife that these men desired of her.

Sigurd finally apologizes, but Brynhild responds, "You have delayed too long in telling me that my sorrow grieves you, and now I shall find no comfort" (87). The only thing she requests at this point is that Sigurd die for his betrayal, and with his passing, a pyre be built for them both, "thus their lives ended" (93). Upon the story's conclusion, Brynhild is portrayed as an embittered, defeated woman who wants the hero killed due to her jealousy. Therefore, her desire to kill herself would only solidify her in the position of a heartbroken woman who is jilted by a lover and is too invested in him to believe that life is worth living after his death. Alternatively, her decision to kill herself could also be interpreted as she knew she was guilty of being unreasonable and did not dare face the consequences of her choices. This latter explanation would lend itself to this patriarchal concept of a woman who does not fulfill the role of a good wife but rather someone who "needlessly" created friction between herself and her husband and, by extension, Odin. While not an accurate portrayal of the women during the period these stories originate, it would have been accredited to the preferences towards patriarchy during the thirteenth century when Christian authors rescripted their stories. This depiction of her will serve as the foundation for later analysis of her and the many discrediting narratives she shares with Sigurd, the dragon slayer.

In *The Prose Edda* lay "Skaldskaparsmal," Sturluson conveys her in much the same way she has been portrayed in *The Saga of the Volsungs*; when Sigurd wakes her from the deep sleep Odin puts her under, "He drew his sword and cut the coat-of-mail off from her. Then she awaked and called herself Hild. Her name was Brynhild, and she was a [V]alkyrie" (70). In this instance, her armor symbolizes her link to her divine and heroic status as a Valkyrie. The most significant difference in this version is that the golden ring Sigurd gave her was retrieved from Andvare[7] by

[7] Andvare is a dwarf with treasure.

Loke. This loss of her armor and her position as a Valkyrie is interpreted as an independent woman who has become submissive to a man. No longer is she a warrior or shieldmaiden, both literally and figuratively, symbolizing becoming subordinate. This ring, originally a gift of Loke's, will also be used for deceitful purposes throughout this version. Throughout these narrations, this ring is often used for ill purposes by those who wish to hurt her. It will also be stolen from her and worn by those who have "conquered" her. Sigurd and Gunnar still switched appearances through magic, emphasizing Sigurd's ability for deceit and offering a new perspective for her role in the story.

Despite the depths to which Sigurd schemes in each story, it is never acknowledged by anyone besides Brynhild. Although everyone else, including his wife, always seems aware of his bullying behavior towards women and even seem to disagree with this behavior, no one ever stands up to him. A patriarchal lens of Sigurd's conduct would indicate that his behavior is endorsed, not just as a lover, but as a hero who conquers dragons and the Valkyrie Brynhild. At least in "Skaldskaparsmal," Sturluson acknowledges Brynhild's aptitude for magic and prophesies, which is essential to note because it is one of the few times that Brynhild is something more than an ignorant woman. He portrays her as one of the most notable figures in Norse mythology with her responsibilities as a Valkyrie and her connection to Odin. With a Goddess-like character, and despite Odin not being specifically tied to this trance-like state within this version, readers are still able to feel sympathy for her after Sigurd takes her armor from her through an act of dominance and then seduces her through duplicitous actions. Her later fury is understandable, which is made worse when Gunnar and Sigurd realize that their attempts to appease her through marriage failed and that she was only left with resentment. While things still end badly for her, at least time is spent on her accreditation and ties to powers as a Valkyrie.

