

Grief, Gender and Mourning in Medieval North Atlantic Literature

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the relationship between grief, cultural constructs of gender, and mourning behaviour in the literatures of medieval Britain, Ireland, Scandinavia, and Iceland. The Introduction situates my analysis within an ongoing conversation about the relationship between gender and mourning in classical, medieval, and modern cultures. In the first two chapters I consider the representation of mourning men in medieval texts, arguing that male grief has been neglected as a field of study, and that male weeping and lament in these cultures are incorrectly assumed by modern scholarship to have been considered effeminate. Through a careful reading of primary sources, I argue that there was a broader range of mourning behaviour available to men in these cultures than is typically assumed to have been the case.

My third chapter, “Perilous Grief,” is a comparative analysis of the gendering of death from grief and suicide. I consider the portrayals of male and female deaths related to bereavement, focusing on the contexts in which suicide and death from grief occur. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the relationship between emotional distress and the gendered body, demonstrating that the somatic response to negative emotions is heavily gendered in medieval Scandinavian texts. In female bodies the negative emotion remains centralized in the

chest, often causing death by bursting, while male bodies swell outwards in their grief, permitting release. The only men who die from grief in these texts are presented as old and infirm. In contrast, medieval Irish texts show the same range of somatic responses to grief in both women and men.

My final chapter, “Envisioning the Afterlife,” offers a sustained comparison of the development of the idea of the afterlife and the otherworld in medieval Irish and Norse literature. I argue that the connection between female supernatural figures, death, and the erotic is strongly established in Old Irish and Old Norse-Icelandic texts, and that the pairing of the macabre and the erotic in these traditions is related to a well-established association between female sexuality and the pollution of death occurring in many cultures.

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While writing on grief, loss, and change, the exchange between Cailte and Oisín when they contemplate the disbanding of their company has been much on my mind:

These reminiscences caused a great silence to fall on them. Cailte then said, ‘Just as painful for us as these memories is the fact that the eighteen of us, the only survivors of that great and noble fellowship, must now part from one another.’

Oisín replied, ‘I swear there will be little fight or strength left in me when the others have gone.’¹

Fortunately, technology has improved both communication and travel since Oisín and Caílte’s day, and I may look forward to many future encounters with my friends and colleagues.

¹ Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3-4.

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General Introduction

Taming Grief

The emotional turmoil evoked by bereavement has long been the subject of social controls. Like anger, grief can be powerfully disruptive, and its inevitable eruption into daily life is channeled through systems, at times elaborate, of mourning behaviour. In 1969 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced her now famous theory of “Five Stages of Grief” to the North American public.² In its original conception, the theory dealt not with grief per se, but with the “5 Stages of Receiving Catastrophic News,” which consisted of Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance.³ Kübler-Ross’s research subjects were patients who were informed of their own dire prognoses.⁴ In modern common usage, the Five Stages typically refer specifically to grief, particularly to someone’s grief for someone else’s death. The Stages provide a roadmap for griever and observers, offering assurance that bereavement is traversed in the proper manner. Recent research, however, calls into question the universality that has been attributed to this theory of grieving.⁵ The Five Stages Theory may be seen as a modern attempt to structure the mourning process, corral it, tame it, and the desire to impose this method reflects societal uncertainty resulting from loss of traditional modes of grieving, due to erosion of religion in daily life. As religion recedes and the handling of the physical reality of death is moved out of the home and into the funeral parlor, there has been a significant shift away from pastoral

² Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Scribner, 1969).

³ Kübler-Ross, *On Death*, passim.

⁴ Kübler-Ross, *On Death*, 9-32.

⁵ For a survey of conflicting research, see Ruth Davis Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief: The Myth of its Five Stages and the New Science of Loss* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

counseling and traditions such as wakes as a means of coping with bereavement. The popularity of this schema suggests not so much that all people require a set way to mourn and grieve, but that societies are uncomfortable leaving “grief work” to an individual’s discretion.⁶

Cultural constructions of gender frequently associate lack of agency with femininity, and to feel grief in response to the inevitability and irreversibility of death is among the most intense ways in which an individual experiences his or her own powerlessness. Substituting action for mourning permits the griever to engage in a fantasy of retaliatory strength, soothing anxieties of helplessness and vulnerability. Judith Butler has analyzed the desire to replace grief with aggression in political reactions to the 9/11 attacks: “President Bush announced on September 21 that we have finished grieving and that *now* it is time for resolute action to take the place of grief. When grieving is something to be feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it

⁶ The broad, multi-faceted nature of this topic would make a thorough literature review cumbersome in the introduction. Here I provide a brief overview of some significant works relating to emotion, grief, and lament; other relevant secondary works will be discussed where applicable in the body of the thesis. Emotions have increasingly been a subject of study in literary and historical criticism. Barbara Rosenwein edited *Anger’s Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), and followed this volume with “Worrying About Emotion in History” *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 821-45, and the book *Emotional Communities in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006). Since the publication of Margaret Alexiou’s influential *Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, 2nd ed., rev. Dimitrios Yatromanolakis and Panagiotis Roilos (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. Rpt. of 1974 ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), the field of lament studies has been robust, with a number of works looking at women’s lament in Irish, English, and Scandinavian literature. Carol Clover’s “Hildigunnr’s Lament: Women in Bloodfeud” in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism* ed. John Lindow (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987), 141-83, draws on Alexiou’s work to illustrate the societal forces work in women’s laments in medieval Iceland. Angela Bourke, Kaarina Hollo, and Patricia Lysaght have all made valuable contributions to the understanding of women’s laments in medieval and modern Ireland: Angela Bourke (as Angela Partridge), “Wild Men and Wailing Women,” *Éigse* 18 (1980), 25-37, “The Irish Traditional Lament and the Grieving Process,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 2 (1988), 287-91, Bourke, “More in Anger than in Sorrow: Irish Women’s Lament Poetry,” in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture*, ed. Joan Newlon Radner (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 160-82; Kaarina Hollo, “Laments and Lamenting in early medieval Ireland,” in *Medieval Celtic Literature and Society*, ed. Helen Fulton (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 83-94; Patricia Lysaght, “*Caoineadh os Cionn Coirp*,” The Lament for the Dead in Ireland,” *Folklore* 108 (1997), 65-82; Rachel Bromwich, “The Keen for Art O’Leary, its Background and its Place in the Tradition of Gaelic Keening,” *Éigse: A Journal of Irish Studies* 5 (1948), 236-52. *Grief and Gender 700-1700*, eds. Jennifer C. Vaught and Lynne Dickson Bruckner (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), considers the relationship between grief and gender in medieval and early modern Europe, and Ann Suter’s edited collection *Lament: Studies in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) includes scholarship on classical and ancient near Eastern cultures. *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, eds. Jane Tolmie and M. J. Toswell (Belgium: Brepols, 2010), gathers a number of articles on medieval grief and lament.

quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to reinvigorate a fantasy that world was formerly orderly.”⁷ This displacement of grief with violent retaliation is also a familiar trope of the feminization of mourning, aligning mourning with weakness and femininity, and validating action as the proper, masculine response to emotional pain. While the President’s statement that *now* is the time for resolute action ostensibly called upon the whole nation, the particular action involved took the form of military invasion, and the US military is primarily conceptualized as the province of men, even though this is not in fact the case. Thus he conflates grief with femininity and passivity, and posits it as a state that must be transcended through masculine action.

A similar idea is expressed in two medieval Germanic texts. In *Njáls saga*, the character Kári informs Morðr Valgarðsson of the burning that has killed their friend Njáll and his family. The saga tells us that “when he (Morðr) lamented loudly, Kári said that there were manlier things than weeping for the dead, and bade him to gather forces and bring them all to Holtsford.”⁸ (*en hann (Morðr) aumkaði mjök. Kári kvað annat karlmannligra en gráta þá dauða ok bað hann safna liði ok koma öllu til Holtsvaðs.*)⁹ In a similar fashion Beowulf chides Hroðgar, who laments the death of his companion Æschere: “Do not grieve, wise man; it is better for each man that he avenge his friend, than mourn too much.” (*Ne sorga, snotor guma; selre bið æghwæm/ þæt he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne.*)¹⁰ While the *Beowulf*-poet does not explicitly equate manliness with revenge as does the author of *Njáls saga*, his proverb declares vengeance, the province of men, superior to more passive expressions of grief. While scholars of Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon literature have often generalized the proverbial sentiments expressed by Kári

⁷ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London, New York: Verso, 2004), 29-30.

⁸ Translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

⁹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Íslensk fornrit 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), 339.

¹⁰ R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, John D. Niles, eds. *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 4th Edition (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2008), ll. 1384-5.

and Beowulf to apply to the entire Germanic world in the ancient and medieval periods, this is a simplification of the literary evidence, albeit one that is extremely attractive to many who want to see a stoic sensibility pervading the culture.

My dissertation employs a number of coordinated critical approaches, which, taken together, I would characterize as a cultural anthropology perspective, to examine the intersection of grief, mourning, and gender in the textual traditions of medieval Ireland, Wales, Scandinavia, and Anglo-Saxon England. This is the first study to look at grief and gender across these closely related cultures, and it dialogues with current research in the history of emotions, while bringing a literary perspective that allows a nuanced contextualization of emotions within textual traditions. Rather than examining grief and gender against the background of modern concepts of appropriate mourning, I juxtapose depictions of mourning in medieval Irish, Welsh, Old English and Nordic literature across a broad range of genres. This allows the texts to speak for themselves by being placed in dynamic contrast to one another. A major component of my study is an analysis of the manner in which gendered social roles circumscribe and inform certain modes of expressing grief, and my dissertation challenges the established sharp distinctions between male and female expressions of grief and their cultural significance.

Even if women do have a special relationship to grief, either through biological impulse or cultural imposition, an expectation by modern scholars that women in traditional cultures carry out the majority of the important grief work on behalf of society at large has led to the demotion of men's grief to a position of unimportance as a subject of study. Whether or not women were in fact the primary mourners in ancient and medieval cultures, the erasure or obscuring of male voices that also express the vulnerability of bereavement does a disservice to the complexity of the medieval cultures that produced the texts I examine. 'Heroic' masculinity

was less monolithic and static than it is often imagined to have been; competing or complementary concepts of masculinity, such as clerical masculinity, and evolving cultural institutions, such as chivalry, exerted strong influences. The qualities that constituted ‘manliness’ were continuously in flux.

In contrast to the contemporary desire to view male expressions of grief as an aberration or as an imitation of “normal” female mourning, many of the textual sources are informed by tendencies to pathologize certain types of male grief, while validating others; thus men in Scandinavian texts are praised for their extravagant grief for their kings, comrades, and sons, but strong emotion at the death of a wife is presented as problematic, even dangerous. Medieval Scandinavian men’s grief for mothers and daughters, though one presumes it existed, is almost entirely left out of the textual record.

Butler considers the use of politicized mourning in creating categories of the mourned, and thus mournable, and the unmourned, whose personhood is destabilized and eradicated by the lack of mourning for their deaths. While analyzing the US government’s policies for mourning soldiers killed in combat Butler asks, “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*?”¹¹ The question is highly relevant to my dissertation. The texts under consideration are selective in whose deaths are mentioned, and even more so in describing which of those deaths are mourned, and in what manner the bereaved expressed their feelings of loss. The death of a Scandinavian queen or noblewoman rarely merits the attention of the authors who so meticulously account for the passing of these women’s male kin, and when a woman’s death is mentioned, it is usually included in the text in the service of her husband’s reputation, as the woman is rendered so desolate by his death that she cannot continue to live in his absence. Her death illustrates the societal importance given to the role of husband and/or king

¹¹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

in these societies. When the situation is reversed, and a man is shown mourning for his wife, his grief is problematic, indicative of an unbecoming weakness and neglect of his responsibilities. In these circumstances, a replacement wife is generally the answer, thus reinforcing the notion that women are interchangeable, their personal qualities less important than their social role.

On the other hand, Irish literature is awash with grief for women, often eloquently expressed. While much of this grief is found in bardic poetry, and is thus part of a subset of mourning for dead chiefs and kings, other genres provide ample evidence for grief for women, in their assorted roles as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, and foster-kin. Thus, medieval Ireland appears to have acknowledged or promoted as grief-worthy social bonds that were horizontal, in addition to the vertical hierarchies that Norse tradition privileged above all others. Joseph Harris argues that in the Norse *männerbund* one's familial ties were replaced symbolically by other members of the *comitatus*, with one's fellow warriors substituting as mother, father, wife, etc.¹² It is therefore not surprising that we see a tendency to diminish women's social value in the realm of mourning, as our sources derive almost entirely from the same aristocratic background that produced the *comitatus*. One of the few glimpses of mourning among the lower classes actually does portray a man mourning for his wife, weeping, clapping his hands, and proclaiming his desire to die. Here, however, the man's mourning for his wife is seen through the eyes of a royal poet, who immediately appropriates this individual's grief to support his own grief for his king. Even as the villager is subject to a class hierarchy overseen by the king, so his sorrow is subjugated to another's grief for the king, and his emotions are dismissed by the poet as being paltry in their intensity. This man's loss of a wife cannot compare, in the poet's mind, to the loss of a king.

¹² Joseph Harris, "Love and Death in the *Männerbund*: An Essay with Special Reference to the *Bjarkamál* and *The Battle of Maldon*," in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period: Studies in Honor of Jess B. Bessinger, Jr.*, eds. Helen Damico and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993), 77-114.

What is at stake in the cultural construction of mourning? Butler writes that “(m)any people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing.” She argues, however, that grief “furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the “we” is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or, rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation.”¹³ Butler proposes that grief’s intrusion interrupts narratives of identity and individuality, revealing “the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.”¹⁴ Butler notes that “there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe,” with the result that “(c)ertain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as “grievable.”¹⁵ Butler suggests that

(a) hierarchy of grief could no doubt be enumerated. We have seen it already, in the genre of the obituary, where lives are quickly tidied up and summarized, humanized . . . What defense against the apprehension of loss is at work in the blithe way in which we accept deaths caused by military means with a shrug or with self-righteousness or with clear vindictiveness? . . . How do our cultural frames for thinking the human set limits on the kinds of losses we can avow as loss? After all, if someone is lost, and that person is not someone, then what and where is the loss, and how does mourning take place?¹⁶

¹³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22-3.

¹⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

¹⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 32.

¹⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 32.

While Butler's analysis focuses on the ways that state apparatuses control and manage categories of grievability in order to maintain hierarchies of personhood, less overtly political communities also use grief in ways that reinforce power imbalances. A hierarchy of grievability might also be theorized: at the top would be those individuals who are mourned, but whose status prevents them from showing grief for others in turn save in exceptional circumstances, as grieving for someone places one's own personhood in a subordinate position. Below this position are those who both grieve and are grieved. At the bottom are the individuals whose loss evokes no comment, and whose voices, if raised in grief, go unheard and unrecorded. While mourning acknowledges one's vulnerability and subordination, it simultaneously claims the right to speak and be heard. Both powerlessness and agency inhabit the grieving voice.

It is the violation of perceived weakness that lends the grieving voice such power to incite action. While well-documented in ancient and modern Greece and in medieval Scandinavia, the role of female lament as incitement to revenge receives far less attention in medieval Wales and Ireland, although there are hints that lament may have also functioned in this way in those cultures. Among the Welsh legal triads, we find the following triad:

These are the three incitements of revenge: one of them is the wailing of female relatives, the second is seeing the bier of their relative going to church, the third is seeing the grave of their relative without reparation.¹⁷

*Try chyffro dial ynt: vn ohonunt diaspedain y caressev, eil yw gweled gelor eu car yn myned y'r llan, trydyt yw gweled bed ev car heb ymdiwyn.*¹⁸

¹⁷ ¹⁷ Sara Elin Roberts, *The Legal Triads of Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 56-7, X34.

¹⁸ Roberts, *Legal Triads*, 56-7, X34. There is another version of the same triad: "There are three incitements to revenge: the wailing of female relatives, and seeing the bier of their relative, and seeing the grave of their relative without compensation." (*Tri chyffro dial yssyd: diaspedein karesseu, a g6elet elor eu kar, a g6elet bed eu kar heb yndiu6yn.*) Roberts, *Legal Triads*, 107, Q25.

Although this triad may indicate only that a reminder of the death is an incitement to revenge, it is also possible that these lamenting women operated in a manner similar to the whetting women of Icelandic saga.

One of the most significant references to keening in medieval Irish occurs in a vernacular penitential edited by E. J. Gwynn, a text organized according to Cassian's "eight principal sins" schema. Although we might expect to find the discussion of keening under the heading *de Tristitia*, it is instead located immediately prior to this section, at the conclusion of the section dealing with the sin of *Ira*. The penitential states:

If it be illness¹⁹ that provokes any outcry [*sic?*], it is not be passed over for the moment. A married woman or a penitent nun who makes lamentation over a layman or laywoman, fifty nights' penance. If it be over a married woman or a penitent nun who dies in childbed, or a member of the household, forty nights' penance. If over a cleric of the laity, twenty nights' penance. If over a bishop or king or confessor or ruler of a chief town, fifteen nights' penance. If it be a novice who happens to commit one of the offences here mentioned, he has double penance, compared with a married woman.²⁰

*mad galar todiuscai ha nuall ni secmaldtai fochetoir. Cetmunter no caillech aithirgi dogní gol for laiech nó laithes pennait .l. n-aidche. Mad for cetmuindtir nó for chaillich aithirgi adbaill dí asáit nó for fiur muindtiri pennit .xl. n-aidchi. Mad for cleiriuch tuathe .xx. pende. Mad for epscop nó rí g nó anmcarait nó aircindech ardcathrach .xu. pendi. Math mac-cleiriuch dia tecmai oen inna cinath-sa asrubartmar is diabul penne dó fri cetmuindtir.*²¹

The significance of the placement of this list of penances is difficult to determine, but nonetheless suggestive. Among the other sins assigned penances in this section are homicide, killing in revenge, suicide, and physical assault. Towards the end of the section the concern turns from the infliction of physical harm to verbal sins, such as cursing one's neighbor, or speaking

¹⁹ Gwynn points out that the Latin from which this text is adapted has *dolore* here, and suggests that the Irish adapter misunderstood *dolor* to mean physical, rather than emotional, pain. However, 'grief' and 'distress' are also possible translations for *galar*, so it is not necessary to assume a mistake on the part of the Irish adapter. E. G. Quin, ed. *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (Dublin 1913-76), s.v. *galar*. In Welsh, *galar* is 'grief.'

²⁰ E. J. Gwynn, "An Irish Penitential," *Ériu* 7 (1913) 121-95: 171.

²¹ Gwynn, "An Irish Penitential," 170.

bitter words to a fellow. Directly preceding the list under consideration is the following statement:

If anyone raises his voice in speaking to someone at a distance or to a deaf man, there is [no] penance. If the raising of his voice is attended with anger, whether at a distance or near by, penance is done according to the sin and the transgression.²²

*Nech connocaib a guth frisíní bís huad hi cein nó fri fer mbodar pennithir ma co feirc im chumgabál cith hi cein cid ind occus peindidir fon cinith 7 fon targabal.*²³

Thus lamenting completes a list of verbal sins of anger. It is possible that the anger was understood to be directed at God, but there is no mention of this, and the majority of the *Ira* section deals with anger directed at other people or at one's own person. Presumably, then, there was a fear that lamenting either resulted from, or resulted in, anger.

This brief passage hints at other complex issues. The severity of penance in relation to the social status of the deceased is intriguing; scholars have often taken this passage to suggest the presence of professional mourners in medieval Ireland, because the penance is lesser if the dead person is a member of the household. However, there is no mention of payment, and while it is a valid interpretation of the text, it is not the only possibility.

Kaarina Hollo implies that the double penance ascribed to a keening nun in the *Bigotian Penitential* is the more genuine representation of Irish tradition, and that reference to a *mac-cleiriuch* in the vernacular Irish version is to be disregarded as evidence.²⁴ In spite of Hollo's confidence in interpreting the material in this way, it must be remembered that there are only two

²² Gwynn, "Penitential," 171.

²³ Gwynn, "Penitential," 170.

²⁴ Hollo, "Laments," 85. While *mac* is the term for "boy," it may also be used to refer to children more generally; see Máirín Ní Donnchadha, "The *Prull* Narrative in *Sanas Cormaic*," in *Cín Chille Cúile: Texts, Saints, and Places, Essays in Honour of Pádraig Ó Riain*, eds. John Carey, Máire Herbert, and Kevin Murray (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2004) 163-177: 172.

extant manuscripts of the *Bigotian Penitential*, and the Old Irish penitential containing the same prohibition on keening survives in a single copy. Furthermore, it is perfectly possible that notions of appropriate mourning shifted between the composition of the *Bigotian Penitential* in Latin and its translation into Irish, or that the discrepancy in the double penance reflects local (or perhaps even personal) concerns of the respective redactors.

In fact, the earliest appearance of this material, in the *Irish Canons*, omits the double penance entirely:

The penance for the wailing . . . after (the death of) a layman or a laywoman, fifty days on bread and water.

If (the dirge is sung) after (the death of) a servant woman with child, or after (the death of) him who cohabits with her, forty days on bread and water.

If after (the death of) a cleric of the parish, twenty days on bread and water.

If after (the death of) an anchorite or a bishop or a scribe or a great prince or a righteous king, fifteen days on bread and water.²⁵

*Poenitentia bardigi capalbiae*²⁶ post laicum uel laicam l. dies in pane et aqua.

Si post glantellam in utero habentem uel post cohabitorem suum, .xl. dies in pane et aqua.

Si post clericum plebis, .xx. dies in pane et aqua.

*Si post hanchoritam uel episcopum uel scribam uel principem magnum uel post regem iustum, .xv. dies in pane et aqua.*²⁷

The penitential's focus on restricting women's keening is usually taken as evidence of women's special relationship with keening in medieval Ireland, and scholars have assumed that if women are the primary people who keen, then restricting women's keening would be the sensible method to reduce keening overall. However, if women are the main keeners, why do the texts need to refer to women in the first place? If women were the individuals in society responsible for keening, then there would be little need to single them out in the text, because it would be

²⁵ Ludwig Bieler, ed. and trans. *The The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963), 162-3.

²⁶ The meaning of *capalbiae* is unknown, but it corresponds to *glandellae* in the *Bigotian Penitential*.

²⁷ Bieler, *The The Irish Penitentials*, 162-3.

understood that women were the target of any prohibition on keening. This is one of many examples where modern scholarship has relied too heavily on modern views of gendered grieving in interpreting medieval evidence.

There are far more extant laments and elegies composed by named, historical, male poets in the medieval period than by women poets. The poetry attributed to women is almost always put in the mouths of legendary heroines, but the texts are the products of scriptoriums; whatever the historical realities of women's lament in medieval Ireland, they remain obscure to the modern scholar. If male authors place their laments in the mouths of female personas, and if the church or state is attempting to limit the expression of women's grief, there is a double silencing of female voices in the written record, in parallel to the displacement of male mourning by modern critics. Because demonstrations of extravagant male grief is problematic in a modern context, destabilizing gendered paradigms in which men are expected to suffer stoically and silently so as not to appear weak and effeminate, male mourning is displaced, and in that displacement, overwrites and conceals women's mourning.

Margaret Alexiou, Gail Holst-Warhaft and Nicole Loraux²⁸ have investigated the changes to legislation regarding women and mourning in the city-states of Classical Greece the fifth century B.C. Nicole Loraux states that "the relationship of the wives and mothers to their husbands and sons is a relationship to power itself. When they weep over their dead spouses or killed sons, they lament not so much the dead body of a kinsman as the king and the power that has been lost, and the name that has been obliterated."²⁹ Loraux suggests that in Greek tragedy, it was maternal grief that was the most dangerous, posing the greatest threat to the social stability

²⁸ Alexiou, *Ritual*. Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices, Women's Laments and Greek Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992). Nicole Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning, with the Essay of Amnesty and its Opposite*, trans. Corinne Pache (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

²⁹ Loraux, *Mothers*, 6. She speaks in reference to Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

of the state.³⁰ Following Loraux's line of thinking, I suggest that in Scandinavian tradition it is the wife who is viewed as the greatest source of political unrest arising from grief. Holst-Warhaft considers the possibility that the Greek city-states weakened the power of the aristocratic families and consolidated them under the authority of the *polis*, and placed severe restrictions on women's public mourning in an effort to prevent blood-feuds.³¹ While medieval Scandinavia is in many ways far removed from the city-states of classical Greece, both cultures undertook projects to consolidate familial structures, subordinating kinship to citizenship in the Greek city-state, and to kingship in Scandinavia. The literary output associated with the Scandinavian courts, themselves highly dependent upon a hierarchy in war-band under control of the king, viewed sexual, rather than maternal, relationships with women as the most disruptive, and it is mourning for and mourning by wives which is represented as dangerous to the social order. While men mourning other men also "lament. . . the power that has been lost, and the name," to grieve for a wife, which is depicted as unnatural and dangerous, or a mother, which situation appears rarely, if at all, reinforces social bonds with weakness, acknowledging the connection between female biology and the male warrior body, and suggesting an unsavory dependence of the latter upon the former.

Overview of Thesis

The first two chapters are a series of case studies on the neglected subject of male mourning in medieval Ireland, Britain, and Scandinavia. Chapter 1 looks at male lament in medieval Wales and Ireland. The first section outlines the evolution of the societal relationships governing the practices of male keening, weeping, and lament in Welsh texts across the span of the medieval period. The Irish portion of the chapter offers a corrective to the emphasis placed

³⁰ Loraux, *Mothers*, passim.

³¹ Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices*, 85-6, 97, et passim.

on female lament in scholarship; while women's lament in early and modern Ireland has been thoroughly (though not exhaustively) explored, male lament remains understudied.

Chapter 2 reevaluates received notions that male weeping was coded as effeminate in the medieval Germanic world. The chapter opens by surveying a wide range of Scandinavian and Icelandic texts, in the vernacular and in Latin, in order to establish the praxis for male weeping from bereavement. This chapter presents a powerful argument against relying heavily on the family sagas, to the exclusion of other genres, when attempting to understand the gendering of emotions in Scandinavian texts from this period. In the second half of the chapter, I contextualize two instances of male weeping in Old English secular poetry within a broader textual framework.

In my third chapter, "Perilous Grief," I discuss portrayals of mourning gone wrong, where the bereaved commit suicide or die from grief, situations that imposed moratoriums on the duration and expression of mourning seem designed to prevent. However, as subversive as these deaths appear, they demonstrate that these drastic responses to grief also support paradigms of gender, class, and power, and thus reinforce and legitimize narratives of societal cohesion.

Chapter 4, "Envisioning the Afterlife," is a sustained comparison of the role of gender in Norse and Irish concepts of the afterlife, divided into three sections. The first considers the role of gender in descriptions of the afterlife and otherworlds; specifically, how the societal values of the audience surface in literary descriptions of existence after death. While most of these texts reflect the evolving perspectives of the elite warrior class, I demonstrate that Scandinavian texts preserve evidence of a female point of view. The second section reevaluates the perceived dichotomy between female death deities and eroticism in Scandinavian texts in light of scholarship on Celtic sovereignty figures. The chapter concludes with juxtaposed close readings of an Old Irish lament and an Old Norse eddic poem. The poems depict gendered ideas of the

afterlife, and are suffused with anxiety about the feminizing principle, which undermines male constructions of self and society. Fears of obliteration, disintegration, and non-personhood are enacted and displaced onto non-male bodies, as a means by which male identities can be preserved and projected beyond life. The anxieties that lead to the erasure of female bodies and their replacement with entirely masculine social bonds resurface, and must again be suppressed, in mythologies of death.

Chapter One

Mourning Men: Male Weeping and Lamenting in Medieval Ireland and Wales

"Thou dost well to weep like a woman for that which thou couldst not defend like a man."

Spoken to the last king of Granada, Muhammad XII, by his mother, as they go into exile.³²

"God made woman to lie, weep, and sew."

Fallere, flere, nere, statuit deus in muliere.

Latin proverb, quoted by Christine de Pisan in *The City of Ladies*³³

Weeping in the modern West is strongly associated with femininity; the saying "boys don't cry" is commonly used to diminish boys and men who shed tears, and the tendency in recent decades of men, particularly athletes and politicians, to abandon the famous "stiff upper lip" and publicly weep has resulted in a number of journalists either wringing their hands over the downfall of traditional masculinity or, less commonly, applauding the cultural shift that permits men to cry with less denigration.³⁴ The two quotations at the head of this chapter likewise associate women with weeping and vice versa, and this idea certainly existed in the medieval period. Despite the apparent continuity between medieval and modern notions of gendered weeping, it is worth noting that, then as now, there were competing discourses about

³² Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, (London: McMillan, 1937), 555.

³³ From Rosalind Brown-Grant, ed. and trans., Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 26. In Christine's Old French the proverb is "*Plourer, parler, filler mist Dieu en femme.*" Maureen Cheney Lois, *The Livre de la cité des dames of Christine de Pisan: A Critical Edition*, (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan Ann Arbor, 1976), 657.

³⁴ By way of example, see Damian Corless, "Boys Don't Cry?" *Independent*, August 2008, Lifestyle section, <http://www.independent.ie/lifestyle/boys-dont-cry-1449222.html>. Accessed on Nov. 27, 2011.

masculinity. Christine de Pisan refutes the misogyny in the proverb, arguing that God bestowed these qualities in women for their own benefit, and that Christ would not have chosen to weep with the sisters of Lazarus if weeping were beneath his dignity.³⁵ What is acceptable to God's dignity is surely not beneath that of a man.

In this chapter I consider the depictions of male weeping and lament in the literatures of medieval Wales and Ireland. Discussions dealing with the performance of mourning rituals in literature continue to rely largely on a dichotomy associating women with the outward and often flamboyant expression of grief, and the special association of women with grieving has become accepted in the critical literature on the topic, despite numerous examples of male grief that complicate this picture. Scholarly criticism has often ignored men who expressed their grief through tears, either viewing them as insignificant or as aberrant. I will reexamine assumptions about the relationship between gender and grief in the literatures under consideration, assumptions which encode certain modes of mourning as the exclusive province of women.

However, scholarship on medieval Wales has avoided this tendency to link mourning with women, and mourning in Welsh literature has largely escaped the kind of gendering applied to mourning in these other traditions. Indeed, scholarship on Welsh mourning views men as the standard lamenters: "While there is some evidence of women lamenting the dead as in the Irish *keen*, the formal mode in early Welsh literature, both bardic and saga, is, again with the exception of *Heledd*, an exclusively male preserve."³⁶ The Welsh triad quoted in my introduction, which states that women's lamenting is one of three incitements to revenge, suggests that there was a stratum of women's keening which has largely gone unrecorded—in

³⁵ Lois, *The Livre*, 657.

³⁶ Jenny Rowland, *Early Welsh Saga Poetry: A Study and Edition of the Englynion* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer: 1990), 142. Unfortunately, Rowland does not cite her sources for women lamenters in Welsh tradition; perhaps she is thinking of the legal triad discussed in my Introduction.

this way, the Welsh tradition mirrors the Irish, as women-authored (as opposed to female voiced) laments are scarce in the medieval period. Nonetheless, while the triad hints at a tradition of mourning associated with women, men dominate the literary evidence. Consequently, an overview of Welsh accounts of male mourning will offer a corrective to the more biased scholarship on the other traditions, and will provide a background against which to place the accounts in the other literatures I will consider later in this chapter. I will begin with a simple description of male mourning in Welsh literature from its earliest records up to the end of the fifteenth century.

In the second half of the chapter I argue that scholarship dealing with medieval Irish literature has, partly under the influence of later Irish keening practices, co-opted the rituals of grieving almost exclusively for female use, and either ignored men's grief, or seen its expression as an imitation of women's mourning. I demonstrate that this bias has led critics to misinterpret the significance and social role of male weeping and lament in Irish literature.

Men's Grief in Middle Welsh Texts

In an article on Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Goch's famous *Marwnad Llywelyn ap Gruffudd*, Ann Matonis discusses the difficulty of determining the sincerity of the emotions expressed in elegiac poetry. Gruffudd's elegy, she writes, "is thought to be a particularly effective lament because of what has been regarded as an outpouring of unmistakably personal grief. For my part I would not question the genuineness of Gruffudd's grief because it is difficult – if not impossible – to judge or confirm such a thing. Then, too, in a literary sense, the question is not entirely relevant. The various devices used to convey this grief are, on the other hand, more

readily scrutable.”³⁷ Matonis’s hesitation in making such an assertion about Gruffudd’s actual emotion is commendable, and it would be wise to extend this caution to considerations of other elegiac texts. Separating those expressions representing the poet’s actual interior emotions from those that are prompted or required by the genre of elegy itself is an impossible task, in the absence of a statement to that effect from the actual poet. It is important to remember that a role of this elegiac and commemorative literature is not only the expression of emotion, but also its production, and the ability of elegy to direct an audience’s mood along the culturally determined proper course may induce catharsis for the individual lamenter as well as for observers.³⁸

Math, Owein, and Peredur

Welsh prose contains surprisingly little in the way of descriptions of male or mixed-sex lamenting or weeping. The Four Branches of the *Mabinogi* are particularly sparse in references to mourning; although the sorrow of Bran’s retainers is made very plain in the 2nd and 3rd Branches, no tears are shed for him, no laments voiced.³⁹ The only instance of ritual mourning occurs in the 4th Branch after the death of Pryderi, slain in battle by Gwydion. “The men of the South went homeward with wretched lamentation, and that was no wonder; they had lost their lord.” (*Gwyr y Deheu a gerdassant ac argan truan ganthunt parth ac eu gwlat, ac nit oed ryued; eu harglwyd a gollysynt.*)⁴⁰ As the only lament in the *Mabinogi*, it lends a particular gravity to Pryderi’s death, and perhaps supports the conjecture that the *Mabinogi* at one point was the life

³⁷ Ann Matonis, “The Rhetorical Patterns in *Marwnad Llywelyn ap Gruffudd* by Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch,” *Studia Celtica* 14/15 (1979/1980), 188-192: 188.

³⁸ Efforts to direct the emotions of the bereaved, and under what circumstances these systems are vulnerable to fracture, will be explored in Chapter 3.

³⁹ Bran’s sister Branwen, his half-brother Efnisien, and Caradog, his son, all die from grief in the Second Branch. I discuss their deaths in Ch. 3.

⁴⁰ Ifor Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1930), 73.

story of Pryderi.⁴¹ Pryderi's death is significant in another way. Pryderi falls fighting Gwydion, and Gwydion defeats him not only with force, but also "*a hut a lledrith*."⁴² that is, with magic and enchantment. Not only have the men of the South lost their lord, they have lost him in an unfair match. The lament of Pryderi's men may reflect a sorrow that is sharper because his death was achieved by trickery. It also may suggest a transition from a more straightforward morality, wherein the Welsh fought against external or supernatural foes, to the treacherous infighting characteristic of the Fourth Branch.

The *rhamantau* are slightly more forthcoming on the subject of lament, but their vexed relationship with Chrétien's romances, the so-called *Mabinogionfrage*, complicates their use as evidence.⁴³ In *Owein*, there are three laments by the people whose lord Owein has slain:

And then, behold he heard a wailing in the fortress, and Owein asked the maiden, 'What is this outcry?' They are anointing the nobleman who owns this fortress' said the maiden. [. . .] At midnight, he heard a frightening wailing. 'What is this wailing now?' said Owein. 'The nobleman who owns this fortress is dead this hour,' said the maiden. And at the start of day he heard a wailing and an outcry immeasurable in their strength, and Owein asked of the maiden, 'What is the meaning of this outcry?' 'They are bearing the body of the nobleman who owned this fortress to the church.'

⁴¹ Eric Hamp summarizes this widespread theory in "Mabinogi and Archaism," *Celtica* 23 (1999), 96-110. See also W. J. Gruffydd, *Rhiannon: An Enquiry into the Origins of the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1953).

⁴² Williams, *Pedeir Keinc*, 73.

⁴³ "The relationship of these tales and the corresponding Old French romances has dominated discussion about them so that *Mabinogionfrage* has, until recently, all but made an examination of these stories as Welsh narratives an impossible task. They were read, structurally and thematically, in the light of the French romances and their effectiveness as compositions was judged in that context, while the issue of their standing within the native Welsh narrative tradition was ignored. In retrospect one can see that the critical review of the tales had, at times, clear partisan aspects and that the discussion has frequently been motivated, on all sides, more by cultural politics than literary history. The debate—whether Chrétien is the sole, or major, source of the Welsh stories, whether his romances and the Welsh have a common Old French source (itself of Welsh origin), whether they are independent developments of a Welsh source, whether the Welsh tales have their own history which may have been influenced by Chrétien's poems, and variations on these themes—is well documented, but, nevertheless, how, or to what degree, the Welsh tales relate to Chrétien's corresponding romances has still not been fully resolved in spite of a great deal of careful textual and narrative analysis, for the question is not capable of resolution simply in terms of borrowing or interference." Brynley F. Roberts, "'Peredur Son of Efrog': A Text in Transition," *Arthuriana* 10 (2000), 57-72: 58.

*Ac are hynny nachaf y clywynt diaspedein yn y gaer, a gofyn a oruc Owein y'r uorwyn, 'Py weidi yw hwnn?' 'Dodi olew ar y gwrda bieu y gaer,' heb y uorwyn. [. . .] Ac am hanner nos, y clywynt diaspedein girat. "Py diaspedein yw hwnn weithon?" heb yr Owein. 'Y grwda bieu y gaer yssyd uarw yw awr honn,' heb y uorwyn. Ac am rynnawd o'r dyd y clywynt diaspedein a gweidi anueitrawl eu meint, a gofyn a oruc Owein y'r uorwyn, 'Pa ystyr yssyd y'r gweidi hwnn?' 'Mynet a chorff y gwrda bieu y gaer y'r llann.'*⁴⁴

Owein goes to his window to view the procession, and sees an endless crowd of women, clergy, and noblemen, chanting and shouting. Following the host is a beautiful woman in full mourning mode, with torn clothes and bloodied flesh, who wrings her hands with bruising intensity. She is the widow of the slain lord, “and her lament was louder than that of any man or horn in the host.” (*Ac uch oed y diaspat noc a oed o dyn a chorn yn y llu.*)⁴⁵ These laments are paralleled in the French *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion*, but there are differences.⁴⁶ In *Owein*, the knight is led by a maiden, who has provided him with a magical ring that grants him invisibility, to an upstairs chamber while the courtiers search for him in order to avenge their lord. It is while he hides in this chamber that Owein hears the three cries, and observes the lady and the procession through his window the next morning. The fact that he can hear but not see the people crying out requires the maiden to explain what is happening to Owein. In *Yvain*, the magic ring allows him to remain in the hall where the lord's body is laid out, and from this vantage point he witnesses the general grief of the populace, and that of the widowed lady. The lady's grief is emphasized more in *Yvain* than in *Owein*, as it is described in two passages, preceding and following the description of the people's mourning, which is described less elaborately. The three cries in *Owein*, because

⁴⁴ R. L. Thomson, *Owein or Chwedyl Iarlles y Ffynawn* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968), 13.

⁴⁵ Thomson, *Owein*, 14.

⁴⁶ Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. under the direction of Daniel Poirion, with the collaboration of Ann Berthelot, Peter F. Dembowski, Sylvie Lefèvre, Karl D. Uitti, and Philippe Walter (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 367-9, ll. 1142-1255.

of his remote location, arrive as disembodied phenomena that must be explained, lending them an eerie quality absent in *Yvain*.⁴⁷

In *Peredur*, the Welsh equivalent to Chrétien's *Perceval*, the celebrated scene in which Peredur glimpses the bizarre grail procession is accompanied by lament: "And Peredur sat beside his uncle, and they conversed. Then he saw two youths entering the hall and proceeding from it to a chamber, bearing an immeasurable spear, with three streams of blood running down from the socket to the floor. And when everyone saw the youths approaching in this way, everyone made such a cry and lament that it was not easy for anyone to endure it." (*Ar neill law y ewythyryd eistedawd Peredur, ac ymdidan a orugant. Ar hynny, ef a welei deu was yn dyuot y'r neuad ac o'r neuad yn mynet y ystauell, a gwayw ganthunt anuedrawl y veint, a their ffrwt ar y hyt yn redec o'r mwn hyt y llawr. A phan welas pawb y gweisson yn dyuot yn y wed honno, llefein a drycyruerth a gymerth pawb yndunt, hyt na oed hawd y neb y diodef.*)⁴⁸ The lord ignores these events and continues his conversation with Peredur uninterrupted, and the casual nature of their exchange, contrasted with the seemingly ritualized, yet anguished, cry of the other people present, increases the strangeness of the situation.

After the youths with the spear have left the room, two maidens appear, bearing an even more mysterious burden: "After a short silence, behold, two maidens come in bearing a large dish between them, with a man's head on the dish, and blood all over the head. And then everyone made a lament and cry, so that it was difficult for anyone to be in the same house with them." (*Gwedy tewi yspeit vechan, ar hynny, llyma dwy vorwyn yn dyuot y mwyn a dyscyl vawr y*

⁴⁷ Compare the mysterious scream of the hidden dragon in *Cyfranc Llud a Llefelys*, that causes the women of Britain to miscarry and the men to lose their strength, among other calamities: "Yr eil ormes oed, diaspat a dodit pob Kalan Mei vch bob aelwyt yn Ynys Prydein, a honno a aei trwy galloneu y dynyon ac a'e hofnockaei yn gymeint ac y collei y gwyr eu lliw ac eu nerth, a'r gwraged eu beichogyeu, a'r meibon a'r merchet a gollynt eu synhwyreu, a'r holl anieileit a'r gwyd a'r dayar a'r dyfred a edewit yb diffrwyth." Brynley F. Roberts, ed., *Cyfranc Llud a Llefelys* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1995), 2.

⁴⁸ Glenys Witchard Goetinck, ed., *Historia Peredur vab Efrog* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1976), 20.

ryghthunt, a phen gwr ar y dyscyl, a gwaet yn amhyl yg kylch y pen. Ac yna diaspedein a llefein a oruc pawb, hyny oed anhawd y neb bot yn vn ty ac wynt.)⁴⁹ The appearance of the man's severed head and the accompanying lament suggests that the Welsh author may have interpreted this scene as a sort of funeral procession. The details of the head and the two laments are not present in *Perceval*.⁵⁰

Carol Clover has used scholarship on women's employment of lament and tokens, such as bloody clothing, to compel their male kin to avenge a death as a lens through which to consider the formal elements of a '*hvot*,' i.e., 'incitement,' in Icelandic sagas.⁵¹ She focuses on the famous scene in *Njáls saga*, where the recently widowed Hildigunnr serves her uncle Flosi at a feast. She first arranges a high-seat for Flosi, which he refuses. He takes another seat, and his niece sits beside him. When a cloth is given to him so that he may clean his hands, it is riddled with holes, and he tears a piece from the table-cloth to use instead. Hildigunnr weeps before him, which he commends as fitting tribute for the dead man. She asks how he will avenge her husband. Flosi wants to settle the death of through legal channels, but Hildigunnr wants blood for blood. Finally she retrieves from a chest the cloak her husband died in, still covered in his blood, and incidentally given to him by Flosi. Hildigunnr throws the cloak over her uncle, demanding that he seek revenge or be shamed. Flosi throws off the cloak, and utters a famous Old Norse-Icelandic proverb: "Cold are the counsels of women" ("*eru kold kvenna ráð*").⁵²

Though examples of whetting, i.e., ritualized incitement to action, for the purpose of revenge are rare in Welsh literature, the above-mentioned triad (p. 8) mentions women's wailing as a spur to vengeance, along with seeing a kinsman's body on the bier, and seeing the kinsman's

⁴⁹ Goetinck, *Peredur*, 20.

⁵⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval ou le Cont du Graal*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Daniel Poirion, et. al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 764-5, ll. 3190-3242.

⁵¹ Clover, "Hildigunnr's Lament," 141-4, *et passim*.

⁵² Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 291-2.

grave. John Carey points out that Chrétien, as opposed to his successors, makes no allusion to the lance with which Longinus wounded Christ, and that “nothing which [he] says about the lance indicates that it has any save a destructive function.”⁵³ Carey sees a connection between the spear that wounds the king and the spear that is carried through the hall, especially given that inquiring about the latter will heal the wound inflicted by the former, even if there are two different weapons.⁵⁴

If Peredur had asked about the procession, the king would have been healed; however, apart from healing the king, Peredur is also obligated to avenge his cousin, whose head decorates the platter. The scene has similarities to the one in *Njáls saga* outlined above: a guest at a meal is honored by being seated next to the head of household, with whom he converses. Over the course of the evening, the standard ritual of the meal is disrupted by the intrusion of bloody emblems of death and the voicing of grief. The presentation of a weapon still dripping blood, a severed head, and a lament before a kinsman of the slain man would surely have been viewed as a *hvot* in an Icelandic saga, and while Welsh texts, with the exception of the legal triad, do not provide strong parallels for incitement as a social institution, it seems likely that these elements would have functioned in the same manner in medieval Wales. Perhaps the scene seems so strange in *Peredur* because a modern audience, like Peredur, lacks the familiarity with culture and custom that would have informed a medieval audience of the import of the scene. Whereas it is obvious to both a modern and a medieval audience when Peredur mistakes knights for angels, the intricacies of medieval revenge are less accessible across the intervening centuries. Brynley Roberts suggests that this scene is “as strange and as irrelevant to the development of the narrative as is the claw that steals Teyrnon’s foals every May Eve in the first of the Four

⁵³ John Carey, *Ireland and the Grail* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2007), 178.

⁵⁴ Carey, *Ireland and the Grail*, 177.

Branches of the *Mabinogi*, and this wounded monster remains unexplained, having no further part in the story.”⁵⁵

The supposed cruxes in this scene disappear if it is read as a whetting scene that fails because it is directed at an individual who is not adept at reading complicated social cues, as the text makes amply clear is the case with *Peredur*.⁵⁶ Whatever the relationship between the French and Welsh versions of this narrative, the variations in this significant episode suggest that it fulfills different purposes in each text. If the Welsh text was adapted at some point from the French tradition, it appears that the adapter altered the mysterious scene of the grail procession so that it would make sense in a Welsh context. Conversely, if the French tradition derived from the Welsh, however unlikely that scenario, the adapter made significant changes to the narrative.

Y Cynfeirdd

In contrast to Welsh prose, Welsh poetry is rich in portrayals of weeping and lament. I turn first to the collection of poems known as the *Gododdin*.⁵⁷ The *Gododdin* is a collection of elegies for warriors who died in the Battle of Catraeth, probably in the middle of the sixth century.⁵⁸ It exists in a single manuscript, which contains three versions of the text. Texts A and B1 contain the most modern linguistic features, with Text B2 “showing much heavier retention

⁵⁵ Roberts, *Peredur*, 70.

⁵⁶ Glenys Goetinck also sees a connection between the lance and revenge, with the bleeding spear possibly representing perpetual war. She embeds this within a larger argument that *Peredur* is unified by the theme of Sovereignty, with the severed head representing the loss of British sovereignty, and reflecting the political situation in Wales at the time of composition; *Peredur: A Study of Welsh Tradition in the Grail Legends* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1975), 39, 175, 258, 282-5, 290-1, 295. Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan qualifies Goetinck’s argument, stating that a “deeply buried Sovereignty theme” “may well lie behind this and indeed other Middle Welsh tales, but cannot be said to be immediately apparent to the reader. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the contemporary redactor and his public were consciously aware of this theme in the material.” “Narrative Structure in *Peredur*,” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 38 (1981), 187-231: 188. Lloyd-Morgan mentions the legal triad in reference to *Peredur*’s avenging his foster-sister’s husband, and posits that “such incidents must have had extra resonances for a contemporary audience familiar with the Laws” 227. However, she does not connect the lament in the grail castle or the parading of the head with the triad.

⁵⁷ John T. Koch, ed. and trans., *The Gododdin of Aneirin: Text and Context from Dark-Age North Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997).