Brynhild does not exist within a single story; instead, she plays a part in multiple fragmented stories with varying aspects of different myths. Her portrayals in the Volsung saga and in *The Prose Edda* can be compared fairly directly to her portrayal in *The Poetic Edda*, compiled by academics around 1270 in Iceland of narratives believed to be older than 900 AD.[8] One of her more positive portrayals in *The Poetic Edda* is "Gripisspa." In "Gripisspa," Brynhild is portrayed as enlightened, and Sigurd seeks her out for guidance after receiving a prophecy. He is told he will awaken a Valkyrie who will teach him many things,

> She to thee, powerful one!
> runes will teach.
> all those which men
> ought to know;
> and in every man's tongue to speak,
> and medicines for healing (261)

once he has woken her from her cursed sleep. She discloses information about his future and his death; she also acts as a type of mentor, providing him with counsel. Her portrayal as a seeress and wise enough to give a hero's advice is notable; however, this does not spare her from being deceived by Sigurd, just as in previous comparisons. He will still betroth himself to Brynhild yet marry Gudrun. In this version, when Gunnar marries Brynhild, they will not sleep together; instead, she will accuse Sigurd of having taken her virginity and will have him executed. This outcome only slightly differs from others in that her accusations are perceived as more vile than previous claims. As in other narratives, she is solely responsible for the loss of a great hero,

[8] There is controversy surrounding this discussion as to the time they were written. Keyser, Bugge, and Gruntvig believe that some were written during the 9th century and some as early as the 5th century when the Eggjum Stone (Runic Inscription) was discovered (Ulvestad 51-5). Munch believes that they were written much later, during the Viking Age, beginning after 800 AD (Ulvestad 52).

providing "evidence" that women are the downfall of great men rather than the beasts with which they battle. Throughout these narratives, she is forced to submit herself to men; the only significant difference is the attitude of respect that she has been given as a seer. Nevertheless, these stories all end for her in the same fashion, and she is continuously held accountable for the actions of others.

In "Sigrdrifumal," she is known as Sigrdrifa, and the work is similar to "Grissipa" in that Brynhild is portrayed as wise, with a deep knowledge of magic, premonitions, and runes.[9] Sigurd seeks her guidance, and she assists him in achieving victory in battle. It is important to note that there is a belief that those who compiled these poems understood Sigrdrifa to be a person set apart from Brynhild, which would have changed the relationship dynamic between Sigrdrifa and Sigurd, although, ultimately "there is […] a profound difference of opinion among the scholars" (Gildersleeve 7). Otherwise, this version of her character is one of the few that, in this manner, maintains her association with the hero sagas. Gunther's portrayal in this poem gives a more distinct perspective of how he views women, even ones who are telling the truth. He remarks that she is being unreasonable, "Many an unjust word thou most utter, and this is a great falsehood" (300) rather than accepting accountability. While no version provides an entirely positive portrayal of Brynhild, this is one of two texts where she is praised for her ability before it is taken away from her.

The last of her more positive portrayals is in "Helreid Brynhildar," a poem in the Codex Regius manuscript about her travels through the realm of the dead. Grieving over the death of Sigurd and with a desire to be reunited with him, her anguish is so great that she cannot imagine

[9] "These ‘runes’ seem to be generally admitted as a later interpolation due to the Norse's passion for didactic poetry" (Gildersleeve 7).

an existence without him, even in death. She overcomes obstacles such as barricades of fire and other dangerous challenges to prove herself worthy so that she may reach him. Her only commendable characteristic is remaining proud and confident in her mission. When she nears the gates of Hel, she faces the guardian Modgud, a giantess who tries to deter her, yet she remains steadfast. While portrayed as brave, she still went to great lengths to be with a man who did not love her. During her conversation with the giantess, she is held accountable for the deaths for which she is liable. Brynhild maintains that she is reasonably innocent:

> Reproached me Gudrun,
> Giuki's daughter,
> that I had slept
> in Sigurd's arms;
> then was I made aware
> of what fain would not,
> that they had deceived me,
> when a mate I took (336)

By providing a rationale for every bad thing that has happened, even Brynhild presents herself as a victim, focused on her desire to be with a man who betrayed her.