⁵⁸ See Koch’s introduction for a discussion of the historical background of the text.

of O[ld] W[elsh] features.”⁵⁹ Not all poems appear in each version, and there are interesting variations in subject matter between the versions. A and B1 contain Christian references, which B2 lacks, and B2 does not mention Wales at all, whereas A and B1 both refer to Wales.⁶⁰ John Koch points out that while the A and B1 Texts describe the Battle of Catraeth as a disaster for the Gododdin warriors, the B2 Text depicts the battle as “a victory, or at least an honourable draw.”⁶¹

In addition to these differences in the three versions of the text, there is also an evolution in the emotional content between the most archaic and more recent versions. The ‘earliest’ version, B2, contains minimal intrusion of personal grief. In *awdl* 41 of the B2 Text⁶² the poet proclaims “I grow sorrowful”⁶³ (*anthuim cim mruinauc*) as a result of the death of the men. Such sentiment is also largely absent in B1. In one *awdl*, the poet exclaims “Woe to us for the grief and constant sorrow!” (*gwae ni rac galar ac avar gwastat*), but this is a rare explicit expression of his grief. The A Text, however, is the most ‘innovative’ version of the *Gododdin*, and here are found a greater number of references to grief and sorrow. A.13 states that “The lament of the host was wretched” (*bu truan gyuatcan gyvluyd*), and A.15 tells that “Grief was long for them” (*eu hoet bu hir*) for the fallen warriors. According to A.32, “There was not such long grief or longing for any son nursed by a mother than after the strong men of the winefed region.” (*Nyt mab mam ae math/ mor hir eu hetlit ac eu hetgyllaeth*). A.56 returns to this theme, stating that “Long was their friends’ grief after them” (*hir eu hoet ar eu carant*). In A.59 the poet refers to his own emotional state, saying “Indeed I know grief for the death of the mail-shirted.”

⁵⁹ Koch, *Gododdin*, lxvi.

⁶⁰ Koch, *Gododdin*, lxix.

⁶¹ Koch, *Gododdin*, xiv.

⁶² This is *Awdl* 31 of the B Text according to Koch’s system. Since Koch’s edition reconstructs the Old Welsh text he believes underlies the *Gododdin*, all quotations are taken from Ifor Williams’s *Canu Aneirin* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1961), referenced by *awdl* number.

⁶³ Koch, 13.

(*llurugogyon nys gwn lleith lletkynt*), and in A.76 “the courteous one in sharing is lamented” (*mynawc am rann kwynhyator*). The elegy for Gereint, A.84, opens with an expansive description of the physical manifestations of sorrow, four entire lines on the poet’s grief: “As there comes upon me/ much dis-ease, I anxiously contemplate the renowned man, / and with failing breath, / [as with] forceful running, it leads to weeping.”⁶⁴ (*Pan ym dyvyd / lliaws pryder pryderaf fun./ fun en ardec/ aryal redec ar hynt wylyaw.*) It is possible, perhaps even likely, that the speaker conflates his grief for Gereint with distaste for the weakness of old age, and these topoi are famously combined to great effect in the *Llywarch Hen* poems. He mourns not only the dead man, but also his lost youth. The theme of the old man lamenting both a fallen warrior and his own waning strength draws some of its rhetorical impact from the fact that the dead man, cut down in youth and strength, will never suffer the indignities of old age. His early death in battle ensures that he will be memorialized at the height of his powers as a warrior.

Thus it can be seen that the (presumably) youngest redaction of this cycle of poetry far outstrips its antecedents in the amount of personalized emotional content. The grief of the poet, while implicitly present throughout the entire corpus, comes to the forefront in the A-text. In part this may stem from the changing perspective on the Battle of Catraeth; as mentioned above, Koch argues that the battle was originally considered an honorable draw, if not a victory on the part of the Dun Eidin warriors. In the centuries following the battle, this positive or neutral assessment shifted, and the battle came to be seen as an utter disaster, in which the entire force was destroyed. The more mournful elements of the A-Text fit neatly into such a context. This may not be the only reason for this shift, however. Welsh elegies of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries show an increasing emphasis on the expression of grief, and the A-Text may reflect this tendency to combine pain and praise in equal measure in later elegies.

⁶⁴ Koch, 125.

Another early elegy is *Marwnad Cynddylan*, which commemorates a seventh-century ruler of Powys in nine stanzas. It is thought to have been composed shortly after Cynddylan's death. The poet repeats the phrase "I will keen (or mourn)" ("ef cuinif") in the penultimate line of all but the final stanza.⁶⁵ He claims he will mourn until his own death, employing varied imagery such as oaken coffins and plots of earth to reinforce this point. The return to this phrase towards the end of each stanza creates a cycle of alternating praise and sorrow. Scholars have speculated that this repetition is a frequent occurrence in formal poetic laments because it imitates the style of keens or more "spontaneous," less formal laments.⁶⁶ The repetition may imitate actual laments, however, it is difficult to prove that such ornamentation, which occurs so frequently in different poetic genres, is operating in this specific way in laments. It may equally well be that repetition in laments is simply a feature of their being marked, poetic speech, albeit a felicitous one; psychologically, the poet returns again and again to his great loss, emphasizing with repetition his declaration that he will not cease mourning until he dies.

The *Llywarch Hen* cycle of englynion contains several references to weeping and lamenting. The chief figure of this collection of material is Llywarch Hen ("Llywarch the Old"). *Canu Llywarch Hen* contains a wide sample of different poetic genres, however, the driving themes of this cycle are the deaths of Llywarch's many sons, and Llywarch's loneliness in his old age. In the poem "Gwên and Llywarch," Llywarch goads his son Gwên to fight, inciting him to promise increasingly brave acts of valour. When Gwên promises to keep his watch on the

⁶⁵ For a discussion of the historical background to *Marwnad Cynddylan* and the related *Canu Heledd* cycle, see Jenny Rowland, *Saga Poetry*, 120-141. I use Rowland's edition of the poem in the same volume, 174-179.

⁶⁶ See Rowland, *Saga Poetry*, 22: "In its best form such repetition imitates the workings of the mind, trapped by emotion into endless consideration of some central fact, yet constantly finding new access of pain in a newly-remembered aspect of the situation. Similar use of formal repetition is found in the poetry of many languages and periods, and is also a feature in genuine keens." In a note, Rowland comments that it is an "interesting question whether these laments in character are intended to imitate popular keens, although one which cannot be answered for lack of evidence." See also Kenneth Jackson, "Incremental Repetition in Early Welsh *Englyn*," *Speculum*, 16 (1941), 304-321: 317-18.

ford, even though he may not escape, Llywarch promises to lament him if he falls in battle: “if you fall, I will keen you” (*oth ry ledir ath gwynif*).⁶⁷ The line “Talan, you deserved tears today” (*Talan teleisty deigyr hediw*)⁶⁸ is repeated in two different poems, and Llywarch observes that there is wailing (*diaspad*)⁶⁹ over the grave of Cynllug.⁷⁰

Y Gogynfeirdd a'r Cywyddwyr

Bardic elegies of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries tend to place far more emphasis on expressing the poet's personal grief than the *Gododdin* poems and the so-called ‘saga englynion,’ *Canu Heledd* and *Canu Llywarch Hen*. As the final product of a poet-patron relationship, the *marwnad* not only commemorates the reputation of the dead patron and mourns his death, it also allows the poet to express his sense of abandonment and personal loss, not only of the patron's companionship, but also the financial and societal security afforded by his patronage. However, not all *marwnadau* from this period are composed for a dead lord or patron, and there is an observable shift in the focus of the poet's efforts; while laments for male nobility continue to dominate the genre, laments for men of lower social status, for women, and for young children begin to appear in this period, and increase in frequency over the following centuries. The possibility that earlier laments for such individuals were composed and did not survive cannot, of course, be dismissed. While this apparent trend may reflect the fact that the corpora of extant poetry from the High and Late Middle Ages is much larger than that from the early medieval period, it is nonetheless a striking development, suggestive of a severe shift not only in poets' social roles, but also in more general societal values. Several factors may contribute to this

⁶⁷Rowland, “Gwên and Llywarch,” *Saga Poetry*, 404.

⁶⁸Rowland, “Miscellaneous Stanzas about Llywarch's Sons,” *Saga Poetry*, 412; Rowland, “Enweu Meibon Llywarch Hen,” *Saga Poetry*, 414.

⁶⁹Rowland, “Enweu,” *Saga Poetry*, 414.

⁷⁰Rowland points out in a note that Cynllug may also be a common noun meaning warrior hero. Rowland, *Saga Poetry*, 537.

change in emphasis. The increasing cultural value placed on romantic relationships with women, which Stephen Jaeger discusses in his work “Ennobling Love,” would lend itself to the production not only of love poetry but also of elegies for deceased women.⁷¹ The arrival of the plague in Britain in the fourteenth century, and its tendency to wipe out entire families, taking young children especially, would have had a far more devastating emotional effect than the loss of a single child.⁷²

In a *marwnad* for Rhys Ieuanc, who died of illness in 1222, Phylip Brydydd writes “My heart is excessively cold over the hand of the court” (*Goroer fy nghalon goruch adaf –llys*).⁷³ The preposition *goruch* (Modern Welsh *goruwch*), ‘above,’ is taken by the editor to suggest that the poem is being recited over Rhys’ grave; on its own the image is ambivalent, but there are

⁷¹ C. Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

⁷² In the introduction to his edition and translation of nine medieval Welsh *marwnadau* for children, Dafydd Johnston considers the small number of medieval elegies for young children in other medieval literary traditions, and suggests possible causes for their (relative) popularity in late medieval Wales. Johnston writes: “The bardic tradition clearly provided these poets with the necessary means of expression to compose elegies for their own children, but nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between the public expression of grief on behalf of the tribe or community which had lost its leader, and the expression of personal and private grief found in these poems. The concept of poetry as essentially a means of self-expression is a modern one which would have been foreign to the medieval bard. The problem of patronage need not detain us, since it is easy enough to imagine ready audiences for such eloquent and moving poetry, but a more important question is what impelled these poets to break with bardic practice by making their own personal grief the subject of their poems.” Dafydd Johnston, ed. and trans., *Galar y Beirdd: Marwnadau Plant* (Cardiff: Tafol, 1993), 25. I disagree with Johnston’s assessment that there is any sort of radical break with traditional Welsh elegies in so far as the foregrounding of personal grief in the poem. On the contrary, I have argued that Welsh poetry increasingly emphasizes the individual poet’s grief. Later *marwnadau* for kings demonstrate a much more personal sorrow on the part of the poet than earlier elegies, and in this I think that the later poets composing elegies for their children are adapting, rather than departing from, the same motifs used by poets composing for kings and princes. A perceived divide between ‘personal’ and ‘political’ grief is probably more of a reflection of a modern separation between these two spheres than a medieval actuality, and it is practically a truism of lament studies that personal concerns and fears pervade even the most ‘political’ of laments. In short, where Johnston sees a “break with bardic practice,” I see a continuum. Nonetheless, Johnston’s point stands: while the sentiment expressed in these poems is, I think, shared by other elegies of the period, their subject matter, is indeed a stark departure. Johnston makes two suggestions for the sudden appearance of elegies for children, beginning in the fourteenth century. He notes that the arrival of the plague in Wales in this period, and with it the increased likelihood that all children in a family might perish within a short period of time, would have altered the way that parents experienced grief for their dead children. Another possibility put forth by Johnston is that the status of the poets themselves may be a factor. Four of the eight poets whose elegies Johnston includes in his volume were not professional bards, and this, he suggests may have influenced their choice of subject. However, he notes that the four remaining poets were indeed professionally trained bards, and consequently amateur poet status is not a requirement for composing children’s elegies.

⁷³ Rhian M. Andrews, *Welsh Court Poems* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 14.

more explicit references to poets mourning over graves in other poems, which would support the editor's suggestion. Two lines later, Phylip declares "my cheeks are frequently drenched by my tears" (*Gorwlychawd fy ngruddiau o'm dagrau mynych*).⁷⁴ In a *marwnad* for Rhys Gryg (died 1233 or 1234), Y Prydydd Bychan ("The Little Poet") opens with the statement "Many a tear a river on its course, copious for Rhys, the fortress of the graveyard" (*Llawer deigr hydrfer ar hynt,/ Hiddl am Rys, rysfa mynwent*).⁷⁵ Elidir Sais composed a joint *marwnad* for Ednyfed Fychan and Thegwared ab Iarddur, who both died in 1246, and he begins "I was over Ednyfed's fresh grave,/ tears (fell) to my lap" (*Uwchben bedd newydd Ednyfed – y bûm, / Im bu deigr hyd arffed*).⁷⁶

The *marwnad* composed for Llywelyn ap Gruffudd by Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch rises to even greater artistic heights, and repeated references to lamenting and weeping adorn the poem.⁷⁷ In line 18 the poet claims his sorrow, stating "Mine – faced with death – is the need to lament"⁷⁸ (*Ys meu – rac angeu – angen gwynaw*),⁷⁹ and, in line 24, "Since mine is the mourning, mine is the weeping"⁸⁰ (*Kanys meu alar, ys meu wylaw*).⁸¹ Again in line 28 there is a reference to the poet's mourning: "How loudly I keen, alas the keening"⁸² (*Uchet y kwynaf, och or kwynaw*),⁸³ but after this, the perspective shifts and broadens to include the grief of all of Llywelyn's followers, and the destruction wrought by war. Thus in line 47 he mentions an unattributed keen:

⁷⁴ Andrews, "Marwnad Rhys Ieuanc," *Court Poems*, 14.

⁷⁵ Andrews, "Marwnad Rhys Gryg," *Court Poems*, 15.

⁷⁶ Andrews, "Marwnad Ednyfed Fychan a Thegwared ab Iarddur," *Court Poems*, 27.

⁷⁷ Sarah Lynn Higley, "Forcing a Gap: The Stylistics of 'Amputation' in *Marwnad Llywelyn* by Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch," *Viator* 19 (1988), 247-272: 265.

⁷⁸ Higley, "Forcing a Gap," 267.

⁷⁹ Higley, "Forcing a Gap," 265.

⁸⁰ Higley, "Forcing a Gap," 267.

⁸¹ Higley, "Forcing a Gap," 265.

⁸² Higley, "Forcing a Gap," 267.

⁸³ Higley, "Forcing a Gap," 265.

“From the death of Britain, the long death-keen of a Supporter”⁸⁴ (*O leith Prydein, veith kwynlleith kanllaw*),⁸⁵ and lines 49 through 58 all begin with the word *llawer*, “many,” comprising a relentless catalog of pain and grief, as in line 49: “Many a tear sliding swiftly on a cheek”⁸⁶ (*Llawer deigyr hylithyr yn hwylaw ar rud*),⁸⁷ and line 52 “Many a widow wailing for him”⁸⁸ (*Llawer gwedw a gwaed y amdanaw*).⁸⁹ In line 57 Gruffudd likens Llywelyn’s death and defeat to that of Arthur: “Many a wretched cry as at Camlan”⁹⁰ (*Llawer llef druan val ban vu Gamlan*).⁹¹ Line 58 returns to the image of line 49 “Many a tear over the cheek having fallen”⁹² (*Llawer deigyr dros rann gwedy’r greinyaw*).⁹³

Sarah Lynn Higley considers the effect of this movement from personal to universal grief, proposing that “What this suggests is that the poet, consciously or unconsciously, is describing an empathic movement *out of self* in which his narrative “I” – in the beginning simply the speaker himself—becomes the voice of the grieving nation, becomes lost in apocalyptic vision [. . .]”⁹⁴ This shift described by Higley, from personal to national, is a common feature of elegies in other vernaculars. I would suggest that this movement *is* deliberate —the poet initially makes a strong proprietary claim for the primacy of his own sorrow, before subsuming it within a greater whole.

Dafydd ap Gwilym, though more well-known for his poems on love and courtship, composed a number of *marwnadau*. Curiously, it seems to have been the fashion among Welsh

⁸⁴ Higley, “Forcing a Gap,” 268.

⁸⁵ Higley, “Forcing a Gap,” 265.

⁸⁶ Higley, “Forcing a Gap,” 268.

⁸⁷ Higley, “Forcing a Gap,” 265.

⁸⁸ Higley, “Forcing a Gap,” 268.

⁸⁹ Higley, “Forcing a Gap,” 265.

⁹⁰ Higley, “Forcing a Gap,” 268.

⁹¹ Higley, “Forcing a Gap,” 265.

⁹² Higley, “Forcing a Gap,” 268.

⁹³ Higley, “Forcing a Gap,” 265.

⁹⁴ Higley, “Forcing a Gap,” 259.

poets in Dafydd's day to compose *marwnadau* while the subject still lived: "Dafydd composed *marwnadau* to Madog Benfras and to Gruffudd Gryg: and these two poets also composed *marwnadau* to him (two in the case of Gruffudd Gryg). The fact that these five poems cannot all be genuine elegies casts doubt upon each one individually."⁹⁵ Bromwich argues that Dafydd used the innovative *cywydd* metre "for the less formal lament for Rhydderch (composed on behalf of another person) and for the fictitious *marwnadau* to fellow-poets still living," while the more traditional *englyn* and *awdl* metres were reserved for real laments.⁹⁶ Bromwich suggests that his *Marwnad Rhydderch*, composed on behalf of Llywelyn Fychan of Glyn Aeron, is probably also a "fictitious" elegy, *marwnad ffug*, as Rhydderch outlived Dafydd. The first twenty of the poem's forty-four lines describe Llywelyn's cries of grief at Rhydderch's death. Dafydd describes hearing "three groans" (*dair och*), which cause him to seek shelter:

I know groans well, and yet I never thought
that man could ever utter such a cry.

⁹⁵ Rachel Bromwich, *Aspects of the Poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym: Collected Papers* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1986), 22.

⁹⁶ Bromwich, *Aspects*, 63. Elsewhere Bromwich discusses this issue more thoroughly: "The presumption is, indeed, that all such 'elegies' addressed during the early *cywydd* period by one poet to another are 'fictitious' elegies, addressed to men who were still living. The choice of the *cywydd* for compositions of this kind is an indication that they are not serious, but that they are to be regarded as friendly and admiring compliments to their subject, for almost invariably they contain touches of humour which betray their fundamental levity. They subscribe to certain recurrent conventions; one is the expression of regret that such-and-such a despised poet (a certain unknown 'Bleddyn' is alluded to in this way [160] [161] in Gruffudd's elegy for Dafydd) was not removed from the world instead of the subject of the elegy; another is a prayer for divine forgiveness on behalf of their subject for his frivolity in composing love-poetry. As in much medieval poetry, levity goes hand-in-hand with seriousness (in this case with genuine admiration and affection), as when Dafydd ap Gwilym in his 'elegy' for the poet-musician Gruffudd ab Adda follows up his marvellously sustained image of a nightingale singing enchantingly in an orchard, only to be struck wantonly by an arrow, with the abrupt assertion that the poet was killed with just such a 'discourteous' blow (*pond oedd wladeiddrwydd?*) as if one were striking off the head of a goose. Even Gruffudd Gryg's poem to the Yew-Tree above the grave of Dafydd ap Gwilym comes under suspicion for similar reasons, as well as on grounds of general probability: the poem echoes closely Dafydd's own *cywydd* to that other evergreen, the Holly; both take a direct address to the tree concerned, and of both trees it is claimed that they will provide secure 'houses' for the poet, and both will share the additional advantage that their leaves will not be nibbled away by goats! [. . .] These early *cywydd* poets were not as yet fully enfranchised from an inherited tradition, in that the *awdl* still retained for them the *aura* of its ancient prestige as the preferred medium alike for formal elegy and for the expression of genuine grief in bereavement . . . This convention of addressing elegies to the living, which appears so strange to present-day readers, seems to have been employed primarily for the purpose of making familiar, semi-humorous addresses by one poet to another. Outside of this relatively well-defined category, there is frequently no possibility of distinguishing among the compositions of fourteenth-century poets between the 'fictitious' and the genuine *marwnad*." Bromwich, *Aspects*, 161.

In my land—free gift—there never was
outpouring of lament, nor huntsman's voice,
nor piercing horn [heard] over wooded slope,
nor bell louder than that cry.⁹⁷

What noise is this, [what] sigh of woe?
keen pang, who was it gave that cry?

He was to Rhydderch a sworn brother [swift his end];
[like] Amlyn's cry from his afflicted home
for Emig, like a foster-mother's grief;
a cry of bitter grief from one
who passionately loved his friend,
a third cry like the Valley's bell,
was the one uttered by Llywelyn.⁹⁸

*Ni meddylwn, gwn gannoch,
Y rhôl yr fyth y rhyw och.
Ni bu i'm gwlad, rhoddiad rhydd,
Na llif cwyn, na llef cynydd,
Na meingorn uwch llethr mangoed,
Na chloch uwch no'r och a roed.*

*Pa'r dwrw yw hwn, pryderoch?
Pefr loes, pwy a roes yr och?*

*Ffyddfrawd Rhydderch ddiffoddrys.
Och Amlyn o'i dyddyn dig,
Alaeth mamaeth, am Emig;
Och gŵr a fai'n awch garu
Ei gâr, o fawr alar fu;
A'r drydedd och, gloch y Glyn,
Ail yw, a rôl Lywelyn.⁹⁹*

Thus far, all of the laments considered have commemorated dead men: warriors, kings, lords, and princes.¹⁰⁰ Dafydd ap Gwilym also composed *marwnadau* for two women, Angharad

⁹⁷ This comparison between the groan (*och*) and a hunting horn recalls the lament of the Lady of the Fountain in *Owein*, discussed above, whose cry is louder than that of any man or horn in the court. Dafydd ap Gwilym apparently had some familiarity with *Owein*, and this may be an allusion to that text. For Dafydd's references to the *rhamantau*, see Bromwich, *Aspects*, 136.

⁹⁸ Rachel Bromwich, ed. and trans. *Selected Poems of Dafydd ap Gwilym*, (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1982, 1985), 170-1.

⁹⁹ Bromwich, *Selected Poems of Dafydd ap Gwilym*, 170-1.

and Nest. The *marwnad* for Nest is a joint poem for Nest and her husband, Ifor Hael, a patron of Dafydd's. This poem is presumably another *marwnad ffug*, as Ifor died after Dafydd, according to the poet Lewys Glyn Cothi. The *marwnad* for Angharad may also have been composed during her lifetime.¹⁰¹

Einion ap Gwalchmai's *Marwnad Nest ferch Hywel*, possibly composed around 1220,¹⁰² is probably a lament for the daughter of Hywel ap Gruffudd ap Cynan of Gwynedd, and Caerwyn Williams suggests that Einion may have met her when his lord, Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, visited her father's court.¹⁰³ The exact nature of the relationship between Einion and Nest is unclear; he mentions that he had sung songs for her (*ceintum gerdd i Nest cyn no-i threngi*), and declares that he was no false favorite of hers (*Gwraig nid oeddwn-i fred gariad genthi*).¹⁰⁴

Marwnad Lleucu Llwyd, an elegy by Dafydd ap Gwilym's contemporary Llywelyn Goch ap Meurig Hen, elegantly co-opts the motif of a suitor faulting his house-bound lover for failing to sneak away and hold a tryst with him. The poem's opening stanza states that the summer and the

¹⁰⁰ Sometimes the deceased is a close family member of the lamenter, as is the case with Llywarch's laments for his sons, or Heledd for her brother Cynddylan. Yet, even in Heledd's moving laments Cynddylan is represented first and foremost as her lord, rather than her brother; Rowland points out that "it is not until stanza 57 that Heledd alludes to her family relationship with Cynddylan. He and her other brothers are mourned as lords and protectors. While her personal grief and love are evident, it is grief for the ruler and his rule which is stressed: thus Cynddylan is Cynddylan Powys (12, 31), he is her *ner* (24), *hynaf* (30), *cledyr kat callon argoetwis* (45), *etiued kyndrwynyn* (47). For Heledd he is primarily *vy glyw* (27), not *vym brawt*. The stress on kingship may have realistic grounds, but the exclusion of references to family bonds must surely be due to a subconscious awareness of the very different symbolic relationship Heledd has to Cynddylan in the poetry. Rowland, *Saga Poetry*, 146-7. Rowland embeds this observation in a larger argument, suggesting that in Heledd we are seeing a Welsh reflex of the familiar Irish mythological motif of a king's marriage to a sovereignty goddess, who, when widowed, laments his death. Thus Heledd's relationship to Cynddylan the king is emphasized, and the fact that he is brother is downplayed. Whether or not the characterization of Heledd is influenced by that of a goddess embodying the land, her lament for the dead male aristocracy of her homeland fits well in the context established by the more numerous male-voiced laments. Llywarch mourns his sons, but they are adult members of the fighting cohort, not young children, and therefore possess a higher social status and value.

¹⁰¹ On the whole, Dafydd ap Gwilym may have composed more elegies for the living than for the dead; Bromwich argues that the *marwnad ffug* developed along with the *cywydd* meter in the 14th century. Bromwich, *Aspects*, 159-62.

¹⁰² Andrews, "Marwnad Nest Ferch Hywel," *Court Poems*, 31-32, 130.

¹⁰³ Andrews, *Court Poems*, 129.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Clancy translates this line as "Woman for whom I was no false lover," but I feel that translation pushes the meaning of *cariad* too far; like Latin *amicus/a*, *cariad* may mean either friend or lover.

world are barren for the poet, who chose the wrong month for a tryst. He then provides the reason for his sorrow, explaining that “There is in Gwynedd today/ No moon, no light, no colour,/ Since was laid, sorry welcome,/ Moon’s beauty beneath hard ground.”¹⁰⁵ (*Nid oes yng Ngwynedd heddiw/ Na lloer, na llewych, na lliw,/ Er an rodded, trwydded trwch,/ Dan lawr dygn dyn loer degwch.*)¹⁰⁶ The poet next addresses Lleucu directly: “Fair girl in the oaken chest,/ I’m bent on wrath, you’ve left me.”¹⁰⁷ (*Y ferch wen o’r dderw brennol,/ Arfaeth ddig yw’r fau i’th ôl.*)¹⁰⁸ His anger apparently fades quickly, for the next lines contain a litany of endearments, and an impassioned plea for her to rise from the grave:

Lovely form, Gwynedd’s candle,
Though you are closed in the grave,
Arise, come up, my darling.
Open the dark earthen door,
Forsake the long bed of sand,
And come to meet me, sweeting.¹⁰⁹

*Cain ei llun, kannwyll Wynedd,
Cyd bych o fewn caead bedd,
F’enaïd, cyfod y fyny,
Egor y ddaearddor ddu,
Gwrthod wely tywod hir,
A gwrtheb f’wyneb, feinir.*¹¹⁰

The next lines offer a more descriptive picture of the poet’s grief. He is a grave-faced man (*Ŵr prudd ei wyneb*), a wailing bard (*Udfardd*), standing over her grave (*Uwch dy fedd*). This is not his first visit to her grave, for “The day before yesterday I was over your grave,/ Spilling tears, a great flood of tears, / Over my face like a rope.” (*Echdoe a fûm uwch dy fedd / Yn gollwng deigr llideirgrbraff/ Ar hyd yr wyneb yn rhaff.*)¹¹¹ According to the poet, Lleucu has promised to wait

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Clancy, “Lament for Lleucu Llwyd,” *Medieval Welsh Poems* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 224.

¹⁰⁶ Parry, “Marwnad Lleucu Llwyd,” *The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 75.

¹⁰⁷ Clancy, “Lament for Lleucu Llwyd,” 224.

¹⁰⁸ Parry, “Marwnad Lleucu,” 75.

¹⁰⁹ Clancy, “Lament for Lleucu Llwyd,” 224-5.

¹¹⁰ Parry, “Marwnad Lleucu,” 75.

¹¹¹ Parry, “Marwnad Lleucu,” 75.

for him (*Ti addawsud, y fud ferch, [. . .] F'aros*),¹¹² and her inability to keep their appointed tryst is presented as a broken promise (*Torraist amod*).¹¹³ The poet says he will leave Gwynedd, though he would stay if she lived, and he entreats her again to join him:

Radiant glowing-fleshed maiden,
Sleep too long under stone,
Rise to finish the revels,
To see if you wish for mead,
To your bard who laughs no longer
For your sake, gold diadem.
Come, with your cheeks of foxgloves,
Up from the earth's dreary house.
A desolate trail the footprints,
No need for deceit, my feet leave
In faltering from passion
Around your house, Lleucu Llwyd.¹¹⁴

*Riain wiwgain oleugaen,
Rhy gysgadur 'ny mur maen.
Cyfod i orffen cyfedd
I edrych a fynnych fedd,
At dy fardd, ni chwardd ychwaith
Erot dalm, euraidd dalaith.
Dyred, ffion ei deurudd,
I fyny o'r pridd-dŷ prudd.
Anial yw ôl camoleg,
Nid rhaid twyll, fy neudroed teg,
Yn bwhwman rhag annwyd
Ynghylch dy dŷ, Lleucu Llwyd.*¹¹⁵

The coffin, grave, and churchyard all at times take the place of the house in the love poetry, a barrier preventing the lovers from meeting. The language of grief is superimposed over that of passion, and the entreaty for the woman to sneak outside to meet her lover becomes a plea for her to rise from the grave to join him who waits over her grave, pacing and weeping. Her death and inability to meet the poet is portrayed as a broken promise, and her refusal to speak with the

¹¹² Parry, "Marwnad Lleucu," 76.

¹¹³ Parry, "Marwnad Lleucu," 76.

¹¹⁴ Clancy, "Lament for Lleucu Llwyd," 226.

¹¹⁵ Parry, "Marwnad Lleucu," 77.

poet is the silence of the grave. This desire to call back the dead to the living world appears in cross-cultural lament traditions, as is the notion that the dead have betrayed the living by dying.

This *marwnad* is composed in *cywydd* metre, and here Bromwich runs into difficulty maintaining the distinction she draws between uses of the new *cywydd* and the more traditional forms:

Yet there appears to be a virtually insurmountable difficulty in applying any such hard-and-fast distinction as to the themes accepted as proper to *awdl* and *cywydd* when considering what is undoubtedly Llywelyn Goch's most famous poem, his *cywydd marwnad* to Lleucu Llwyd. It is very difficult to doubt the sincerity of the passionate cry of grief which permeates this poem. Yet against all the internal suggestions, Dr. Thomas Parry has preferred to regard the lament as belonging to the convention of 'fictitious *marwnadau*,' and as having been addressed to the poet's mistress while she was still living, and in the absence of positive evidence on either side it is difficult to reject this view out-of-hand.¹¹⁶

The relevant portion of Parry's note reads as follows: "This poem, which purports to be an elegy on the poet's sweetheart, is probably a conventional tribute to a married woman, the wife of a certain Dafydd Ddu."¹¹⁷ Bromwich points out that the *marwnad* in question shares a number of features with traditional keens, lending to the poem "an effect of vivid reality and spontaneity, which argues forcibly in its favour as a genuine expression of grief in bereavement."¹¹⁸

Bromwich points out that there were a number of no longer extant *cywydd* poems written by Llywelyn for Lleucu Llwyd: "That the *marwnad* was but the final *cywydd* in a sequence of poems addressed to Lleucu Llwyd which have not come down, but which were above all responsible for Llywelyn's fame in his own day, is evident both from the poet's own allusions to them, and from Iolo Goch's comparison of Llywelyn's sinful love with the love-story of the

¹¹⁶ Bromwich, *Aspects*, 166-7.

¹¹⁷ Parry, *Oxford*, 544, note 49.

¹¹⁸ Bromwich, *Aspects*, 167.

prophet David.”¹¹⁹ This poem utilizes the convention of love poetry to create a moving elegy—it seems unlikely and needlessly complex to suggest that this is a love poem using the conventions of elegy which in turn rely upon the conventions of love poetry for their rhetorical force. There is another argument for viewing the elegy as sincere. In his *marwnad* for Llywelyn, Iolo Goch calls him the “master of the *cywydd serch*” (p. 166) and mentions Lleucu Llwyd by name. Llywelyn’s reputation as a poet was built upon a body of love poetry composed for Lleucu in the *cywydd* metre. It is possible that, as this poem is a final love poem, as well as an elegy, (and an elegy that liberally employs motifs associated with *cywydd serch*), that Llywelyn purposefully employed the form he had previously used in the numerous love poems he had composed in Lleucu’s honour while she lived.

In a poem possibly composed by Llywelyn Fychan ap Llywelyn Foelhron in the mid-thirteenth hundreds, the poet speaks of the loss of his children to the plague, and states that he “lamented greatly”¹²⁰ (*fawr gwynais*).¹²¹ In Gwilyn ap Sefnyn’s “*Marwnad i’w Ddeg Plentyn*” (“Elegy for his Ten Children”) the poet characterizes himself thus: “Poor aging poet bereft of his craft,/ left behind to weep./ A grieving poet’s heart is ever in torment,/ and I myself am grave and sad”¹²² (*Druan henfardd direol,/ ymdrigo ’n wylo yn ôl./ Uthr fydd calon bardd athrist,/ a thrwm wyf innau a thrist*).¹²³ Ieuan Gethin complains that his eyesight “has been worn out by excessive weeping”¹²⁴ (*o dra wylo a dreuliawdd*) over the loss of his son.¹²⁵ Another poem by the same poet eulogizes his daughter, and like the lament for Lleucu Llwyd discussed above, Ieuan’s elegy for his daughter often uses the imagery of love poetry to express his affection for

¹¹⁹ Bromwich, *Aspects*, 168.

¹²⁰ Johnston, “Haint y Nodau,” *Galar*, 51.

¹²¹ Johnston, “Haint y Nodau,” *Galar*, 50.

¹²² Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Ddeg Plentyn,” *Galar*, 65.

¹²³ Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Ddeg Plentyn,” *Galar*, 64.

¹²⁴ Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Fab,” *Galar*, 73.

¹²⁵ Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Fab,” *Galar*, 72.

her, and his devastation at her death, praising her grace and beauty.¹²⁶ As in his elegy for his son, Ieuan refers to his abundant tears: he “will lament like a wolf”¹²⁷ (*cwynaf fel blaid*)¹²⁸ for his daughter, his “tears flow in streams”¹²⁹ (*tra hidllon ddagrau yw’r mau*),¹³⁰ he has “no health but wailing/ and suffering the great sadness and crying out”¹³¹ (*Iechyd nid oes ym onid ochi/ a goddef tristwch mawr a gweiddi*).¹³² One stanza speaks movingly of memory, grief, and the role of elegy in allowing the poet to call forth and experience again a previous emotion:

There is a sad memory within me still unmended,
and the sadness, it is not easy to get over it.
A poet is always sad when he performs an elegy,
alas her morose father, I know, that he was ever born.¹³³

*Trist gof sy’ ynof heb gysoni,
a’r tristwch, nid hawdd myned trosti.
Trist fydd awenydd o weini -- marwnad,
gwaeth i thad anynad gwn, o’i eni.*¹³⁴

The next stanza in the poem reveals the outcome of resurrecting his grief through his art:

My grief for her turns wretchedly within me,
my tears flow in streams,
three times worse than the stab of an arrow sinking into the breast,
my heart has been shattered because of her.¹³⁵

*Truan mae galar hon yn trôl,
tra hidllon ddagrau yw’r mau, i mi,
tri gwaeth no brath saeth yn soddi –dan fron,
treiglodd ym galon don amdani.*¹³⁶

¹²⁶ Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Ferch,” *Galar*, 80-8.

¹²⁷ Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Ferch,” *Galar*, 80-1. This reference to a wolf’s lament is an interesting parallel to the Old English and Old Norse examples discussed below, but here the animal’s grief is not feigned.

¹²⁸ Johnston, *Galar, Marwnad i’w Ferch*, 80-1.

¹²⁹ Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Ferch,” *Galar*, 82.

¹³⁰ Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Ferch,” *Galar*, 82.

¹³¹ Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Ferch,” *Galar*, 83.

¹³² Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Ferch,” *Galar*, 84.

¹³³ Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Ferch,” *Galar*, 83.

¹³⁴ Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Ferch,” *Galar*, 82.

¹³⁵ Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Ferch,” *Galar*, 83.

¹³⁶ Johnston, “Marwnad i’w Ferch,” *Galar*, 82.

Huw Machno's early seventeenth-century *marwnad* for his son Owain, who died in 1619 at eleven years of age, contains a reference to grief turning (*trôî*) in the breast, and also employs this motif of asking the dead to return from the grave, familiar from the *Marwnad Lleucu Llwyd*, albeit in a way that illustrates the naiveté of such a request:

Most pitiable it was to witness,
 such constant sadness, hearing
 his two downhearted brothers,
 flawless language, recalling him.
 Says Robart, in most respectful manner,
 "He is bound in the coffin lying beneath the stone
 here on the land with the fair wall."
 The youngest brother is in a sorry state,
 O holy Jesus, wanting him back,
 and on Sunday Siôn walks
 the graveyard asking questions:
 "Why won't my brother, healthy custom,
 come home from his pit anymore?"
 "Be quiet," says the other, "let us understand,
 because he is in the earth he will not come to us, that is certain,
 he is in heaven in truth, and because he is (there will be lamenting)
 entirely in the presence of joy.
 Say Huw, you are my father,
 why do you cry after him?"
 "The eyes were made by nature
 weak, as is plain to see,
 and my tears, there is bitter cold sadness,
 come because I am burdened with grief;
 it ate its way through my breast,
 it was longing for his gentleness."¹³⁷

*Tostur oedd tyst yr eiddo
 wrth glywed, trymed pob tro,
 ei ddau frawd ddihyfrydol,
 gyfan iaith, i'w gofio'n ôl.
 Medd Robart, modd oreubarch,
 "Mae fo wedi'i rwymo i'r arch
 yn gorwedd dan y garreg
 yma ar y tir â'r mur teg."
 Yntau'r ieuaf mewn trafael,
 o Iesu gwyn, eisiau'i gael,
 ac ar dduw Sul fe gerdd Siôn*

¹³⁷ Johnston, "Marwnad Owain ap Huw Machno," *Galar*, 115, 117.

y fynwent drwy ofynion:
“Pam na ddaw ‘mrawd, defawd iach,
draw o’i bwlld adre’ bellach?”
“Taw,” medd y llall, “deallwn,
am ei fod mewn tywod hwn
ni ddaw atom, ni ddowntir,
mae ef yn y nef yn wir,
a chan ei fod, achwyn fydd,
oll i wyneb llawenydd.
“Dywaid Huw, fy nhad wyt ti,
ar ei ôl pam yr wyli?”
“Naturiaeth a wnaeth yn wan
y golwg mal y’i gwelan’,
a’ m deigr i, mae dig oer aeth,
cair herwydd cario hiraeth;
trwy ‘nwy ais y trôl’ n ysu,
*trymder am ei fwynder fu.”*¹³⁸

Whereas typically it is the lamenter who demands or requests the return of the dead, addressing or commanding the deceased person directly, here Huw observes his two sons conversing in the graveyard, with the younger, Siôn, asking the elder, Robart, why his brother no longer comes home from his grave. This scene opens a window not only to a parent’s grief for a child, but to children’s grief for a sibling, with the added layer of the father’s sadness over his surviving sons’ confusion and grief. The older son then notices his father’s tears and asks why he weeps, as he has just explained that his brother is in Heaven. Huw is moved to fresh grief by watching his surviving sons process the finality of their brother’s death.

In closing this consideration of male mourning in medieval Welsh literature, I would like to note the limitations of this sort of literary study for deciphering emotional norms in the periods considered. The Welsh evidence indicates an increase in lamenting and weeping as facets of mourning ritual through this period; however, this apparent shift may result from other causes, such as the paucity of early elegies, or represent a change not in actual behaviour, but in its

¹³⁸ Johnston, “Marwnad Owain ap Huw Machno,” *Galar*, 114, 116.

received importance or the appropriateness of including it in poetry. The social realities that lay behind the texts remain obscure.

The frequency and abundance of male lament and weeping in Welsh tradition is significant for the following inquiries into Irish, Anglo-Saxon, and Old Norse-Icelandic literature. The geographical proximity of Britain, Ireland, Iceland and Scandinavia encouraged connections via trade and settlement. The establishment of the Danelaw in England, Anglo-Norman conquests of Ireland and Wales, Viking settlements in Ireland, and the high proportion of Irish and Welsh settlers in Iceland all argue for an ongoing and significant cultural exchange between these societies. While it would be untenable to argue that the Welsh evidence should be seen as an exact cognate for male mourning in these other literatures, the level of interaction between these cultures suggests that there would be similarities between the practices of mourning, or in literary representations of grieving.

To Weep Irish: Male Weeping and Lament in Medieval Irish Sources

While criticism on medieval Irish literature has tended to portray lament and mourning as practices that were primarily carried out by women, the language of scholarship has avoided the essentialist tone of some of the criticism on mourning in Old-Norse and Old English literature.¹³⁹ This may stem from the tendency of earlier scholars to view the Celts and the Teutons as possessing vastly different social and emotional norms. While the Teutons were characterized as stoic and emotionally controlled, an uninhibited and irrational character was frequently attributed to the Celts. Thus, Celts were already coded as feminine, compared to the masculine Teutons, and men openly grieving in a manner deemed feminine by Victorian and twentieth century sensibilities did not conflict with this characterization.

¹³⁹ See Chapter 2.

This ideological dichotomy has its origin in the writings of the Frenchman Ernest Renan, whose beliefs about Celtic and Teutonic traits would exert a strong influence on Matthew Arnold. Renan proposed that “If it is permitted to assign sex to nations as to individuals, we should have to say without hesitation that the Celtic race . . . is an essentially feminine race,”¹⁴⁰ and also considered the elegance of Lady Charlotte Guest’s translation of *The Mabinogion* to derive from a shared sensibility between text and translator: “To render these gracious imaginings of a people so eminently dowered with feminine tact, the pen of a woman was necessary.”¹⁴¹ Renan also saw as a pervasive strain of sorrow permeating the character of Celtic literature:

Take the songs of its bards of the sixth century; they weep more defeats than they sing victories. Its history is itself one long lament; it still recalls its exiles, its flights across the seas. If at times it seems to be cheerful, a tear is not slow to glisten behind its smile; it does not know that strange forgetfulness of human conditions and destinies which is called gaiety. Its songs of joy end as elegies; there is nothing to equal the delicious sadness of its national melodies. One might call them emanations from on high, which, falling drop by drop upon the soul, pass through it like memories of another world. Never have men feasted so long upon these solitary delights of the spirit, these poetic memories which simultaneously intercross all the sensations of life, so vague, so deep, so penetrative, that one might die from them, without being able to say whether it was from bitterness or sweetness.¹⁴²

Matthew Arnold would take up and elaborate upon Renan’s view: “no doubt the sensibility of the Celtic nature, its nervous exaltation, have something feminine in them, and the Celt is thus peculiarly disposed to feel the spell of the feminine idiosyncrasy; he has an affinity to it; he is not far from its secret.”¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Ernest Renan, “The Poetry of the Celtic Races,” in *Poetry of the Celtic Races and Other Essays by Ernest Renan*, trans. W. G. Hutchinson (London: Walter Scott, 1896), 8.

¹⁴¹ Renan, “Poetry,” 16.

¹⁴² Renan, “Poetry,” 7-8.

¹⁴³ Matthew Arnold, *Lectures & Essays in Criticism: The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 3, ed. R. H. Super (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 347. See the chapter “An Essentially Feminine Race,” in David Cairns’s and Shaun Richards’s *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 42-57, for a discussion of Arnold’s perspective and British colonialism.

Henry Osborn Taylor continues in the tradition of Renan and Arnold, describing the “truculence and vanity” of Irish literature, and opines that “a weak sense of fact and a lack of steady rational purpose are also conspicuous. It is as ferocious as may be. Yet, withal, it keeps the charm of the Irish temperament. Its pathos is moving, even lovely. [. . .] the imagery has a fantastic and romantic beauty, and the reader is wafted along on waves of temperament and feeling.”¹⁴⁴

When describing the Teutons, Taylor begins by stating that “intellectual as well as emotional differences” separated the two ethnic categories, with “a certain hard rationality and grasp of fact mark the mentality of the latter.”¹⁴⁵ “The Teutons,” according to Taylor, “disclose more strength and persistency of desire than the Celts. Their feelings were slower, less impulsive; also less quickly diverted, more unswerving, even fiercer in their strength. The general characteristic of Teutonic emotion is its close connection with some motive grounded in rational purpose.”¹⁴⁶ By setting the Celts in opposition to the Teutons and praising the Teuton’s strength and rationality, qualities gendered as masculine, he feminizes the Celts.

These ethnic stereotypes would come under scrutiny as the twentieth century progressed; in his 1955 inaugural O’Donnell Lecture, “English and Welsh,” given at Oxford, J. R. R. Tolkien criticizes these notions:

In this legend Celts and Teutons are primeval and immutable creatures, like a triceratops and a stegosaurus (bigger than a rhinoceros and more pugnacious, as popular paleontologists depict them), fixed not only in shape but in innate and mutual hostility, and endowed even in the mists of antiquity, as ever since, with the peculiarities of mind and temper which can still be observed in the Irish or the Welsh on the one hand and the English on the other: the wild incalculable poetic Celt, full of vague and misty imaginations, and the Saxon, solid and practical when not under the influence of beer. Unlike most myths this myth seems to have no value at all.

¹⁴⁴ Henry Osborn Taylor, *The Medieval Mind: A History of the Development of Thought and Emotion in the Middle Ages I* (London: Macmillan, 1911), 128.

¹⁴⁵ Taylor, *Medieval Mind*, 138.

¹⁴⁶ Taylor, *Medieval Mind*, 138.

According to such a view *Beowulf*, though in English, must, I should say, be far more Celtic—being full of dark and twilight, and laden with sorrow and regret—than most things that I have met written in Celtic language.¹⁴⁷

As a consequence of the view Tolkien disputes, scholarship did not hold the Celts to the same standards of masculinity, and thus weeping Irishmen were not castigated for failing to live up to a masculine ideal. Simply put, the stakes were not as high. Despite the perceived femininity of Celts, an inclination to view women as the primary carriers of ritual mourning traditions in the medieval period has been predominant in scholarship on medieval Ireland. The prominence of female mourners, especially the practitioners of the famed Irish keen, in later Irish tradition has bolstered this view.¹⁴⁸ Thus Kaarina Hollo, writing of medieval Ireland, proposes that “What we can gather... is that lamenting the dead was a cultural practice strongly associated with women.”¹⁴⁹ Lysaght states that “In most societies ritual lamentation has been part of the rôle performance of women . . . In Ireland the art of improvised poetic lamentation by women was highly developed and persisted well into the twentieth century.”¹⁵⁰ Hollo takes the famous passage in *The Irish Penitentials* as further “confirmation of the prominent role played by women in keening,” and rightly points out in the *Bigotian Penitential*, a keening nun would receive twice the penance of a laywoman.¹⁵¹ However, as I mentioned in my Introduction, in the Old Irish version of this passage it is a *mac-cleiriuch*, i.e., a boy-cleric, a novice, who is prescribed double penance for keening— this discrepancy must be the “confusion” to which Hollo refers but does not discuss.¹⁵² Imposing a penance on women for a behavior does not necessarily mean that women were the only practitioners of that behavior. It is possible that

¹⁴⁷ J. R. R. Tolkien, “English and Welsh,” in *The Monsters and the Critics and other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), 162-197: 171-2.

¹⁴⁸ Patricia Lysaght, “*Caoineadh*,” Bourke, “Traditional Lament;” Bourke, “Anger;” Bromwich, “Keen.”

¹⁴⁹ Hollo, “Lament,” 86.

¹⁵⁰ Lysaght, “*Caoineadh*,” 65.

¹⁵¹ Hollo, “Lament,” 85.

¹⁵² Hollo, “Lament,” 85.

women were censured in the penitential for an act in which men were freely permitted to engage. Furthermore, while the Latin penitential tradition is more inclusive, the Irish version of the penitential ascribes penance for keening only to women of particular social stations, which suggests less a general prohibition on keening, women's keening or otherwise, than an attempt to restrict the activities of a small portion of the populace.

Katherine Simms draws on James Carney's discussion of "the traditional role of the poet as in some sense his patron's spouse and lover" to argue that in their elegies for their dead lords, Irish poets often assumed the role of a woman who had been in a sexual relationship with their dead lord. According to Simms, "the agonies of grief the poet claims to suffer closely resemble the emotions attributed in literature to a hero's widow."¹⁵³ She argues that

the poet's passionate personal grieving in a quasi-feminine persona was not an essential part of the formal elegy. It was a recurring motif, sometimes dominating the whole poem, sometimes confined to a single couplet. After the burial of a chief it was customary for his kinsfolk and subjects in general to assemble on his grave and fill the air with lamentation, sometimes remaining all night, but there was a particularly prominent role allotted to the keening women and the poets.¹⁵⁴

Simms later points out that aside from any symbolic associations between the chief's poet and his wife, "both were bound to their lord by a contract of affectionate dependency, enjoying privileges and prestige that were automatically terminated by his death. No doubt the same could be said in general terms of many others among the courtiers or *aos grádha* of their king. Yet how many of them would recognize it as their duty to die with their master and share the one grave?