Condemned to a mortal life by Odin throughout the Eddic poetry, by the end of each poem, she has become a spiteful woman bent on vengeance for a man who is married to another. Despite the variations within these poems, Brynhild never has a happy ending; she is also portrayed as the reason no one else has a happy ending either, always desiring to have the last hateful action in her sad stories. While none of her previous portrayals is especially favorable, then, among the worst portrayals are those in "Fafnismal," "Brot af Sigurdarkvidu,"

"Gudrunarkvida," and in the later *Nibelungenlied*. In "Fafnismal" or "The Sayings of Fafnir," Brynhild is portrayed as vindictive and spiteful. Her previous renderings of a wise woman or powerful woman are absent. Instead, she spends much time outlining her relationship with Sigurd and how she has been mistreated. She goes on a tirade about her heartbreak and anger and curses both Sigurd and Fafnir, expressing a desire for retribution. She is a vengeful woman who plays a part in everything terrible that happens to them. These events are all foreshadowed by a comment she makes to Sigurd, "It is not wise to place faith in women, for they so often break their promise" (297), which confirms this version being written by a misogynist. While "Gripisspa" features her wisdom, "Fafnismal" highlights her as vindictive, only. Elements of stories are then in juxtaposition and are evidence of the differing contexts of Brynhild's character, lending proof to author inconsistencies.[10]

In further contrast is the "Brot af Sigurdarkvidu," whose focal point is Brynhild's dejected emotional state and desire for vengeance. Similar to "Gripisspa," the story ends with accusations of rape; however, in this poem, she admits to her deceit as she rejoices in Sigurd's execution. Her actions are so immoral that even the man who often killed Sigurd for her in other translations is surprised at her behavior and her jealousy of Gudruns happy marriage, condemning her motivation in the reproof, "Thee Brynhild has in anger instigated evil to perpetrate, harm to execute" (319). Her role in "Brot af Sigurdarkvidu" is another tragic rendition of a dejected and unrequited love.

Brynhild is also portrayed as a jealous woman in the poem "Gudrunarkvida," though here readers see a different side of the story, focusing on Gudrun's grief at losing her husband, Sigurd.

[10] Some of these poems are unique in that the Valkyrie might be a separate individual in that different names are used to distinguish them. Sigrdrifa is a Valkyrie from a previous poem in *The Poetic Edda* about Helgi Hundingsbane, a poem that illustrates Brynhild's journey to the afterlife. As noted earlier, there are differing opinions on whether this is a different woman or meant to be the same person.

Brynhild's role in this story is villainous. She is a hostile woman responsible for a sequence of death and betrayal. Through an aggressive dialogue between Gudrun and Brynhild, it becomes evident that Brynhild is jealous and resentful, which results in a dangerous competitiveness between the two. Out of spite, Brynhild commits suicide and punishes innocent people with her maliciousness: "She caused her eight thralls and five female slaves to be killed, and then slew herself with a sword" (341). While her previous roles have proven detached from her original position, this is the first time she is portrayed as wicked. This interpretation of Brynhild is far removed from her brave Valkyrie aspect. Although Odin has punished her in every story, it means something when Odin grants her request to marry only a brave man. She was the most elevated of all Valkyries, as mentioned previously. She was the only one mentioned by name, but she also made a personal request to Odin, which he granted. Despite losing her powers, believing that a divine woman who can carry men to Valhalla would rather pine for someone else's husband than continue being a shieldmaiden, even one without powers, is implausible.