¹⁵³ Katharine Simms, "The Poet as Chieftain's Widow: Bardic Elegies," in *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney*, eds. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach, and Kim McCone (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1989), 400-11: 400.

¹⁵⁴ Simms, "Poet," 401.

... with the possible exception of the king's immediate family, it was the poet above all who was conventionally expected to react in this way.”¹⁵⁵ In my third chapter I will demonstrate that this “dying of grief” *topos* in Irish literature plays out in numerous relationships aside from that between poet and patron or wife and husband. For the current chapter I will consider the accuracy of the assumption heavily implied, though never explicitly stated, in Simms’ article: that the resemblance of the poets’ grief to that of the women is a result of the “quasi-feminine persona” adopted by the poets, rather than the grief that men in this cultural context would normally display. To what extent is this special association between women and mourning in medieval Ireland borne out by the evidence? I will argue that while a crowd of nameless women mourning a dead man is a common feature of medieval Irish texts, men, and not only those who are poets, are also frequently depicted as mourners, and their grief is expressed using the same range of gesture and behavior as women’s grief. In essence, the mode of grieving we see in these texts was available to both men and women.

Before continuing, it is prudent to note that the terms for crying and weeping are at times used in a context that overlaps their semantic range with terms referring to verbal lament. *Cáinid*, whence the English word “keen,” is often translated as “to lament,” but it may also mean “to weep,” and *golaid* and *ciid* are the usual words for crying and weeping. Two medieval Irish texts, *Cath Maige Tuired* and the prose *dindshenchas* passage on Loch Oirbsen, associate the origin of lamenting the dead with Bríg or Brigit. *Cath Maige Tuired* relates that “Bríg came and keened for her son. At first she shrieked, in the end she wept. Then for the first time weeping and shrieking were heard in Ireland.”¹⁵⁶ (*Tic Bríc & cáines a mac. Éghis artós, goilis fo deog. Conud*

¹⁵⁵ Simms, “Poet,” 404.

¹⁵⁶ Elizabeth Gray, ed. and trans., *Cath Maige Tuired: the second battle of Mag Tuired*, Irish Texts Society 52 (Naas and Dublin, 1982), 57.

and sin roclos gol & égem ar tós a n-Érinn).¹⁵⁷ In the *dindshenchas* passage, Bríg ordains “crying and lamenting the dead and screaming in response to violence” (*gol oculus caine marb oculus eigem fri hecin*).¹⁵⁸ Hollo points out that Cormac’s Glossary describes Brigit as the goddess of poets, and argues that “it is likely, then, that the type of keening that Bríg is said to have instituted was seen as a verbal art rather than as a formless expression of grief, despite the emphasis on crying and screaming in both passages.”¹⁵⁹ Hollo may be correct, and perhaps the contrast between articulate poetic speech and raw wordless sorrow, which becomes a feature of later Irish folk lament, may also have a specific point to make: at times the power of grief leaves even the patron goddess of poetry bereft of words. Later Irish keens typically alternate between episodes of poetic articulation and wordless, syllabic wailing, and an earlier incarnation of this pattern may be present in the description of Bríg’s keen. Also, *gol* need not necessarily be understood as weeping. In the vernacular penitential corresponding to the *Bigotian Penitential*, *gol* is the Irish equivalent for the Hiberno-Latin coining *bardicatio*, a word whose origins surely suggests refined, poetic language, and not wordless weeping.

In the *Cath Maige Tuired* passage, crying and screaming (*gol* and *égem*) both appear as elements of Bríg’s *cained*, and in the *dindshenchas* passage crying, screaming, and lamenting/keening are all practices established by Bríg. In “The Siege of Howth,” a woman requests time to lament (*cainid*) her murdered husband, and then gives a *faid guil*, a “cry/lament of weeping,” before throwing herself to her death.¹⁶⁰ This raises the question of how distinct all of these categories were in the Old and Middle Irish period. Did a *cained* require speech, as in the more modern keens that have been recorded, or could it be constituted of weeping alone? The

¹⁵⁷ Gray, *Cath Maige Tuired*, 56.

¹⁵⁸ Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., “The Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” *Revue Celtique* 16 (1895), 276.

¹⁵⁹ Hollo, “Laments,” 84.

¹⁶⁰ Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., “The Siege of Howth,” *Revue Celtique* 8 (1887), 47-64: 62.

answer to such a question, if it can be answered at all, lies outside the scope of this discussion, as it would require a survey of all occurrences of these terms, and their contexts, throughout the entire medieval Irish corpus. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that there is likely to be overlap in meaning between the medieval terms, as opposed to the more discrete modern definitions.

The death of Cú Chulainn evokes great grief, as one would expect. Not only do his companions set up a great cry of mourning, but even horses, objects, and nature join in keening for him, as described in the *dindshenchas* poem *Gáirech*:

The place where the lads of Emain, met together, raised a cry (truth I tell), round the grave that betrayed them, each in turn—its rightful name is Gairech.
The Hound of the Smith was in bloody durance: this it was that set them wailing sorely, when horses and weapons and stones, no longer dumb, joined in keening.
The marsh of the ford, where he tarried, was a-bubbling and a-seething: the death of the Hound, whose charge it was to guard us, was harsh tidings for every home of men.¹⁶¹

*Baile hir-ralsat gáir cen góe
macrad Emna for óen-chóe,
'mon lecht rosmairn immasech,
is dó is comainm cert Gáirech.*

*Cú na cerda boi i cacht chró,
ed rosnacht ic sár-gubo,
dia cainset cen ladna ille
graige ocus arma is ailche.*

*Grellach Átha, áit roan,
ar fiched, ar fogarbad;
díth Chon, diarb ord ar n-aire,
ba scél borb cach beó-baile.¹⁶²*

The later prose version found in the *Rennes Dindshenchas* elaborates on the situation:

From the *gáir*, <<outcry>> which the striplings of Emain sent forth around (their fosterbrother) Cúchulainn as he lay in his bed of gore. And chariots and horses and

¹⁶¹ Edward J. Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchas* 4 (Dublin: Academy House, 1903), 221.

¹⁶² Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 220.

weapons and the stones of the mires answered it on this side and that around the ford, so that they became like a (redhot) ingot dipt (and) boiling. Whence *Gáirech* is said.¹⁶³

Gairech, canas roainmniged?

*Ni ansa. Don gair rolasat macraid Emna im Coinculainn ina lighe chro, co rot-freagratar 7 carpait 7 graigi 7 armu 7 ailchi na ngrellach san chan imon n-ath, co mbatar amal tinde foibdide for fiuchud. Unde Gairech dicitur.*¹⁶⁴

The call and response indicated by this description is reminiscent of later Irish recorded keens; it is interesting that here it is depicted in an all-male context, as it is the male youths, the *macraid*, who begin the cry. Horses, weapons, and chariots are the equipment of a warrior, and it is fitting that they be given a voice to mourn the death of one who wielded them so capably on the battlefield. The very stones lament, so bitter is their sorrow, and the waters are heated to a fierce boiling by grief.

In *Bruiden Da Choca*, Fergus arrives at the devastated hostel to find only three survivors: “Then Fergus made a lamentation and a great keen over his fosterling and he beat his hands, and they were tears of blood that he wept”¹⁶⁵ (*Ro-fer Fergus ann-side nemele 7 nuallgubai dermair os cinn a daltaí, et ros-esoircc a bosæ, et roptar dera folai ro-snighed*).¹⁶⁶ In *Aided Muirchertaig Meic Erca*, a king’s death is mourned by a saint and his monks: “So Cairnech with his monks thereupon visits him, and the saint himself made great grief in bewailing him”¹⁶⁷ (*Doroich dono Cairnech cona manchaib cuca fáisin, 7 dorighne féin toirrsi mór ica écaine*).¹⁶⁸

According to several texts, the hill known as *Druim Suamaig* was formerly called *Tulach Dher*, “The Hill of Tears.” Two *dindshenchas* poems give the cause of the original name. *Druim Suamaig I* states that “The Dagda’s tears—for the hill is his—the warrior king of Colt let fall in

¹⁶³ Stokes, “Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” 73.

¹⁶⁴ Stokes, “Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” 72.

¹⁶⁵ Gregory Toner, ed. and trans. *Bruiden Dá Choca*, Irish Texts Society 61 (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 2007). 143. See also the same event in Recension B, 274-75 of the same volume.

¹⁶⁶ Toner, *Bruiden*, 142.

¹⁶⁷ Whitley Stokes, “*Aided Muirchertaig Meic Erca*,” *Revue Celtique* 23 (1902), 395-437: 425.

¹⁶⁸ Stokes, “*Aided Muirchertaig*,” 424.

mourning for Aed of Ath No, over his pyre on the mighty hill.”¹⁶⁹ (*Déra in Dagdai, díles dó,/ ic cainiud Áeda ó Áth Nó: / roscí rí Cuilt, in curaid,/ ina thuirt ‘sin trom-thulaig.*)¹⁷⁰ *Druim*

Suamaig II provides a similar account: “The Hill of Tears was its name at the first (I will tell you its noble secret) when the comely Dagda was there, mourning for Cermait.”¹⁷¹ (*Tulach Dher a hainm ar tus, / (ader-sa ribh a deadh-rus,)/ da raibi in Dagha data / and a caineadh*

Ceartmata.)¹⁷² In *Bruiden Da Choca* the additional detail is given that the Dagda’s tears were tears of blood: “he reached Tulach Dér, (that is, the tears of blood that the Dagda wept there in his outburst at the news of the death of his son Cermait, and that is why it is called Tulach Dér).”¹⁷³ (*co rrainic Tulach Dér .i. deræ folæ ro theilg in Dagdæ inte a comrac fri tasc a maic in Cermatæ, conid de di-gairther Tulach Der di.*)¹⁷⁴ Perhaps the author was prompted to add this detail by the description of Fergus’s bloody tears in the text.¹⁷⁵ At the beginning of *Cath Ruis na Rig* in the Book of Leinster, the druid Cathbad weeps tears of blood over the deathly ill Conchobor,¹⁷⁶ and in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, it is related that “Fer Rogain wept, so that his mantle in front of him became moist”¹⁷⁷ (*Ro chí Fer Rogain co m-ba fliuch a brat far a bélaib.*)¹⁷⁸

It is clear from these examples that male weeping and keening was not confined to the realm of bardic poetry, but appears in other genres, and is not exclusively the province of poets

¹⁶⁹ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 237.

¹⁷⁰ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 236.

¹⁷¹ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 239.

¹⁷² Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 238.

¹⁷³ Toner, *Bruiden*, 131.

¹⁷⁴ Toner, *Bruiden*, 130.

¹⁷⁵ However, in Recension B, there is no mention that the Dagda’s tears were tears of blood; see Toner, *Bruiden*, 272-3.

¹⁷⁶ “He wept floodlike deep-red tears of blood, so that his breast and bosom were wet” (*ciís déra folcmara forruada fola cor bo fliuch blaé & brunni dó*), Edmund Hogan, ed. and trans., *Cath Ruis na Rig For Boinn* (Dublin University Press, 1892), 3-4.

¹⁷⁷ Eleanor Knott, ed., *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 8 (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1975), 26-7.

¹⁷⁸ Knott, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, 26-7.

mourning dead patrons. Men in these texts keen, weep, and lament, like the women mourners depicted in Irish texts. This makes it difficult to assert that women experienced a more intimate association with the rituals of mourning than did men; at the least, it is clear that some medieval Irish authors were comfortable portraying men weeping and lamenting as a means of demonstrating their grief.

One text that should not be ignored in any discussion of male grief in medieval Irish literature is the *Acallam na Senórach*, a lengthy text probably composed in the late-twelfth century.¹⁷⁹ It is an unusual work, a marriage of the secular heroic literature, represented primarily by the aged Fenian warrior Cailte, and the hagiographical, in the figure of Saint Patrick. The Fenian tradition concerns itself with the exploits of the *fiana*, warbands under the leadership of a *ríghénnid*, a chief of a *fian*. The most famous *fian* is that of Finn mac Cumail; the Fenian tradition is dominated by the exploits of Finn and his followers, but other *fiana* and *ríghénnids* do appear in this body of material.¹⁸⁰ The *Acallam*, the largest single repository of fenian material, concentrates on the *fian* of Finn mac Cumail.

As Cailte and Patrick traverse Ireland, Cailte reveals numerous tales of the heroic pagan past which are recorded by Patrick's scribes, at the command of Patrick's guardian angels. The layering of past and present in the text is complex, with stories of the past frequently prompted by landmarks, monuments, and objects. The past events narrated by Cailte are often integrated seamlessly into the present, with a tale of the past being narrated during the course of an event happening in the text's present, which is itself part of the larger frame tale of Cailte and Patrick's encounter.

¹⁷⁹ Ann Dooley, "The Date and Purpose of *Acallam na Senórach*," *Éigse*, 34 (2004), 97-126. Whitley Stokes, ed., *Acallamh na Senórach*, in *Irish Texts*, series 4 volume 1 (1900) xiv+1-438, accessed from the Corpus of Electronic Texts, <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G303000/index.html>.

¹⁸⁰ For a discussion of *fiana*, see Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1991), 203-223.

One of the more striking elements of the *Acallam* is the prevalence of sorrow and grief throughout the narrative. Joseph Falaky Nagy notes that “Perhaps more than any other medieval Irish composition, the *Acallam* revels in sadness and the sense of loss . . . The leading exponent of this nostalgic gloom tinged with pride is the old Fenian warrior and main character in the text, Caílte mac Rónaín”¹⁸¹ Caílte, Oisín, and the other survivors of the old *fian* are introduced in the first lines of *Acallam*, where the reader is informed that three battles destroyed the *fian*, that the survivors of the battles broke into small companies and separated, and that by the time of the narrative present, only Caílte, Oisín, and a few companions remained. They travel across the countryside, seemingly without purpose, and as the sun sets they pause to take their rest “in great sorrow and despair”¹⁸² (*do bhádar co dubach do-mhenmnach*).¹⁸³ After resting, the Fenians decide to seek out Cama, who, aside from Caílte and Oisín, is the sole surviving elder of the *fian*. Cama welcomes them and asks them their names. The revelation of their identities causes her to “weep bitter showers of tears” (*ro cháí annsin frasa díchra dér*).¹⁸⁴ She then serves them food and wine, and they converse about their old friends and comrades. Eventually a silence falls, which Caílte breaks by comparing the pain of past losses with the sorrow of the Fenian’s impending separation from one another, and Oisín responds by stating that “there will be little fight or strength”¹⁸⁵ (*nith na nert*)¹⁸⁶ after the departure of his companions. Upon this declaration the warriors and Cama weep deeply, despite the fact that, as the text tells us, the Fenians are “manly warriors”¹⁸⁷ (*Ocus gérsat calma na fer-ógláigh ro cháisetar*).¹⁸⁸

¹⁸¹ Joseph Falaky Nagy, “Compositional Concerns in the *Acallam na Senórach*,” in *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney*, eds. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach and Kim McCone, Maynooth Monographs, 2 (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1989), 149-58. 149.

¹⁸² Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 3.

¹⁸³ Stokes, *Acallam*, l. 9.

¹⁸⁴ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 24-5.

¹⁸⁵ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 4.

¹⁸⁶ Stokes, *Acallam*, l. 39.

¹⁸⁷ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 4.

What are we to make of this incident, particularly the text's emphasis on the disparity between the Fenian's weeping and their masculinity and warrior status? Does the author's distinction between weeping and manly behaviour reflect the beliefs of a contemporary audience, or is the author importing such an idea into the past for a literary effect? Taken at face value, the author's assertion that their weeping is at odds with their social role would appear to support those scholars who prefer to see mourning customs as especially associated with feminine behaviour. However, we have seen several examples where men weep and keen, and if their behavior is portrayed negatively in the text, it is done too subtly for this modern reader to detect.

Cáilte is the main character in the *Acallam*, and he weeps far more than any of the other characters. When Bran, son the King of Munster, comes to Patrick's retinue to learn the lore of the *fian*, his account of his hunting methods moves Cáilte: "On hearing this Cáilte, in the presence of Patrick, wept tearfully and sorrowfully until both his shirt and his chest were wet."¹⁸⁹ (*Ro cháiestar Cailte annsin a bh-fiadhnaise Pátraic co dérach dobrónach, cur'bo fliuch blai & bruinne dho.*)¹⁹⁰ A journey to Diarmait's grave likewise has a dramatic effect on the Fenian survivor:

There Cáilte put his weapons on the ground and lay down on the grave and tomb of his companion and foster-brother and beloved comrade, Diarmait ua Duibne. He wept flowing tears of true sorrow until both his shirt and chest were wet, and said, "Sad it is that my companion and foster-brother has gone from me!" They were there from the middle of the day until close to sunset.¹⁹¹

*Ocus do chuir Cáilte a arma re lár ann, & do luigh ar leacht & ar lighe a coicli & a chomhalta & a fir grada .i. Diarmata ua Duibne,. & ro cháiestar déra folcmara fir-truagha gur' bhó fliuch blái & bruinne dhó, & adubairt: 'truagh amh mar do- chuaidh mo coicli & mu chomalta uaim!' Ocus o bátar ann ó medón láí co crích fuinid nóna.*¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 39-40.

¹⁸⁹ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 29.

¹⁹⁰ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 889-9.

¹⁹¹ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 47.

¹⁹² Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 1518-24.

Cáilte also weeps at mention of the grave of Berrach Brecc, a wife of Finn: “At this time Conall Mor ‘the Great,’ son of Niall, said to Cáilte, ‘There is an island far off on this sea before us and a fort there and a great grave. We know not whose grave it is.’ Cáilte wept at hearing that.”¹⁹³ (*Is annsin ro fhiarfaig Conall Mor mac Neill do Chailti: ‘Atá ailén ar in muir-sea ar comair amuig & dúnad ann & annlacud mor annsein, & ní fhetamur crét da fuil.’ Ocus is ann sin ro cháiestar Cáilte ica cloistecht-sin.*)¹⁹⁴ A woman’s unfinished quatrain in the house of the King of Ulster is completed by Cáilte, who “put the horn from his hand, and wept flowing, truly sorrowful tears that soaked his shirt and his breast”¹⁹⁵ (*ro chuir Cáilte in cornn assa láim, & ro cháiestar déra falcmará fir-thruaga cor’ bo fliuch blái & bruinde dó*).¹⁹⁶ When Cas Corach, son of the *ollam* of the *Túatha dé Danann*, comes to Cáilte to learn the lore of the *Fian*, Cáilte recites a poem about the passing of the *Fian*, and “then Cáilte recalled the loss of the friends, the foster-brothers, and the great hosts he was formerly with, and he wept heavy, truly sorrowful tears, so that his shirt and breast were drenched”¹⁹⁷ (*Is annsin tuc Cáilte da uidh & da aire esbaid na carat & na comalta & na n- drong-buidhen mor iter a raibi, & ro cháiestar déra troma fir-thruaga ann, cor’ bo fhliuch blai & bruinde dó*).¹⁹⁸ Cáilte visits the great rock which the *Fian* had used as a sharpening stone, and again Cáilte is heavily affected: “he wept flowing tears of great sadness, remembering the great people that often stood on that rock with him in earlier times”¹⁹⁹ (*& ro cháiestar déra fir-thruaga falcmará annsin os chind na cloiche ic cuimniugud na muintire moire ro bóí os chind na cloiche-sin co minic reime*).²⁰⁰ When the King of Leinster asks Cáilte why two neighboring hills are named the Height of Cuillenn and the Height of Cúanaide, he “then wept

¹⁹³ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 64.

¹⁹⁴ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 2085-8.

¹⁹⁵ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 99.

¹⁹⁶ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 3265-6.

¹⁹⁷ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 102.

¹⁹⁸ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 3377-9.

¹⁹⁹ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 124.

²⁰⁰ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 4198-4200.

abundant tears of sorrow so that his shirt and breast were wet”²⁰¹ (*Ocus ro cháiestar Cailte annsin dera falcmará fir-thruaga cor' ba fhliuch blái & bruinde dó*).²⁰² In the company of the King of Connaught, Cailte weeps at the ‘Seat of Finn:’ “As they sat down there tears fell heavily and flowed across Cailte’s cheeks”²⁰³ (*mar do t-shuidhidur ann ro moidedur déra co tróm falcmar tar a gruaidib do Chailti*).²⁰⁴

The last occasion on which Cailte sheds tears occurs when he is staying with the *Túatha dé Danann*. Bé Binn gives Cailte four drinks that cause him to vomit forth noxious substances, among them a black vomit which represents his grief for Finn, after which Cailte rests and continues to heal. While listening to the lovely music of the *sidh*, Cailte considers the loss of his fighting strength, and complains that he has “‘not the strength or vigour to go outside with all the rest!’ Tears fell across his cheeks”²⁰⁵ (*nach fuil do nert na do tracht accum-sa dul amach maraen ré cach aníu!*’ *Ocus ro moidhetar déra tar a gruaidib*).²⁰⁶

While no other man in the text weeps with Cailte’s extravagant frequency, he is far from alone in shedding tears. Finn and his warriors wept when their enemies, the Sons of Morna, burned one of the *fian*’s forts to the ground, with all of the inhabitants inside.²⁰⁷ On another occasion Finn and his followers arrive too late to save their comrades from complete slaughter by the Sons of Morna, and Finn “wept pitiful, flowing showers of tears so that his shirt was wet above his breast. All the *fian* likewise wept”²⁰⁸ (*& at-connaire Find sin, & do thuitedur a airm*

²⁰¹ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 135.

²⁰² Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 4845-6.

²⁰³ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 183.

²⁰⁴ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 6533-4.

²⁰⁵ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 202.

²⁰⁶ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 7198-7200.

²⁰⁷ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 2657-60.

²⁰⁸ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 86.

assa lamaib, & ro chaíestar frassa falc-mura fir-thruaga cor'ba fhliuch blái os bruinde dó, & ro cháíestar in Fhiann uili archena).²⁰⁹ A king whose son has been stolen away to the *síd* sheds tears for the loss of his heir.²¹⁰ A year-long absence by Finn prompts his warriors to consider choosing a new chieftain to replace him, “and those boys wept heavily and considerably because of the loss of their father and their lord”²¹¹ (*Ocus ro cháísetar na meic-sin ina degaid-sin co trom taidbsech d' esbaid a da n-athar & a tigerna*).²¹²

Returning to the question raised earlier regarding the redactor’s comment about weeping and masculinity, I believe that the author is depicting a change in societal mores brought on by Patrick’s evangelization of Ireland, and that Cailte’s tears represent a shift from terrible, deadly despair to a grief which is mediated and overcome by knowledge of Christian salvation.²¹³ The pre-Christian culture described in the text is one in which grief frequently overwhelms an individual and results in his or her death.²¹⁴ In the aftermath of Patrick’s arrival, death by grief occurs rarely. Significantly, the family of Aed, a young prince who has died suddenly, threatens that they will die of grief if Patrick does not resurrect him. Patrick raises Aed from the dead, and his family converts to the Christian faith.²¹⁵ Near the end of the text as we have it, most of the surviving Fenians, with the exception of Cailte and Oisín, turn their faces to the earth and die of grief.²¹⁶ As survivors from the pre-Christian past, they have been unable to fully assimilate to Patrick’s message of salvation. They have carried the burden of their grief until it destroyed them. Cailte, however, openly and repeatedly expresses his grief, until he is able to set it aside.

Having considered depictions of mourning men outside the genre of poetic lament, I now

²⁰⁹ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 2837-9.

²¹⁰ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 4913-15.

²¹¹ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 146.

²¹² Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 5249-52.

²¹³ I explore the role of grief in this text more fully in a forthcoming article.

²¹⁴ These examples are treated more fully in Chapter 3.

²¹⁵ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 1205-29.

²¹⁶ Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 7896-7902.

turn to the evidence in late medieval bardic elegies. Pádraig A. Breatnach discusses the scene at the patron's grave described in fifteenth-century bardic poetry. The "poet is represented as lying tearfully on the subject's grave day after day, or, alternatively, as competing for position there among a throng of mourners that includes territorial status-holders, member of the deceased's household, other poets, but above all a crowd of keening women who cry out, clap hands, trample on the freshly-turned clay and shed their tears on the tombstone."²¹⁷ Though Breatnach emphasized the presence of female mourners, he does note that other members of the dead man's household are also mourning at the grave. Breatnach cites a number of elegies to paint his picture of the vigil. The poets make frequent use of ritualized mourning in their poems, referring to their own tears, as well as those of the dead man's followers, to keening, and to lying on the dead man's grave. One poet claims:

I stay on Éigneathán's grave; it is a course imposed by necessity upon me; I cannot refrain from tears there (as) I hear the grief of Clan Conaill.²¹⁸

*Ar f(h)eart Éigneatháin anaim,
beart 'na héigeanchás orainn;
re ceilt ndéar ann ní fhuilim,
do-chluinim léan chlann gConaill.*²¹⁹

Another poet also weeps on his dead lord's grave:

I weep heartfelt tears each day on the grave of my people's worthy champion; since I do not go away from it, mourning from him will not leave me.²²⁰

*Mé gach énlá ag caí chridhe
ar uaigh deighfhir ar ndaíne-ne (?);
biaidh ar son gan dula di*

²¹⁷ Pádraig A. Breatnach, "The Poet's Graveside Vigil: A Theme of Irish Bardic Elegy in the Fifteenth Century," *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 49-50 (1997), 50-63: 53.

²¹⁸ *Tuile ar ttrághadh trén Gaoidheal*, ed. Lambert McKenna, "Some Irish Bardic Poems XCIV" *Studies* 39 (1950) 437-44. Quoted from Breatnach, "The Poet's Graveside Vigil," 56. His translation.

²¹⁹ *Tuile ar ttrághadh trén Gaoidheal*. ed., McKenna, 437-44. Quoted from Breatnach, "The Poet's Graveside Vigil," 56.

²²⁰ *Decair comhall don chumhaidh*, ed. Ann O'Sullivan, *Poems on Marcher Lords*. ITS vol. 53 (London: 1987), 70-82. Quoted from Breatnach, "The Poet's Graveside Vigil," 57. His translation.

*a chumha gan dol dín-ne.*²²¹

Female keening, accompanied by music, brings forth tears from the other mourners: “Many are shedding real tears (caused) by women who keen him with music.”²²² (*Ní tearch ag dáil deór bhfire/ag mnáibh le ceól ‘gá chaoine.*)²²³ This is supportive of Angela Bourke’s argument that in later keens, “the lamenter functions as a sort of grief therapist: an explicit aim of her poetry was to move listeners to tears, to facilitate them in expressing their own grief.”²²⁴ The emphasis on “true” tears recalls the frequent refrain in the *Acallam* that Cailte, or another character, wept “true, heartfelt tears,” and this distinction appears to have been a way for a mourner to legitimize the sincerity of his or her own sorrow. One poet favorably compares the intensity of his weeping with that of the women gathered at the grave: “The day on which my flood of weeping is driest, the sorrow of the women is drowned by it.”²²⁵ (*An lá is tiorma mo thonn caoine/ cumha na mban báidhtear lé.*)²²⁶

Another poet compares the women’s lamenting and weeping to his own, which is spurred on in an attempt not to be outwept: “My lamentation grows ever keener, so that the grieving of women is not any more lasting; when a strange woman outcries me it is not a day on which to conceal my crying.”²²⁷ (*Mo ghul ag dul a ndéine,/ cumha na mban nach buaine;/ ní lá do chleith mo chaoine/ aoidhe mná ag breith mo bhuaidhe.*)²²⁸

²²¹ *Decair comhall don chumhaidh.* ed. O’Sullivan, 70-82. Quoted from Breatnach, “The Poet’s Graveside Vigil,” 57.

²²² *Do ghabh Éire a huain cumhadh*, Book of O’Conor Don, f. 337r, BL Add. 19, 995, f. 8b (fragment). Quoted from Breatnach, “The Poet’s Graveside Vigil,” 61. His translation.

²²³ *Do ghabh Éire a huain cumhadh*. Quoted from Breatnach, “The Poet’s Graveside Vigil,” 61.

²²⁴ Bourke, “The Irish Traditional Lament,” 289-90.

²²⁵ *Foraois na horchra Íbh Eathach*. Book of O’Conor Don, f. 273 v. Quoted from Breatnach, “The Poet’s Graveside Vigil,” 61. His translation.

²²⁶ *Foraois na horchra Íbh Eathach*. Quoted from Breatnach, “The Poet’s Graveside Vigil,” 61.

²²⁷ *Tuile ar ttrághadh trén Gaoidheal*. Ed. Lambert McKenna, “Some Irish Bardic Poems XCIV” *Studies* 39 (1950) 437-44. Quoted from Breatnach, “The Poet’s Graveside Vigil,” 61. His translation.

²²⁸ *Tuile ar ttrághadh trén Gaoidheal*. ed. McKenna, 437-44. Quoted from Breatnach, “The Poet’s Graveside Vigil,” 61.

In one poem, poets compete the women at the graveside: “They utter together on both sides their keening joust; the woman of Murbhach (i.e. Ireland) cry out acknowledging them—the poets cry back in response.”²²⁹ (*Cantar aca leath ar leath/ le chéile a gcluiche caointeach,/ gáir dá n-aithne ag mnáibh Murbhaigh,/gáir dá aithle ag ollamhnuibh.*)²³⁰ This type of exchange is typical of later Irish keens, and it is also striking similar to the keen described in the prose *dindshenchas* on *Gáirech*, where the keen of Cú Chulainn’s companions is answered by the horses, chariots, weapons, and stones.

While the poets’ grief is often similar to that of the women, a direct equivalency is only rarely made. There are instances where a poet depicts himself competing with the women, but this does not indicate that the poet is acting as a sexual rival. There is no need in most of these examples to see the poet acting as a widow, when there are men who weep and lament and lie on graves who are not poets. The presence of the “widowed poet” motif in a poem does not suggest that any acts of mourning the poet ascribes to himself must be related to that trope.

Though she references the trope of the poet lying on the king’s grave after noting the “accepted convention that the women mourned for their dead chief as for a lost lover,”²³¹ Simms is careful to point out that there is no hint of a sexual relationship between poet and lord: “Quite apart from the empty conventions of grief which called on the keening women to act as bereaved lovers, bed-sharing was a general mark of esteem and trust in this society, peculiarly appropriate between a king and his poet.”²³² Simms’s point is well-taken, but it undermines her overall argument. She goes on to argue that “regardless of any symbolism, or traditional equation of

²²⁹ *Leasg an aghuidhsi ar Eas Ruaidh*. ed. Lambert McKenna, “Some Irish Bardic Poems XCIV,” *Studies* 39 (1950) 187-192. Quoted from Breatnach, “The Poet’s Graveside Vigil,” 61. His translation.

²³⁰ *Leasg an aghuidhsi ar Eas Ruaidh*. ed. McKenna, “Some Irish Bardic Poems XCIV,” *Studies* 39 (1950) 187-192. Quoted from Breatnach, “The Poet’s Graveside Vigil,” 61.

²³¹ Simms, “Poet,” 402.

²³² Simms, “Poet,” 403.

roles, there were many practical parallels in the positions of the king's wife and his *ollamh*.”²³³

This being the case, it is unclear when these mourning behaviours overlap because the poet is representing himself as a widow, or because the wife and poet of a dead lord experience a similar loss of status upon the lord's death. In the absence of an explicit statement on the part of the poet, and in light of mourning by men who are not poets and are therefore highly unlikely to think of themselves as a man's widow, it seems prudent to exercise caution when attributing poets' mourning to a feminine role. Given the title of Simms' article, one might expect more support for the idea of the poet as widow than what is presented. She invokes the idea of poet as patron's lover, and suggests that this idea is present in some elegies. However, she does not provide any examples where this is clearly the case, and actually points out that the bed-sharing/grave-lying mentioned by the poets is not sexual, but is a sign of high status. What evidence she does present is suggestive, but does not prove that the underlying notion of the relationship between the poet and lord is modeled on a marriage, rather than on the dependency of patronage.

Simms' article moves from a discussion of the specific motif of the widowed poet to a more general assessment of the manners in which women and poets grieved at the graveside, and also to a consideration of the theme of the much-widowed sovereignty goddess. She concludes that “the mourning poet's experience was presented as a microcosm of the loss suffered by the land and people, and in this sense he can be taken as speaking for the land.”²³⁴ Simms is seeking to equate the poet with the land, and thus with the sovereignty goddess who marries the king. This ignores the people whose loss, she has just suggested, is represented in the poet's grief.

²³³ Simms, “Poet,” 404.

²³⁴ Simms, “Poet,” 409.

An inclination to interpret ambiguous statements to support the widowed poet trope is found in an edition of an elegy for Aodh Ó Chonchobhair. This poem is slightly earlier than those discussed by Simms and Breatnach, but has many similar descriptions of mourning. The poet refers frequently to weeping, both his own and that of the Irish people “Now after his death neither I nor they (his family) know of a single eye socket in Ireland whose eye has not dried up from [keening] the great, young, slender-fingered scion”²³⁵ (*Ní haithnidh dhamh-sa ‘na dhiaidh/ ‘mun am-sa, ‘s ní haithnidh dhóibh,/ dearc d’Éirinn nach seisg a súil,/ tresan bhfleisg n-úir méirshing móir*).²³⁶ The idea that all mourn for Aodh recurs in stanza 11, where the poet writes that “Aodh’s blood has poured through the earth, and all have keened his passing”²³⁷ (*Do-chuaidh fuil Aodha fa úir, do ghuil gach daonna ‘na dhiaidh*).²³⁸ Another reference to weeping shows up in stanza 16: “I lament the death of Tuathal’s heir for the misery it brought to Cruacha. Cruacha of the brown nuts is in mourning since his passing; my tear is as large as a great bog-berry.”²³⁹ (*Ag gul i Thuathail a-tám/ um Chruachain do chur dá sódh;/ Cruacha chnódhonn dá ló are léan,/ mo dhéar ní mó mónann mhór*).²⁴⁰ Later, he again returns to his tears: “The expedition of Brian’s heir into Bréifne has burned up my cheek; my eye has not ceased [from crying] since then; I must go on an errand north-eastwards [to visit his grave]”²⁴¹ (*Toisg isan mBréifne ag ua Bhriain/ do loisg go géirthe mo ghruaidh;/ nochar choisg ó shoin mo shúil,/ soir dúinn ar an toisg bhu-thuaidh*).²⁴² There is one statement which McManus interprets as evidence that the poet is utilizing the chieftain’s widow motif: the poet states that he “will go [and lie] on

²³⁵ Damian McManus, “Elegy on the Death of Aodh Ó Chonchobhair († 1309),” *Ériu* 51 (2000), 69-91: 77.

²³⁶ McManus, “Elegy,” 77.

²³⁷ McManus, “Elegy,” 78.

²³⁸ McManus, “Elegy,” 78.

²³⁹ McManus, “Elegy,” 79.

²⁴⁰ McManus, “Elegy,” 79.

²⁴¹ McManus, “Elegy,” 81.

²⁴² McManus, “Elegy,” 81.

the king's grave as though it were a spouse's bed (?)”²⁴³ (*Géabhad ós cionn chuirp an ríogh/ dar liom mar badh cuilt chaomh*). In his notes, McManus explains his reasoning behind this translation:

My rendering of *cuilt chaomh* as ‘spouses’ bed’ (lit. ‘bed of companions’) is based on the common conceit of the marriage-type relationship between poet and patron. In elegies of this kind the patron’s grave, usually *feart* or *uagh*, takes the place of his bed, commonly *leabha*, occasionally *cuilt*, in the standard eulogy. As sharing the latter symbolized the esteem in which the poet was held by the patron, so lying with him on his grave expressed the esteem in which the patron was held by the poet, his great grief and his gratitude for the benefits that the relationship brought him.²⁴⁴

McManus’s translation relies on reading this trope into the text, but it is not explicitly present here or elsewhere in the poem. In this case, McManus forgoes the more standard translations of *caomh*, which would admirably suit the situation presented in the poem, in order to conform with a trope which is otherwise not attested in this poem at all. While McManus’s choice here is understandable, it is not necessary, and is potentially misleading. Another possible translation of *chaomh* is “fine” or “noble,” and this may be an adjective describing the bed, rather than a substantive noun referring to a person.

In what is perhaps a take on the competition between the poets and the women who attempt to outdo one another in the extravagance of their mourning, the poet criticizes Ireland, personified as a woman, for not expressing her grief in a fitting manner:

“Your arrogance angers me, O Éire! It is a tragedy that your spouse lies buried in the earth. Your husband is dead, O Inis Fáil; you have earned no great repute, O wife of Brian!”

“Alas, woman, that the race whose blood is on your breast should be at your mercy! You, O Éire, will not tear out your hair [in grief] today, after the death of your spouse.”

“You were entitled to some [turn of] fortune after drinking blood in the north; O Éire, there is no wealth, save for the blood of Créidhe’s descendant in your soil.”²⁴⁵

²⁴³ McManus, “Elegy,” 89.

²⁴⁴ McManus, “Elegy,” 89.

²⁴⁵ McManus, “Elegy,” 79.

*As reacht liom-sa, a Éire, th'uaill,
as ionnsa do chéile i gcraidh;
teasda th'fhear, a Inis Fáil,
níor dhlighis cáil, a bhean Bhriain.*

*Mairg, a aoinbhean, fhuil ar th'iocht
isa braoinshreabh fhuil ar th'ucht;
ní theasgfa tú, a Éire, th'fholt,
a-nu ar dtocht do chéile a curp.*

*D'éis na fala a-tibhis thuaidh,
ana do dhlighis 'na dhiaidh;
a Éire, ní fhuil do mhaoín,
acht fuil taoibh í Chréidhe id' chriaidh.²⁴⁶*

By calling the personified sovereignty figure “the wife of Brian” the poet may be suggesting that her loyalty to her husbands has been lax: Brian is dead, and now so is Aodh. The second stanza’s emphasis on her disinclination to tear out her hair in grief for her dead husband also indicates an imperfect faithfulness. Some poets emphasize the status of a dead man by describing the wives of other men as having desired the dead man, and having to conceal their grief lest they invite the wrath of their husbands.²⁴⁷ However, Aodh’s rightful bride, Ireland, cannot be bothered to feign mourning, even as every household keens his passing.

To conclude, I have found little evidence that medieval, as opposed to modern and early modern, Irish custom privileged women as mourners and practitioners of keening. Part of this may stem from confusion over the term ‘keen;’ while in later Irish tradition the parameters of the keen are quite clearly spelled out, medieval authors appear to use the term more loosely, including poetic laments, wailing, and weeping under the term. Nonetheless, it seems likely that

²⁴⁶ McManus, “Elegy,” 79.

²⁴⁷ “A woman who feared her own husband wished the grave empty. Before a woman admitted shedding a tear, she scanned the house on every side.” (*Ben lerb omhan a fer fein/ an fert is folamh budh ail/ do fhéich an thegh ar gach thaoibh/ sul do mhaoidh ben dér do dhail*). From “Sealbh gan urraidh oighrecht Fhind,” Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS no 475 (24 P 25) f74r (141). Quoted from Simms, “Poet,” 402. Simms’s translation.

the undermining of the native patronage system by waves of Anglo-Norman settlement served to destabilize the role of the male poet in composing elegies for the dead, and the coexistent practice of women's lament filled this vacuum. Of course, most laments composed by women in the medieval and later periods were never put to paper, and it would be difficult to make an argument about their prevalence in actual custom. The constraints inherent to this sort of investigation require an adherence to textual evidence, and the special relationship of women with ritual lament and mourning in medieval Irish texts is sustainable only if the corpus of bardic poetry is ignored. Otherwise, it is male poets who dominate the literature of grief.

Chapter Two

Masculinity and Mourning in Medieval Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England

Weeping in the Myth of Baldr's Death and Scandinavian Royal Funerals

Ynglinga saga, the first section of the famous compendium of sagas dealing with Scandinavian rulers, contains a short tale explaining how Ingjaldr, the son of a Swedish king, becomes a man infamous for wickedness:

One winter a great crowd came to Uppsala, and King Yngvarr and his sons were there. Álfr, King Yngvarr's son, and Ingjaldr, son of King Qnundar, were six years old. They set up a boyish game, and each was to be the leader of his army. And when they played together, Ingjaldr was weaker than Álfr, and this seemed so awful to him, that he wept greatly. And then Gautviðr, his fosterbrother, came to him, and led him away to Svipdagr the Blind, his fosterfather, and told him that it had gone badly and he was weaker and punier in the games than Álfr, King Yngvarr's son. Svipdagr replied that that was a great shame. The next day Svipdagr had a wolf's heart taken and roasted on a spit, and gave it to Ingjaldr the king's son to eat, and afterwards he was the grimmest and worst tempered of all men.

Ok einn vetr, þá er fjölmennit var komit til Uppsala, var þar Yngvarr konungr og synir hans. Þeir váru sex vetra gamlir, Álfr, sonr Yngvars konungs, ok Ingjaldr sonr Qnundar konungs, þeir efldu til sveinaleiks, ok skyldi hvárr ráða fyrir sínu liði. Ok er þeir lékusk viðr, var Ingjaldr ósterkari en Álfr, ok þótti honum þat svá illt, at hann grét mjök. Ok þá kom til Gautviðr, fóstbróðir hans, ok leiddi hann í brot til Svipdags blinda, fóstfrður hans, ok sagði honum, at illa hafði at farit ok hann var ósterkari og óþróttkari í leiknum en Álfr, sonr Yngvars konungs. Þá svaraði Svipdagr at þat væri mikil skömm. Annan dag eptir lét Svipdagr taka hjarta ór vargi ok steikja á teini ok gaf síðan Ingjaldi konungssyni at eta, ok þaðan af varð hann allra manna grimmastr ok verst skaplundaðr.²⁴⁸

At first glance, this vignette appears to reinforce clichés about masculinity in medieval Scandinavia: the response to a six-year-old boy's tears over the outcome of a children's game is to feed to him the heart of a wolf, so that he takes on the qualities of that beast and becomes fierce and cruel. Svipdagr's plan is a success. As an adult, Ingjaldr invites a number of other kings to the funeral feast for his father, and then, while the others are drunk, exits and sets fire to the hall (a tactic he will use many times in his life). The rival kings die in the conflagration, and Ingjaldr claims their domains as his own.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ed. *Heimskringla* I, Íslensk fornrit, 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941), 63-4.

²⁴⁹ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla* I, 65-7.

The depiction of the medieval Scandinavians in modern popular culture is often one of brutal, destructive aggressors, incapable of fine feeling, and Ingjaldr certainly fits this description. His tears are evidence of a character flaw that must be eradicated; Svipdagr clearly thinks it is better to be the foster-father to a cruel man than to one who is weak. At a casual glance this scene appears to suggest that for a male individual to shed tears, even as a child, is a serious failing; however, the text is not explicit on this point, as Gautviðr is concerned that Ingjaldr is weaker in the game (*leikr*) than the other boy. The role of his tears in Gautviðr's dismay is difficult to determine, and while the narrative of tears as the cause of shame is attractive in that it reinforces modern notions of Viking masculinity, it may be significant that the narrator of *Ynglinga saga* does not go on to present Ingjaldr in a positive light. Ingjaldr's age should also be taken into account, as he is a young child when he weeps, and though children's emotional responses are rarely recorded in medieval Scandinavian and Icelandic literature, it is likely that a child would be held to a different set of behavioral standards in these matters than an adult.

Two of the most famous, and certainly most discussed, scenes of weeping in medieval Old Norse-Icelandic literature occur in Snorri Sturluson's narrative of the death of the god Baldr, found in the *Gylfaginning* section of *Snorra Edda*. Drawing on a small number of depictions of male weeping in the Icelandic family sagas, scholarship on this text often assumes that the weeping for Baldr would have been deemed effeminate by the audience of *Snorra Edda*. But the weeping in Snorri's narrative can be contextualized against a different textual background than is usually brought to bear on this aspect of the text. In the following analysis, *Fagrskinna*, *Heimskringla*, and *Gesta Danorum* will provide a literary framework for reconsidering the relationship between weeping and masculinity in Snorri's account of the death of Baldr. As

Snorri does not explicitly ascribe any moral or social value to the weeping, his own views on the masculinity or effeminacy of weeping cannot be derived from *Snorra Edda* itself. Reading the weeping in the Baldr-narrative beside depictions of mourning in the kings' sagas and *Gesta Danorum* offers a surprisingly different perspective on the relationship between weeping and gender in Snorri's text.

Baldr, the son of Óðinn and Frigg, suffers terrible nightmares, and his frightened mother takes an oath from every thing, living and dead, not to harm her son. At an assembly, the Æsir celebrate Baldr's immunity from harm by pelting him with objects. Loki is displeased by this, and, disguised as an old woman, gleans from Frigg that mistletoe did not take the oath. Loki returns to the assembly with mistletoe, which he puts in the hand of Baldr's blind brother Hqðr, whom he points in the direction of Baldr so that he may join in the game with the other gods. Hqðr throws the mistletoe, and Baldr is struck dead. The gods fall silent and then collectively weep. A funeral is held for Baldr, and the gods send a messenger to Hel, who rules over the land of the dead, to ask what she would exchange for Baldr's return. Hel's condition is that if all creatures will weep for him, Baldr may return. The gods almost succeed in bringing this about, but are forestalled by a giantess, who may, Snorri tells us, be Loki in disguise. She weeps "dry tears" (*þurrum tárur*) for Baldr, thus preventing the fulfillment of Hel's demand.²⁵⁰

Scholars have long been fascinated by the weeping in this text, and a number of theories have been advanced to explain what many consider to be puzzling and uncharacteristic behavior for Norse gods. There have been attempts to connect the second weeping in this text with the

²⁵⁰ Anthony Faulkes, ed. Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), 45-8. The phrase *þurrum tárur* occurs in a single stanza embedded in the prose. Some scholars have argued that this stanza, combined with the alliteration in the description of Hermóðr's ride to Hel, suggests the existence of an eddic "Baldr lay" telling of his death and attempted recovery from Hel. For a discussion and criticism of this argument, see Christopher Abram, "Snorri's Invention of Hermóðr's *helreið*," in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature. Sagas and the British Isles I. Preprint Papers of the 13th International Saga Conference, Durham and York, 6th-12th August, 2006*, ed. John McKinnell et. al. (Durham: University of Durham, 2006), 22-31.

mourning of Creation for Christ at the crucifixion,²⁵¹ and recently Anatoly Liberman has argued that the weeping should be associated with rain, with Baldr functioning as a fertility/sky deity. Liberman asserts that “Even if Neckel’s idea on the importation of the Baldr myth from the East were sustainable, the ethos of medieval Scandinavia could have been expected to suppress such a demeaning detail as men in tears. Yet Snorri allowed the gods to weep.”²⁵² For Liberman, the weeping is jarring, and conflicts with his perception of correct masculine behavior in medieval Scandinavia; it is a “demeaning detail,” one that detracts from the exalted status of the male Æsir.

The assumption that male weeping was disgraceful in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia forms the basis for an article by John Lindow, in which he states that “weeping . . . was women’s work,”²⁵³ thus unsuitable for the male gods, and in his conclusion he argues that by weeping they “behaved, however briefly, like unmanly men.”²⁵⁴ Lindow suggests that by causing the Æsir to perform a feminine task twice in the myth of Baldr’s death, Loki has forced them to assume a feminine role in the cosmology, thus destabilizing and temporarily inverting the male/Æsir versus female/Jǫtnar dichotomy, which Lindow sees as generally holding sway in the mythology. “Weeping,” according to Lindow, “was women’s work,” and Loki has engineered the situation so that the Æsir behaved in an effeminate manner at Baldr’s death; if everyone and everything weeps, “then the universe the gods created will be behaving unanimously like a bunch of women.”²⁵⁵ Lindow points out that Margaret Clunies Ross sees a connection between the

²⁵¹ For an overview of some of these theories, see John Lindow, “The Tears of the Gods: A Note on the Death of Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 101 (2002), 155-69: 156-7. See J. L. Baird, “*Natura Plangens*, the Ruthwell Cross and *The Dream of the Rood*,” *Studies in Iconography* 10 (1984-6), 37-51, for a discussion of creation weeping for Christ in *The Dream of the Rood* and the theme of nature weeping in classical tradition.