Her position in these poems differs from the last one that will be considered, in which she is not a Valkyrie but the Queen of Iceland. *The Nibelungenlied* is essential to literature because it was the first heroic epic written in the territories that would become modern-day Germany. Written around 1200 AD by an anonymous poet, it is based on shared historical circumstances and individuals who were said to be real people during this period. While the story's foundation is different, the characters' motives and desires are similar. In the Germanic prose *The Nibelungenlied*, Brynhild’s transgressions embody and validate the upholding of the "natural" patriarchal order despite Gunther and Sigurd once again deceiving her. In this poem, Brynhild is portrayed as the Queen of Iceland, a strong woman with an affinity for fighting. Gunther, a vassal to Sigurd, wants Brynhild for power, while King Sigurd intends to marry her sister,

Kriemhild. They devise a plan where Gunther pretends to be King of the Burgundians while Sigurd pretends to be his vassal. Sigurd formulates a plan to trick Queen Prunhilt [Brynhild] into believing he is weaker than her so that she will want to marry Grunther, the stronger man.[11] Entering her tournament to prove themselves, "He found his cloak of invisibility lying hidden ... He slipped into it quickly, and no one could tell who he was (432-431). Sigurd makes himself invisible and competes to seem as if it were Gunther.

As in earlier narratives, Brynhild does not want to marry Gunther but is put in a position where she can't refuse him, due to having already committed to marrying the man who won. She is rightly suspicious that Sigurd had not been present to watch Gunther compete, and she questions Gunthor about where Sigurd was. This event is the first of many instances in this story when she feels that she is being deceived, but everyone seems to be protecting Sigurd, just as they did throughout the Eddic poetry. Despite Gunther's knowledge of their deceptive plot, he belittles her for being mistrustful, "Then happy I am at these tidings ... that your pride is laid so low here, that someone has lived to be master over you" (473-475) and pressures her into agreeing to their terms. This introduction to the poem sets the precedent for everyone trying to keep secrets from Brynhild. Having no choice but to marry Gunther, Brynhild shares a double wedding with Kriemheld (Gudrun) and Sigurd and leaves her home to live with the people who will continue to treat her poorly.

Begrudgingly, Brynhild moves into their home but remains confident that some trick has occurred; she will remain restless until she has her answer. This circumspection leads her to refuse to share Gunther's bed on their wedding night, swearing "What you're hoping for can't

[11] The names change depending on the translation; in addition to these spellings, some refer to Sigurd and Brynhild as Siegfried and Brunhild. From this point, I will continue to refer to them as Brynhild and Sigurd for simplicity unless it is a direct quote.

come to pass. I want to remain a maiden still - be sure you mark this! - until I find out the truth of the matter" (635-637). He swore to her that there were no secrets between them, but she remained steadfast that she would stay a virgin until he was truthful. It is important to note that this is one of the few times throughout her storylines when she is not portrayed as a lovesick and naive woman. Everyone knows she is being tricked, but no one respects her enough to be honest with her. Brynhild, vulnerable and knowing that she may never go home, courageously stands up for herself and refuses to play a further part in this deception. This behavior change is singular in that it will lead to her being punished by these men for not fulfilling this ideal of a willing and happy wife. Sigurd and Gunther are complicit in this motif of patriarchy in that they will take this choice away from her. When she does not fulfill this patriarchal theme, an example will be made of her.

At this point, Gunther, a mere vassal, knows that unless they consecrate their marriage, he won't have any official claim to the throne of Iceland. Through rage at being refused, he tries to take her body by force. Gunther "struggled for her love and tore her clothes apart" (635-637), but, having momentarily forgotten her strength, he was not successful. While Brynhild is not portrayed as a Valkyrie in this story, she is by no means a weak woman. She tied him up with a cord around her waist and carried him over to a nail, "and hung him on the wall" (636-638) and punished him for accosting her. She leaves him hanging there for the rest of the night to stew in his anger and shame. Gunther is an interesting character in that he never plays the apparent protagonist; instead, he always ends up with Brynhild by deception. He is a weak man who is neither a hero nor a noble; he is just a man who inserts himself in every scheme of Sigurd's betrayal. In any poem, Gunther is neither wanted nor loved by Brynhild.

In this particular version, the following day, embarrassed, Gunther tells Sigurd what has happened to him, and, once again, as in other poems, Sigurd finds a way to make things worse so that Gunther gets what he wants. Sigurd decides that the only course of action is to humble Brynhild by violating her body. Just as he slept with her in the guise of Gunther through the Eddic poetry, Sigurd uses deception to make their marriage "legitimate." That next night, concealed by the invisibility cloak, Sigurd enters their sleeping chamber, and Gunther locks the door behind them. Sigurd refers to this as "playing his game" (665) and does not consider his actions wrong. Even the translation reflects this indifference; this moment of sexual assault is framed in terms of necessary subjected. The moment reads: "When he set about overcoming her, she caused him much pain. I doubt if such a defiance will ever be made by a lady again" (668-669), suggesting this act of rape is the woman's fault rather than the man. The rape is framed as corrective punishment; Sigurd thinks of forcing " the haughty maiden [to] take back the monstrous desire" (672-673). This thread of conquest is emphasized by the work's care in articulating that Gunther hears everything, yet does not speak. He wants to "conquer" Brynhild, even if through another; "It was that which ended the battle - then she became Gunther's wife" (677), which is all he had wanted.

Brynhild is a woman shamed and brought low by men in each of her stories. It is maddening to believe that the "hero" and his weak accomplice shatter a woman who is powerful, wise, and beautiful in each of her narratives. This scene needed to be discussed in order of events because it is critical to experience this as she did; sharing her depth of anguish and humiliation is paramount to answering why someone would do this to her. This type of sexual violence and emotional violence provides evidence that the author did not see her as a woman, in terms of

understanding a woman as a person. Instead, she is just another beast the hero conquers to remain the ultimate champion.

Moreover, raping Brynhild is not enough for Sigurd; he steals a gold ring from her finger as a token to symbolize her submission and later gifts it to his wife. The need for such a token is an essential conversation in that it represents ownership. This theft will be how Brynhild discovers that everyone knows what happened to her and discovers their complicit roles in the deception. The truth comes to light when Kriemhild and Brynhild argue about who has the noblest husband. Until this point, Brynhild had believed that Gunther was a King while Sigurd was merely the vassal. Kriemhild, in a burst of rage, states, "It was Sivrit, my dearest husband, who first made love to your fair person ... What were you thinking of? It was an evil trick. Why did you let him make love to you?" (840). Brynhild, shocked, says she will speak to Gunther about what happened, but Kriemhild offers the stolen golden ring as proof. Overcome with despair, Brynhild finally understands the truth and everyone's involvement in this scheming. The depths of betrayal she must feel are unspeakable; it is difficult to imagine her sorrow at knowing she left her home behind to be with people who did not care about her. Once again, Brynhild's character finds herself on this precipice of this underhanded behavior by these men, and, now, Kriemhild, her sister in this German rendition. Bynhild's character throughout this narrative is not one of a simple or immature woman, as witnessed throughout her other portrayals. She is a woman who challenges attempts to humiliate and shame her. Brynhild does not allow herself to exist within this space of being a submissive wife. Instead, she stands up for herself at every attempt to silence her and is made an example of as a consequence.

Perhaps the oldest recorded version of this story is the "Atlakvida" in the *Poetic Edda*, composed in Norway during the 9th century (Schutte 293); an understanding of the historical

order is necessary when considering how much time passed during their compositions. During this period, a lot of social and religious change took place. In the oldest versions of their stories, Brynhild (Brynhidr) is on a mission to find the strongest man, and, unlike *The Saga of the Volsungs*, Siegfried is given no priority. The changes that take place from this version to the one currently used "make it appear as if the Brynhildr story was the original and the Sigurðr legend was added later to give depth to Brynhildr's ambition" (Jochens, 138-139). This acknowledgment of the shifting of roles with the narrative indicates that later authors would write the story so that Brynhild would serve a male narrative. This clarity confirms that the story of Siegfried and Brynhild was of Christian design, "a motif the Nordic versions eventually embraced" (Jochens 238-139) and contributes to the argument that Brynhild's role as a powerful Valkyrie in her own right was not acceptable to Christian patriarchy. European courts enjoyed these heroic epics; however, Waha explains that the hero was meant to be exclusively male, because "Heroic men were expected to win whether the price might be land, political power, or women" (11), something that was not originally a Nordic element.