²⁵² Anatoly Liberman, “Some Controversial Aspects of the Myth of Baldr,” *Alvíssmál* 11 (2007), 17-54: 39.

²⁵³ Lindow, “Tears,” 168.

²⁵⁴ Lindow, “Tears,” 169.

²⁵⁵ Lindow, “Tears,” 168.

“female principal” and the Jǫtnar, and that carrying out Hel’s condition will force the Æsir to join themselves to this principal.²⁵⁶

Lindow also considers the possibility that the Æsir’s weeping demonstrates the importance of Baldr’s death, in that they are willing to “weep, that is, behave in public like women,”²⁵⁷ in order to retrieve him. Lindow concludes that the killing of Baldr at the hand of his brother “undoes the superiority of the æsir,” as the Æsir typically do not die, and that “this reversal is revealed metaphorically by the weeping of the male æsir when Baldr falls, that is, by their behaving, however briefly, like unmanly men.” Hel’s demand requires that all of creation, living and dead, animate and inanimate, must weep, and therefore “behave in the metaphorically female way, that is, in the weaker way within the social system.” Though *ergi*, the medieval Scandinavian pejorative term for male behavior ranging from cowardice to homosexuality, is never referenced in Snorri’s version of this myth, Lindow sees this concept underlying the portrayal of weeping in Snorri’s account: “Accusations of *ergi* and awareness of potential accusations played a large role in the society in which Snorri lived, and they therefore played a large but veiled role in the myth he presented as the centerpiece of the mythology”²⁵⁸ Certainly, the death of Baldr and the Æsir’s inability to rescue him from Hel is indicative of a failing strength, a destabilization of the Æsir’s position at the top of the social hierarchy. However, to what extent is their weeping emblematic of this change, a metaphor for their weakening position? Is this in fact how the weeping operates in this text?

The nature of the weeping for Baldr is not a trivial issue, as the timeline of the world’s destruction hinges upon Baldr’s death and failure to leave Hel. His death affects the fate of the

²⁵⁶ Lindow, “Tears,” 168.

²⁵⁷ Lindow, “Tears,” 169.

²⁵⁸ Lindow, “Tears,” 169.

Æsir and of the entire cosmos, and it is fair to assume that the details Snorri includes about the aftermath of his death would also be significant. If Lindow's analysis is correct, he is making an important point about gender and emotional norms in this and other texts. The emphasis Snorri places on the weeping for Baldr calls for a careful reexamination of the relationship between masculinity and weeping in medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian literature.

I will first consider the evidence Lindow presents to support his argument that male weeping was a sign of effeminacy in medieval Scandinavia and Iceland. He references his earlier discussion of this topic in his book *Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology*, where he "said that when Snorri wrote that weeping prevented the æsir from expressing their grief, he invited us to conclude that the world had been turned topsy-turvy, since lamentation is woman's work, especially in a feud society, and Baldr lies encircled by a ring of men. The prohibition on male weeping hardly needs additional comment."²⁵⁹ Lindow goes on to cite several instances of male weeping in the Icelandic sagas, as well as two references in Eddic poetry, to support his argument. In *Njáls saga*, the hero Gunnarr is wounded on his cheek by a spur, and later accused of weeping as a result of the wound. This accusation causes Gunnarr and his brother to kill eight men in retaliation.²⁶⁰ Toward the end of the saga, a man who claims that Skarpheðinn Njálsson wept at the burning of his family homestead is beheaded immediately after his comment by Skarpheðinn's brother-in-law, Kári, for whom the accusation that Skarpheðinn wept was too much to bear.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ John Lindow, *Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology*, FF Communications, 262. (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1997), 67.

²⁶⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 134-9.

²⁶¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 443.

Lindow references an article by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen²⁶² which looks at these examples of weeping in *Njáls saga*, stating that Sørensen's "analysis makes it clear that accusations of men weeping were powerful stuff."²⁶³ However, Sørensen himself is far more cautious on the applicability of the events in *Njáls saga* for evaluating male weeping in saga literature as a whole: "In Icelandic sagas real men do not cry, *at least not in Njáls saga*."²⁶⁴ (my italics).

The use of *Njáls saga* as a guide to standards for manly behavior in medieval Iceland is problematic. Ármann Jakobsson has written persuasively on the presentation of masculinity in this particular saga. He distinguishes between the views of the society presented in the text and those of the saga itself, observing that "three layers of ideologies need to be taken into account: the actual ideology of thirteenth-century Icelandic society, the dominant ideology in the society that the saga vividly creates, and the ideology of the saga itself."²⁶⁵ Ármann sees the saga as mounting a substantial critique on the gender norms of the society it depicts, arguing "that although no other saga presents such a harsh ideology of unmanliness, masculinity is nonetheless undermined in the saga, and that the masculine ideal used to manipulate respect in the society as a part of a power game is not its own. On the contrary, *Njáls saga* demonstrates the restrictiveness of gender roles"²⁶⁶ In his conclusion, he writes that the saga's "treatment of gender is critical of the norms of a misogynist society. It shows that the ideal of masculinity may become so exaggerated that it becomes uncompromising and oppressive."²⁶⁷ Ármann's reading

²⁶² Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, " 'Græder du nu, Skarpheðinn?' Nogle betragtninger over form og etik," in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* 11 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter), 480-89.

²⁶³ Lindow "Tears," 166.

²⁶⁴ Sørensen, "Græder," 246, footnote 15: "*I islændingesagaerne græder rigtige mænd ikke, i hvert fald ikke i Njáls saga.*"

²⁶⁵ Ármann Jakobsson, "Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*," *Viator* 38 (2007), 191-215: 195.

²⁶⁶ Jakobsson, "Masculinity," 195.

²⁶⁷ Jakobsson, "Masculinity," 214.

of masculinity in *Njáls saga* is nuanced, and his careful delineation of the different perspectives in the saga helps to explain why the attitudes of many of the characters seem to conflict with the values promoted by the saga itself.

Ármann devotes a subsection of his article to an examination of crying in *Njáls saga*. He points out that “other sagas also provide examples of an acute fear of crying but none more so than *Njáls saga*. The message at first seems unambiguous: real men don’t cry. And yet they do, enough for small-minded people such as Gunnarr Lambason to be constantly on the lookout for crying men to victimize.”²⁶⁸ While acknowledging the heroism of Kári for avenging the insult to Skarpheðinn and of Skarpheðinn and Gunnarr for defending themselves against accusations of weeping, Ármann asks whether this indicates that the saga presents weeping as “unmanly,” and concludes that it does not. He points out that the saga does not explicitly deny that Skarpheðinn and Gunnarr wept, and suggests that the truth of the accusations may simply have been deemed unimportant. However, those figures who attempt to manipulate and ridicule others by accusing them of weeping “deservedly come to a bad end.”²⁶⁹ Ármann argues that “there is no actual authorial statement that crying is unmanly and no attempt made to vindicate those accused, while the saga has plenty of scorn for those who try to manipulate crying for their own gain.”²⁷⁰ At the very least, Ármann’s analysis complicates the use of *Njáls saga* as a simple rubric by which to measure masculinity in medieval Icelandic literature; at most, it presents a strong argument for not using the saga in this manner at all.

As an example of a male whose weeping does not seem to indicate weakness, Lindow introduces Gizurr Thorvaldsson, who cries tears like hailstones when his sons and wife are

²⁶⁸ Jakobsson, “Masculinity,” 203.

²⁶⁹ Jakobsson, “Masculinity,” 203.

²⁷⁰ Jakobsson, “Masculinity,” 203.

burned to death.²⁷¹ Lindow suggests that the difference between hail-like tears and the Æsir's "weeping uncontrollably" (*gráta*)²⁷² separates the two scenes, with weeping being less manly than hail-like tears.²⁷³ While considering the occurrences (or accusations) of weeping in these sagas, Lindow neglects to examine whether the cause of the weeping may play as large a role in its reception as the fact of weeping itself. Weeping from pain, as in the case of the false accusations leveled at Gunnarr and possibly that of Skarpheðinn, is different from weeping over a death, and Gizurr's weeping for his wife and sons is a far closer parallel to the Æsir's weeping than the examples in *Njáls saga*. After glancing briefly at two examples of male weeping in Eddic heroic poetry, Lindow concludes that "these passages throw only a very dim light on the weeping of the æsir at Baldr's death, set as they are in European courts far to the south. By the standards expressed in the 'realistic' literature of medieval Iceland, men should not weep."²⁷⁴

Lindow does not explain why he assumes that the norms of "realistic" Icelandic literature are more applicable to Snorri's story of Baldr's death than those of Eddic poetry, but I see several reasons why this should not be the case. The Baldr myth is never set in Iceland, and even when it is partially removed from the realms of the gods, as it is in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, it plays out in the courts of Danish kings. Its subject matter is more closely aligned with the royal courts featured in the heroic poetry of the Edda than with the homesteads of farmers depicted in the family sagas, and among its intended audience was a Norwegian king whose patronage Snorri was seeking. Perhaps some overlap between these two spheres, farm and court, should be expected as described in literature composed by Icelanders in the thirteenth

²⁷¹ Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, eds. *Sturlunga saga* 1 (Reykjavík: Reykjavík Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946). 494.

²⁷² *Gráta* does not always imply the shedding of tears, but may also refer to lamenting, mourning, or bewailing. However, in the myth of Baldr's death Þökk's declaration that she will "weep dry tears" (*gráta/ þurrum tárur*), thereby preventing his return, makes it clear that it *gráta* indicates weeping in this narrative. Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon Poeticum Antiquae Linguae Septentrionalis* (Copenhagen: S. L. Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1931), s.v. *gráta*.

²⁷³ Lindow, "Tears," 166.

²⁷⁴ Lindow, "Tears," 167.

century, and that the Icelanders would at times superimpose their own values. However, it does these authors a discredit to assume that they were incapable of depicting the different mores of these communities, or that an Icelandic who spent time in the Norwegian court, as Snorri did, would not have observed that customs varied. That the Icelandic as a fish out of water in the exotic Scandinavian courts is a commonly employed trope in saga literature indicates that saga authors were keenly aware of such differences.

As Ármann was careful to differentiate between three strata of ideological beliefs when attempting to interpret the presentation of masculinity in *Njáls saga*, it must likewise be taken into account that there may be layered or competing perspectives present in Snorri's version of Baldr's death. These perspectives may be impossible to delineate; the worldview of thirteenth-century Icelanders is determined primarily through their historical fictions, and it is only with difficulty that their own views can be separated from what they imagined those of their ancestors to be. There is the perspective of Snorri, which one might attempt to determine from his writings; besides the worldview of his native Iceland in the thirteenth century, there is also that of the Norwegian court in which he found patronage; there is the system of values of the society being depicted in the narrative, in this case that of the Æsir. In attempting to discern the views on masculine weeping in the latter case, the society of the Æsir as depicted in *Snorra Edda* and in the mythological poems of the *Codex Regius* offers scant material for comparison, as there is little weeping in these texts, and no male weeping, outside of the Baldr myth-complex. One could argue that this validates Lindow's and Liberman's assumptions that male weeping was viewed negatively, for if weeping were not taboo, it would occur more frequently in these texts. However, the death of Baldr is arguably the greatest disaster to affect the Æsir before their destruction at the end of the world, and as such it ought to evoke a greater emotional response

than any other event in the mythology. Attempting to determine Snorri's personal views on male weeping in order to understand his presentation of weeping in his texts requires an impossibly circular mode of reasoning, as he never explicitly expressed a view on this topic. As discussed above, using contemporary saga literature, including *Njáls saga*, to determine an Icelandic societal perspective is fraught with pitfalls.

This leaves the literature of the Scandinavian courts as a potential window onto the ideologies at play in *Snorra Edda*. This also is problematic, as it is often difficult to determine whether a text from this period was composed in Iceland or in Norway. Nonetheless, there are texts which suit this purpose. *Heimskringla* has strong ties to Norway, and many scholars have assumed that it was also composed by Snorri, although there is no certain proof of his authorship.²⁷⁵ *Fagrskinna* is one of the major sources for *Heimskringla*,²⁷⁶ and *Gesta Danorum*, while focused on Denmark and composed in Latin, is roughly contemporary with *Snorra Edda*, and not only deals with Scandinavian royalty but also extensively incorporates the mythic and legendary material which Snorri used in his own work.

Fagrskinna mentions weeping related to the deaths of two kings: Magnús and Hákon. After King Magnús's death and burial, the text states "over his grave wept many a worthy man"²⁷⁷ (*Yfir hans gróf grét margr dýrligr drengir*).²⁷⁸ Oddr Kíkinaskáld wrote the following verses about the grief for the dead king:

Men bore the generous monarch
with many tears to the grave;
this was a weighty burden

²⁷⁵ See Diana Whaley's *Heimskringla: An Introduction* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1991), 13-19, for a discussion of the authorship issue. Whaley concludes that Snorri did write *Heimskringla*, although the evidence is not conclusive.

²⁷⁶ For an overview of the debate over the nationality of *Fagrskinna*'s author, see Alison Finlay, *Fagrskinna: A Catalogue of the Kings of Norway*, (Boston: Brill, 2003), 15-17.

²⁷⁷ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 199.

²⁷⁸ Bjarni Einarsson, ed. *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum: Fagrskinna - Nóregs konunga tal*. Íslensk fornrit 29 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1984), ch. 54, 249.

to the ones he had given gold to.
The king's retainers, hearts heavy,
hardly could keep from weeping;
the lord's people afterwards
often sat in sorrow.²⁷⁹

*Felldu menn, þas mildan,
morg tór, í gróf bóru,
þung byrðr vas sú, þengil,
þeim, es hann gaf seima.
Deildusk hugr, svát heldu
húskarlar grams varla,
siklings þjóð en síðan
sat opt hnipin, vatni.²⁸⁰*

The return of young King Hákon's corpse to Kaupangr for burial causes great sorrow in his people: "And after the space of two weeks his men came back to Kaupangr with the news that people were to go and receive King Hákon's body, and all the people did so, nearly all of them weeping, because everyone was very fond of him."²⁸¹ (*Ok kómu aptr á hálfmánaðar fresti menn hans til Kaupangs með þeim tíðendum, at menn skyldu ganga í móti líki Hákonar konungs, ok svá gekk allr lýðr, ok flestir, allir grátandi, því at hverr maðr unni hónum hugástum*).²⁸²

On both occasions, the dead man is a king who was held in high esteem by his people, and the text makes this clear: Magnús was generous to his followers, and Hákon was loved by his people. Finlay's translation, given above, is perhaps not strong enough: she translates *hverr maðr unni hónum hugástum* as "everyone was very fond of him," but "every one loved him fervently" or "every one loved him with his heart" would all also be possible translations, and would likely better convey the intensity of his people's affection for him.²⁸³

²⁷⁹ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 199-200.

²⁸⁰ Bjarni Einarsson, *Ágrip: Fagrskinna*, 249.

²⁸¹ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 242.

²⁸² Bjarni Einarsson, *Ágrip: Fagrskinna*, 303.

²⁸³ Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog Over Det Gamle Norske Sprog* (Oslo: Tryggve Juul Møller Forlag, 1954), s.v. *hugást* and *unna*.

Heimskringla contains over a dozen instances of weeping, many occurring from grief over a death. For the purposes of this argument, I will limit my discussion to examples of weeping caused by grief. The first concerns the figure Njǫrðr, who is usually presented as a deity but here is introduced as a king, whose corpse is burned by his Swedish subjects who “wept much over his grave” (*grétu allmjök yfir leiði hans*).²⁸⁴ The text does not comment further on the weeping, and there is nothing in the description that suggests the weeping was viewed negatively. Upon the death of King Hákon the Good, there is so much grief that “both friends and enemies wept over his death” (*bæði vinir ok óvinir grétu dauða hans*).²⁸⁵ I would like to draw particular attention to the fact that Hákon is wept for by friends and enemies, to which one may compare the weeping of all things living and dead over Baldr, which would include both the Æsir and the Jǫtnar, the Æsir’s traditional enemies. King Ingi is reported to have wept “like a child” (*grét sem barn*)²⁸⁶ when informed of the death of his dearest follower, Gregory Dagsson.

When returning from a pilgrimage to Rome, the poet Sighvatr learns of the death of his patron, King Óláfr, in battle. Sighvatr passes through a village where a man is mourning his wife: “he beat his breast and tore his clothes, and he wept heavily, saying that he wanted to die.” (*barði á brjóst sér ok reif klæði af sér, grét mjök, segir, at hann vildi gjarna deyja.*)²⁸⁷ In a verse, Sighvatr contrasts his grief with that of the bereaved husband, whose loss pales in comparison with Sighvatr’s:

The man says that he wishes to die
if he loses the maiden’s embrace.
Love is costly, if the proud man
must weep for the dead.
But the brave man who does not flee,
who has lost his lord,

²⁸⁴ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla* 1, 23.

²⁸⁵ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla* 1, 192-3.

²⁸⁶ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ed. *Heimskringla* 3, Íslenzk fornrit 28 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1951), 365.

²⁸⁷ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ed. *Heimskringla* 2, Íslenzk fornrit, 27 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1945), 15.

sheds battle-tears.
Our loss seems greater
to the king's men.

*Fúss læzk maðr, ef missir
meyjar faðms, at deyja.
Keypt es óst, ef eptir
oflátinn skal gráta.
En fullhugi fellir
flóttstygg, sás varð dróttin,
vårt torrek lízk verra,
vígtór, konungs órum.*²⁸⁸

The use of *vígtór* in the final line is interesting; the compound literally translates as “killing-tears” or “war-tears” and refers to blood, and of course it is possible to read the stanza as referring to the renewed battle rage of men whose lord has died on the field. In this reading, while the widower weeps helplessly and passively wishes to die, the dead king’s warriors shed war tears, blood, either their own or that of their enemies, and perhaps in this way find death beside their lord. Sighvatr was away on pilgrimage during the battle, and thus was not fighting beside Óláfr when the king died. Perhaps the stanza should be read as a complaint that he was unable to show his devotion to Óláfr by shedding blood. However, it is also possible to read these war-tears as literal tears, and perhaps as literal tears of blood brought forth by the most intense emotional distress, a motif with which the well-travelled Christian poet may have been familiar, through his native literature or the tradition of bloody tears in medieval Christianity.²⁸⁹ In this reading, there would be three strata of tears in this stanza: the man weeping for the dead maiden, the war-tears, i.e., blood, spilled for Óláfr on the battlefield, and Sighvatr’s own tears, shed long after the battle in which his king fell.

²⁸⁸ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla* 2, 15.

²⁸⁹ See Andrew Breeze, “The Virgin’s Tears of Blood,” *Celtica* 20 (1988), 110–122: p.122, Andrew Lynch, “‘Now, fye on youre wepyngel’: Tears in Medieval English Romance,” *Parergon* 9 (1991), 43–62: 49–50, and Vernam Hull, “Celtic Tears of Blood,” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 25, 226–236 for examples.

In *Heimskringla*, then, there are several accounts of kings or warriors whose deaths prompt weeping from their companions, and in none of these accounts is the weeping derided as shameful or effeminate. In contrast to the heroic Eddic poems, wherein the rare weeping men are outnumbered by the heroines who often weep for dead husbands or sons, these portrayals all feature men weeping; while the subjects who weep for Njǫrðr and the townspeople who shed tears for King Hákon may well have included women, this is implied, but not necessarily specified. Teresa Pàroli observes of Eddic poetry that “men can shed tears only as a group in the ritual setting of collective mourning for their chief’s death, actual or imminent,”²⁹⁰ and while this observation can be applied to many scenes in *Heimskringla*, King Ingi, the skáld Sighvatr, and the overheard widower all weep alone. However, in these examples the circumstances are slightly different. King Ingi is a rare instance of a king weeping for his follower, and in most cases, it is the followers who weep for the king or prince. While Sighvatr is in mourning for his chief, his failure to be present in the battle where King Óláfr was slain seems to have delayed the outpouring of his grief, which is triggered only when he encounters a man lamenting his wife’s death, a scene which is itself an unusual account of male grief for a woman. Sighvatr responds to this display with poetry, and it is interesting to note that while Sighvatr’s stanzas here and elsewhere eloquently document his feelings of loss for his king, the prose of *Heimskringla* is far more reticent, permitting the poet’s own words to express his sorrow. Had Sighvatr been present at Óláfr’s burial, perhaps he would have mourned in the presence of others. The mourning peasant is from a lower social class than the other men named in the text, although the groups of nameless people who weep for the dead kings could conceivably have included peasants.

Heimskringla, unlike the family sagas, rarely concerns itself with the emotions of individuals

²⁹⁰ Teresa Pàroli, “The Tears of the Heroes in Germanic Epic Poetry,” in *Helden und Helden-sage: Otto Gschwantler zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Hermann Reichert and Günter Zimmermann, *Philologica Germanica* 11 (Wien: Fassbaender. 1990), 233-266: 240.

outside of the upper classes. That he weeps alone, and for his wife, sets him even further apart from the other weeping men in this text.

Saxo Grammaticus seems to take a much greater interest in the emotional lives of his characters than does the author of *Heimskringla*, and his *Gesta Danorum* contains numerous, and frequently elaborate, depictions of weeping. Whether this emphasis can be traced to the influence of contemporary continental literature, for instance, the burgeoning genre of courtly romance, is not clear. The frequent portrayal of weeping heroes in classical epic may also have inclined Saxo to similarly detailed depictions in his own work. Even if Saxo has been influenced by non-Scandinavian textual traditions, it nonetheless holds that he was a near contemporary of Snorri, working in a similar cultural milieu and with comparable material.

After burning his wicked stepfather alive in his hall, Amleth rouses the populace to his own cause with a lengthy speech, in which he asks “what sane person would grieve because the villainy has recoiled on its perpetrator? Who would weep for the overthrow of such a bloody executioner?” (*Quis cruentissimi lictoris cladem defleat aut crudelissimi tyranni iustum lamentetur interitum?*)²⁹¹ Amleth’s speech is so successful that all are swayed to follow him, and some are moved to tears (*alios ad lacrimas usque perduxit.*)²⁹² This example does not depict people weeping for the deceased man, but Amleth’s rhetoric presents such behavior as one that would be acceptable, and perhaps even expected, under other circumstances, but is not in this instance because of the character of the dead king. Amleth does in fact elicit tears from the people, albeit not arising from grief.

King Regnerus takes to his bed in grief after the execution of his son. His wife chides him that a father should respond with “arms [rather] than tears,” and orders him not to “whimper like

²⁹¹ Alfred Holder, ed., *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum* (Strassburg: 1886), Bk. 3, 94.

²⁹² Holder, ed., *Saxonis Grammatici*, 96.

a woman, for he would reap as much dishonor through weeping as he had previously gained glory by his valor.” Regnerus, afraid that “effeminate lamentation” would mar his good name, leaves his bed to pursue revenge:

When he heard the news, Regner in his grief was set on dying, for he not only went into mourning, but, with a heart completely stricken, confined himself to his bed and let groans reveal the sorrow he had suffered. His wife, whose self-reliance surpassed a man’s, chided Regner’s feebleness and fortified him with her masculine exhortations; she summoned his soul from its dejection, told him he must resort to energetic warfare and declared that a courageous father made better amends to a son’s bloodstained ashes through arms than tears. Further, she advised him not to whimper like a woman, for we would reap as much dishonour through weeping as he had previously gained glory by his valour. Her words made Regner fear he might obliterate his ancient renown for bravery by effeminate lamentation; he therefore threw off his sad demeanour and the outwards marks of misery, and allowed the hope of a swift revenge to revive his dormant hardiness. So at times stout dispositions are strengthened by weaker ones.²⁹³

*Quo audito Regnerus, obstinato ad moriendum luctu, non modo merorem induit, uerum et per summam animi egritudinem lectulo corpus affixit, doloremque conceptum gemitu patefecit. Quem coniunx, uirilem supergressa fiduciam, imbecillitatis increpitem uirili adhortacione firmauit, reuocatumque a merore animum arma impensius celebrare perdociuit, affirmans, fortissimum patrem cruentos filii cineres iustius armis quam lachrymis expiaturum. Monuit quoque, ne muliebriter lugens tantum sibi ignominie fletu pareret, quantum antea claritatis uirtute contraxerat. Ad hanc uocem ueritus Regnerus, ne pristinos fortitudinis titulos effeminato merore contereret, discusso mesticie habitu depositisque doloris insignibus, promptissima uindictae spe iacentem reuocauit audaciam. Adeo interdum ab inualidis forcia roborantur ingenia.*²⁹⁴

In this occurrence, weeping for the dead is portrayed negatively, but there are several elements to this scene that set it apart from the other examples. Here the weeping figure is a father and the deceased is his son. Like Egill and Njáll, he takes to his bed upon the death of his son, and this act is related to the pursuit of vengeance for the death: both Egill and Njáll acknowledge their inability, stemming from their advanced age, to avenge their sons, and Regnerus’s wife informs him that it is more fitting that he should seek revenge than weep in his bed. Like countless other

²⁹³ Peter Fisher and Hilda Ellis Davidson, eds. and trans., *Saxo Grammaticus: The History of the Danes, Books I-IX*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979-80), 289.