The way women have been presented in this poem is representative of the sentiment of Christian authors. *The Nibelungenlied* emerged during Germany's High Middle Ages as a response to the growing demand for stories to be commissioned by financiers. On this note, Batts adds that though academics know "little of the procedure by which the poet's work was committed to parchment" (700), it is evident that scribes did not commission these more extensive manuscripts. Most commonly, these were authors who were part of the court and, wishing to remain in good standing, would have considered religious and political disposition at the time. While these stories still present Brynhild as a notable character, her descent from

Valkyrie to mortal instigator gives greater context into how she fits into this patriarchal narrative agenda.

These would have been Christian scribes and, due to societal pressure, would have incorporated pagan beliefs into a more Christian rendering. While the debate continues amongst scholars whether "sagas are literary products of writers fully versed in Christian, ecclesiastical tradition" (Borovsky 7), they are not only or entirely products of the flourishing oral tradition or the manufacturing of medieval scribes. For Brynhild, specific details would have remained, but her role would have been reshaped to fit Christian themes and virtues, especially in the form of moral and character growth lessons. Notably, her role as a grieving relict and a woman scorned persists throughout all her Eddic portrayals. Her suicide is seen as evidence of her moral failure, as "an abandonment of the power negotiations they entailed, and an ambivalent personal victory" (Batten 292), distilling the social implications of her reactions and the framing of her narrative.

These authors would have omitted portions of the original myths that contradicted their teachings to work within this Christian framework. The first thing to be removed would have been her ties to Odin as a Valkyrie, her connection to being a shieldmaiden, and her disinterest in being married and not needing a man to care for her. Instead, she would take on the role of a woman who lost favor with Odin and would need to be saved by a man rather than remaining a Valkyrie and in his good graces. Her position in the sagas preceding her role as damsel in distress is still evidence "of an ancient female hegemony—an oral tradition—that was later eclipsed by emerging Viking patriarchy and finally submerged by the Christian hierarchy" (Kress, quoted in Borovsky 6), but that the original stories would have portrayed her as more influential.

Older oral stories and traditions would become affected by Christian customs and influence. Brynhild's portrayal would have been molded to fit these changing literary and societal expectations. The expectations imposed by Christianity would have led to a reinterpretation of Norse deities and those with supernatural abilities, such as modifying Brynhild's role within her stories from a divine Valkyrie to a mortal warrior maiden or queen. While not as pronounced as other changes Christian authors made to Norse mythology, it is still essential to scrutinize why Brynhild's character would have been demoted within her stories. It is reasonable to question why a Valkyrie would have become dependent upon a man to save her and been brokenhearted and committed suicide when she didn't get the man she wanted. Christian authors would have accentuated moral lessons according to their values rather than prior pagan inclinations.

Throughout these poems, Brynhild appears as a dramatic figure who experiences extremes of passion and misfortune. When readers try to simplify what is written, they become tangled in “theories of the origin and development of the story” (Gildersleeve 3), the complex basis of her identity. It is challenging to accurately account for Brynhild's decline as a divine woman and how Christianity and social attitudes toward powerful women influenced this change. These modifications took place over a long period, just as the process of indoctrination to Christian beliefs was gradual. Christian authors' degradation of her character is seen in a general context of their values being reflected in Norse mythology. It is valuable to note that surviving written accounts from the Middle Ages are sparse, let alone from earlier periods. Any understanding of Brynhild is speculative, and the Christian indoctrination of Scandinavia while documenting Norse mythology is a complex discussion, especially when considering how pagan

women were represented. Some part of this discussion can be explored through the evidence of Brynhild's similar, yet diverse, narratives.

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