²⁹⁴ Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici*, ch. 9, 311.

women in saga and poetry, she shames the man upon whom she depends for status into fulfilling the obligations of blood feud, and she uses accusations of effeminacy to goad him into action. Her concern is not merely the fact of Regnerus's weeping, but his refusal to fight. It is not uncommon in the sagas to see men take to their beds from grief and die. In some cases, such as Egill's and Njáll's mentioned above, the explicit intent of such action is to die, while in others this is less clearly a motivation. Nevertheless, a subtext to the queen's *hvøt* may be fear that her husband will die from his extreme grief, and, like Egill's daughter, she urges him to action to prevent this possibility from taking place.

The sorrow following Queen Thyra's death is unusual, in that it is a rare example of great grief expressed for a queen's death, a grief which is felt by the whole nation, as in the examples of royal men who are universally mourned by their people: "After this died Thyra, the chief glory of the Danes. After a most splendid funeral, Haraldus ordered her body to be buried amid universal lamentation not far from the mound of his father. No family was unmoved by grief at so bitter a loss, for they believed that the public fortunes of the country would expire in these private obsequies."²⁹⁵ (*Post hec Thyra, Danice maiestatis caput, absumpta est. Cuius corpus Haraldus amplissimo funere elatum mango cum omnium plangore non longe a patris tumulo sepulture mandauit. Neque enim tam acri iactura cuiusquam penates meroris expertes esse poterant, priuato funere publicam patrie fortunam exspirasse credentes.*)²⁹⁶

Kanutus, potential heir to the throne of King Henricus, is later murdered by his cousin and rival Magnús; Magnús splits open Kanutus's head, then his men repeatedly stab his body with their spears.

²⁹⁵ Eric Christiansen, *Danorum Regum Heroumque Historia, Books X—XVI*, 1 (Oxford: BAR International Series, 1980-1), Bk. 10, 10.

²⁹⁶ Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici*, Bk. 10, 329.

The news of the crime excited the universal lamentation of the land, and filled every dwelling with grief. For when the people heard the dreadful report of the murder, they immediately abandoned the cheerful festivities which they were conducting at that season, and exchanged them for an unseasonable mourning; both sexes bewailing him in unison. The proclaiming of his death by public sorrow was an indication of how greatly he was beloved by all. So the land which had favoured him with its love in his lifetime, also wept tears of gratitude at his death, and as Kanutus was followed by lamentation, so was his murderer by the fiercest execration.²⁹⁷

*Facinoris fama promiscuum patrie lamentum exciuit immiumque penates plangore compleuit. Populus enim, cum calamitosum de nece eius nunciam accepisset, protinus conuiuiorum, que ea tempestate gerebantur, hilaritate deposita, morem tempori impensum merore mutauit, inque eo lamentando uterque sexus unius gemebundi amici uocem habuit. Cuius funus publico luctu elatum, quantus eius amor omnium animis insitus esset, indicio fuit. Itaque, cuius uitam patria caritatis officiis excoluerat, morti quoque testes grati animi lachrymas erogabat, ut Kanutum eiulatibus, ita raptorem spiritus eius ualidissimis execrationibus insecuta.*²⁹⁸

Kanutus's brothers bring a suit in the assembly over his death, and the people condemn his murderer.²⁹⁹ Kanutus's death has parallels with Snorri's version of Baldr's death: a man in the line of succession is treacherously murdered by a kinsman, and he is universally mourned.

When Archbishop Eskillus finally leaves office to retire to a monastery, he departs in a carriage, and "the crowd of weeping friends, who would never see him more, followed its departure with lamentations, as if it were a funeral procession."³⁰⁰ (*Cuius flentis discessum amicorum turba, ipsum ulterius non uisura, perinde ac funus lachrymis persecuta est.*)³⁰¹ Here weeping and lamentation are presented as typical behaviors at a funeral, although in this case one does not actually occur.

²⁹⁷ Christiansen, *Danorum Regum* 1, Bk. 13, 129.

²⁹⁸ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, Bk. 13, 429.

²⁹⁹ Christiansen, *Danorum Regum* 1, Bk. 13, p.130.

³⁰⁰ Christiansen, *Danorum Regum* 2, Bk. 14, 570.

³⁰¹ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, Bk. 14, 631.

The grief at the funeral procession of King Waldemarus is vividly described, in a passage which deserves to be quoted in full:

The sad lamentations of women swelled the mourning, as they came up to the funeral procession with their hair all torn, declaring that once again they were going to undergo their old burden of enslavement, now that he was dead; for it was he who had led the citizens out of captivity, who had freed his country from dread of piracy, and made dwellings along the coast as safe from the depredations of robbers as those inland. And when the peasants caught sight of his funeral procession, they left the rural tasks on which they were engaged and filled the countryside with similar groans. And for the sake of honouring the last rites, they cheerfully put their shoulders to his bier, wailing that since the king was dead, and the country ruined, general destruction, or worse, was impending over their sorry lives.³⁰²

*Accessit luctui matrum miserabilis planctus, sparsis comis funeri occurrentium iterumque se pristinum seruitutis onus experturas dicentium; extinctum illum, qui ciuium capitibus captiuitatem detraxerit, qui patriam pyratum metu uacuefecerit maritimasque sedes, perinde ac domesticas, a predonum incursum tutas prestiterit. Agrestes quoque, funebri ipsius pompa conspecta, rustico opere, quo occupati erant, relicto, consentaneis arua querelis replebant. Cui etiam ut supremi officii decus prestarent, funebri eius lecto humeros subiicere iocundum ducebant, euersam regis morte patriam miserisque sibi commune funus, aut siquid funere tristius est, imminere plangentes.*³⁰³

Absalon presided over the funeral, and he

was unmanned by sorrow as he uttered the solemn words; they could not prevent him from bedewing the altar with his tears, and he had hardly sufficient command of his voice or hand to perform the holy office. He was so stricken with grief, and suddenly contracted so grave and perilous an infirmity, that he almost ended his life and the holy sacrifice at that same time. It would seem incredible for so great a man to be numbed and disabled by such risible³⁰⁴ grief, if his affection for Waldemarus were not so widely known. [...] And the altar, wet with the tears that fell from him instead of prayers, was no insignificant token of his love towards the king.

³⁰² Christiansen, *Danorum Regum* 2, Bk. 15, 600.

³⁰³ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, Bk. 15, 655.

³⁰⁴ I am not certain which word Christiansen is translating as ‘risible,’ although I assume it is *insigni*. I would instead translate the line “*Incredibile uideretur, tantum uirum tam insigni luctus horrore confectum*” as “It would seem incredible, that such a man would be affected by such an extraordinary trembling of grief.” Perhaps ‘risible’ is a mistake for ‘visible’, in that his trembling was so pronounced as to be visible.

I trust that the incense which was moistened by those tears gave off a fragrance that was acceptable to God.³⁰⁵

*inter solennium uerborum nuncupacionem doloris impotens non temperauit sibi, quo minus aram lachrymis spargeret, uixque ad rem diuinam peragendam vocis aut manus ministerio sufficere valuit. Quin etiam tantum egritudinis animo contraxit, tamque graui et periculosa ualetudine subito affici cepit, ut pene uitam cum sacrificio finiret. Incredibile uideretur, tantum uirum tam insigni luctus horrore confectum, si non eius erga Waldemarum affectus fuisset notissimus. Sed fortuna, altero patrie lumine extincto, reliquum perire passa non est, ne deesset, cuius ductu Danie pedibus Sclauia subiiceretur, aut gens, que sub tantis ducibus ad excellentem honoris habitum prouecta fuerat, tutore uacua remaneret. Cuius lachrymis, precum loco defusis, respersa altaria non paruulum promptissime eius erga regem beneuolencie indicium prebuere. Iisdem quoque madefacta thura gratum deo odorem dedisse, crediderim.*³⁰⁶

The extravagant grief of the populace is paired in Saxo's description with the more restrained sorrow of Absalon. The women and the peasants who participate in the procession echo the fears of countless other lamenters, whose safety is compromised by the death of their protector, and Saxo seems to have more interest than the author of *Heimskringla* in the mourning of the lower social classes. Their complaint has a ritualized formality, and its thematic similarity to other laments universalizes, rather than trivializes, their grief. However, it is the intimate portrayal of Absalon's weeping, the text lingering over his falling tears, that shows a personal bond. One senses that Absalon mourns Waldemar the man, not the king. The suggestion that his behavior might have been considered "incredible," if not for his famous affection for Waldemar, along with the mention that he was "unmanned by sorrow," could be taken to indicate that his grief was considered excessive, and perhaps effeminate. However, the word which Eric Christiansen translates as "unmanned" is *impotens*, and while "unmanned" is a perfectly good translation for the Latin, it genders Absalon's actions in a way that is perhaps not present in the Latin;

³⁰⁵ Christiansen, *Danorum Regum*, vol. 2, Bk. 15, 600.

³⁰⁶ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, Bk. 15, 655-6.

“weakened” might work better here. Nothing else in the passage presents him in a negative light, and perhaps the incredible nature of the impact of the king’s death is pointed out specifically to emphasize the great affection between the two men, which has been portrayed in great detail in Books XIV and XV. Unlike the peasants who shoulder the king’s bier and loudly proclaim their loss, Absalon can barely speak or perform the rite. While mention of weeping occurs with some frequency in the text, rarely are the tears themselves depicted in such detail: first they “bedew the altar,” the altar is later described as “wet with the tears,” and the burning incense was “moistened by those tears.” It should be noted that Absalon had been Saxo’s original patron for *Gesta Danorum*, and Absalon’s nephew was his patron when Saxo completed his work. Surely if Absalon’s weeping at Waldemarus’s funeral had been scandalously inappropriate, Saxo would not have included it, let alone lavished such attention on the scene. Christiansen suggests that in Book XV of the *Gesta Danorum*, “The freshness of his detail, and the concentration on episodes involving Absalon, point inescapably to the archbishop’s own words as the main source of the book. They may have been coloured by Saxo’s own experience, but there can be no convincing reason for looking further than the spoken reminiscences of his patron for both the inspiration and the substance of what he wrote.”³⁰⁷

Of the examples above, only Regnerus is strongly castigated for his weeping, and I have argued that it is not his weeping alone, but the context of his behaviour, which prompts his wife to shame him with charges of effeminacy. When the choice is *either* weeping *or* revenge, then the heroic course of action for Scandinavian men is assuredly the latter. However, the remaining passages from *Gesta Danorum* present shedding tears for the dead as a frequent and fitting response to the death of a loved one or of a cherished leader. The weeping individuals are sometimes men, sometimes women, and sometimes mixed groups; on several occasions, it is

³⁰⁷ Christiansen, *Danorum Regum* 3, 887.

explicitly stated that both men and women wept, and sometimes that weeping was universal throughout the land. With the exception of Queen Thyra, the dead being mourned are all men.

In the case of Hákon's death, which is mentioned in *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla*, all three texts mention the weeping for the king in Kaupangr. *Ágrip* relates that "all the people went to meet [his funeral procession] and almost all of them were weeping" (*gekk allr lýðr á móti ok flestr allr grátandi*),³⁰⁸ and *Fagrskinna* uses nearly the same phrasing. *Heimskringla*, however, adds the detail that both friends and enemies wept for his death. While this detail may be borrowed from different versions of *Ágrip* or *Fagrskinna* than survive, or from another text entirely, it is also possible that the author of *Heimskringla* may have invented this detail, a possibility which is even more intriguing when one notes its similarities to the universal weeping for Baldr. This may lend some small support to the theory that Snorri wrote *Heimskringla*, but even if *Heimskringla* and *Snorra Edda* do not share an author, the presence of such a distinctive figure in each text, a character who was so admired that even his enemies wept at his death, indicates that there may be borrowing between these texts. That Snorri presents his text as a myth might be used to argue for its primacy, but the absence of weeping in the other main version of the Baldr myth does not suggest that weeping was generally as significant in the myth as Snorri would have his audience believe. It is more likely, then, that Snorri crafted his version of the narrative so that it would reflect contemporary traditions of medieval Scandinavian mourning rites for kings and princes, a move which would allow him to position his account of Baldr's death as the first of such rituals. Perhaps, then, this is an example of Snorri backtracking from an observable custom to create a literary myth with all the hallmarks of an origin story.

³⁰⁸ M. J. Driscoll, ed. and trans., *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum: A Twelfth-Century Synoptic History of the Kings of Norway* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research: 2008), 64.

It may be important that Saxo's version of the Baldr myth does not contain any reference to weeping after Baldr's death. However, Saxo is clearly drawing on a radically different tradition than Snorri, and this must be taken into account. It may also be significant that the Baldr-narrative embedded in *Beowulf* lacks weeping.³⁰⁹ Another famous grieving father who laments his dead son is Egill Skallagrímsson, whose *Sonatorrek* "calques," in Joseph Harris's opinion, "the mythic pattern" of Baldr's death and attempted retrieval. Harris goes on to suggest that Egill's grief for his son follows the "sacred prototype" of Óðinn's for Baldr, and that "unless Egill is to be treated as totally unique within his cultural setting, we are safe in hypothesizing that the myth of the death of Baldr served more generally as a cultural model for paternal grief."³¹⁰ Not all scholars accept the authenticity of *Sonatorrek* as a pagan tenth-century poem,³¹¹ but here again there is a bereaved father mourning his son, in a narrative that many scholars consider to be related to the death of Baldr. Neither narrative mentions weeping, but both fathers compose or recite poetry, which fits in well with the Óðinnic theme; in fact, the very absence of poetry in Snorri's version seems aberrant, given Óðinn's intimate connection to that art.

Lindow observes that "the general or universal weeping appears, from the point of view of the textual tradition, to be a later phenomenon."³¹² He assumes that Snorri did not invent the tradition of universal weeping, as it is mentioned in two skaldic stanzas. The first of these is found in *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjargarsonar* and would, according to the saga's chronology, date to 1196:

Everything wept,
So I have heard,

³⁰⁹ Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 2460b.

³¹⁰ Joseph Harris, "*Homo necans borealis*: Fatherhood and Sacrifice in *Sonatorrek*," in *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, ed. Stephen O. Gloescki (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies in collaboration with Brepols, 2007), 153-73: 158-9.

³¹¹ Bjarni Einarsson, ed., *Egils saga* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003), 186; Torfi Tulinius, *Skáldið í skriftinni: Snorri Sturluson og Egils saga* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2004), 106-15.

³¹² Lindow, "Tears," 164.

Baldr from Hel,
 It seemed a wonder.
 But when to his enemy,
 He offered his head,
 Þormóður wailed;
 that's the truth.³¹³

*Hvatvetna grét,
 hefk þat fregit,
 býsn þótti þat,
 Baldr ór helju.
 Þó hefir hata,
 þá er höfuð færði
 Þormóður þotit,
 þat er ólogit.*³¹⁴

The second stanza, from the poem *Málsháttakvæði*, is of an even more tenuous dating and provenance: Lindow writes that it is “perhaps from roughly the same time period [as the verse in *Hrafn saga Sveinbjargarsonar*], perhaps later, and perhaps from the Orcadian bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson.”³¹⁵ This stanza contains far more detail than the one from *Hrafn saga* given above:

It seemed sad about Frigg's son,
 He was said to come from a great family,
 Hermóður wished to increase his life,
 Éljúðnir managed to swallow Baldr,
 All wept after him,
 The ban on laughter was increased for them,
 The story about him is known to be heard,
 Why should I pursue such?³¹⁶

*Friggjar þótti svipr at syni,
 sá var taldr ór miklu kyni,
 Hermóður vildi auka aldr,
 Éljúðnir vann sólginn Baldr,
 öll grétu þau eptir hann,
 aukit var þeim hlátrar bann,*

³¹³ Lindow, “Tears,” 164. Lindow's translation.

³¹⁴ Lindow, “Tears,” 164.

³¹⁵ Lindow, “Tears,” 164.

³¹⁶ Lindow, “Tears,” 165. Lindow's translation.

*heyrinkunn er frá honum saga,
hvat þarf ek of slikt at jaga.*³¹⁷

If these two texts are in fact from the late twelfth century, then they predate *Snorra Edda* by a few decades. However, *Hrafn's saga* itself is thought to have been composed between 1230 and 1250,³¹⁸ and it is not unknown for saga authors or compilers to invent stanzas or borrow them from other texts, so the internal chronology of *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjargarsonar* is no guarantee of the stanza's actual existence in 1196. As far as the other poem is concerned, too little is known about its origins to use it as independent confirmation for weeping in the Baldr myth uninfluenced by Snorri's account. If these verses were composed slightly later than Lindow suggests, in the early or even mid-thirteenth century, they could themselves be drawing this detail from Snorri's account of the myth. In the case of the second stanza, this possibility is bolstered by the presence of the name Éljúðnir in the fourth line. In *Snorra Edda*, this is the name of Hel's hall, but the name does not occur elsewhere aside from this stanza.³¹⁹ It could be a coincidence that two of the only sources which mention the weeping for Baldr also are the only extant references to this name for Hel's hall, but this seems unlikely. Christopher Abram is cautious in assessing the value of the poet's assertion that the story was well-known; "while there is no reason to doubt it," he writes, "the evidence for the knowledge of the myth is hardly widespread."³²⁰ The passage of eight years appears to have made Abram more skeptical of the poet's claim that the myth circulated widely: "Perhaps it was; but *Málsháttakvæði* is a very late poem, possibly younger than *Gylfaginning*. Both texts are products of the antiquarian revival of

³¹⁷ Lindow, "Tears," 165.

³¹⁸ Úlfar Bragason, "The Structure and Meaning of *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjargarsonar*," in *Scandinavian Studies* 60 (1988), 267- 92: 267.

³¹⁹ Faulkes, Snorri, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 27.

³²⁰ Christopher Abram, "Representations of the Pagan Afterlife in Medieval Scandinavian Literature" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 2003), 142.

interest in pagan myths in the Norse world”³²¹ Abram’s discussion of this stanza is embedded in a larger argument about Christian influence on Snorri’s mythological works. Abram is of the opinion that Snorri has likely augmented pagan traditions, especially those concerned with Baldr’s death, to give his narrative a “Christian colouring.”³²² Abram follows Sophus Bugge in drawing a comparison between the weeping of all creation while Christ is on the cross in *The Dream of the Rood* and the weeping for Baldr while he is in Hel. He also sees a possible Christian source for Þökk’s refusal to weep in Gregory the Great’s assertion that the Jews, alone out of all creation, did not weep at Christ’s death.³²³

The presence of widespread mourning in the skaldic verses of poets in *Fagrskinna* suggests that if this idea was borrowed from Christian tradition, it happened before Snorri’s time. Such a borrowing may have occurred through cross-cultural interactions when Scandinavia and Iceland were still largely pagan. However, widespread or universal mourning for a dead god, king, or hero is found so frequently in other literary and religious traditions that pinning its presence in Icelandic literature on Christian influence is unnecessary. It is a motif that could have been borrowed from elsewhere, or have deep roots in Germanic tradition, or have arisen independently at a more recent date. Furthermore, this literary motif appears frequently enough to suggest that it may have its roots in actual mourning practices, and Saxo’s description of Waldemarus’s funeral procession, which he probably received first-hand from Absalon, supports this line of reasoning. This does not rule out the possibility that Snorri and his audience were aware of the Christian parallels to the Baldr myth; in fact, I find it unlikely that an educated medieval Christian audience for this story would have been oblivious to such similarities, but

³²¹ Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 218.

³²² Abram, *Myths*, 219.

³²³ Abram, *Myths*, 219. Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. David Hurst (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 55-56.

widespread or universal weeping for the dead is also found in narratives which do not parallel the story of Christ's death at all. This motif has a robust existence independent of mythic and religious accounts of dying gods.

By reconsidering the weeping in Snorri's account of Baldr's death in light of depictions of mourning in several of the king's sagas I have shown that, contrary to the dominant scholarly opinion, it is exceedingly likely that the weeping for Baldr would not have been seen by the audience as an indication of effeminacy or weakness. This clearly demonstrates the danger in relying on a small selection of the most well-known family sagas for determining the governing societal values in medieval Scandinavian and Icelandic literature. *Njáls saga* is unquestionably a masterpiece, but it is but one work out of an extensive corpus, and should not be pressed into service during every scholarly inquiry.

Taken altogether, the set of examples gathered from *Fagrskinna*, *Heimskringla*, and *Gesta Danorum* suggests that no shame was attached to men who wept from grief for the dead, so long as appropriate vengeance was pursued. Grief strong enough to elicit tears does, however, appear to have been exceptional; many a king and prince is laid to rest without mention of anyone weeping over his corpse or grave, and from this it appears that tears were shed as tribute only to men (and the rare woman) who were held in high esteem by their followers and companions. As for the weeping for Baldr in *Snorra Edda*, it is an indication of the great love felt for him, and of how keenly his death affected not only his kin and companions, but all of existence. A griever's own desolation and fear in the face of death is often a component of mourning, and in the weeping of all things living and dead, animate and inanimate, of the Æsir, who have reason to love Baldr, and of the Jǫtnar, who do not, the Norse cosmos rightly laments its own approaching destruction.

Men's Tears in Anglo-Saxon Texts

The Victorian and modern academic views on masculinity and mourning in medieval Scandinavian and Icelandic texts discussed above have also had an impact on the interpretation of male weeping and lament in the corpus of Old English literature. A useful path into my discussion is provided by Robin Norris's introduction to her dissertation "Deathbed Confessors: Mourning and Genre in Anglo-Saxon Hagiography."³²⁴ Norris examines the notion of the "heroic code," which she describes as "a cultural construction of appropriate masculine conduct evidenced by the prescriptive statements scattered throughout the Old English poetic corpus, but codified only in the minds of modern scholars."³²⁵ Norris argues that the practice of describing ethnic groups in stereotypical and broad strokes, such as the laconic, stoic Teutons much evidenced in earlier twentieth-century scholarship, fell out of favour, replaced by the heroic code. Those admired qualities which earlier scholars believed to result from inherent racial characteristics were now attributed to the strict standards of behaviour to which the aristocratic warrior elite of Anglo-Saxon England adhered. The ideas about emotion and gender embedded in the modern notion of the heroic code, where men do not express their emotions or vulnerability, have had an enormous effect on Anglo-Saxon studies.³²⁶ Though Norris's dissertation focuses on mourning men in Anglo-Saxon religious literature, she discusses the funeral of Beowulf in her Introduction. Norris considers the mourning for the hero's death as a site not only of interest for what it suggests about the associations between grief and gender in that poem, but also for what it reveals about the tendency of scholars to elide or ignore the accounts of male grief in this text, while lavishing attention upon the one female mourner described in the poem. Although this

³²⁴Robin Norris, "Deathbed Confessors: Mourning and Genre in Anglo-Saxon Hagiography" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2003).

³²⁵Norris, "Deathbed," 2.

³²⁶Norris, "Deathbed," 2.

figure's description and her lament, as Norris and others point out, do not actually exist in the poem, the lamenter has dominated the discussion of Beowulf's funeral rites. In contrast, the men who weep for their dead king and ride around his barrow singing an elegy have been largely ignored.³²⁷

Hroðgar's Farewell

While the crying men (*wollenteare*) who place Beowulf on his funeral pyre are usually passed over without comment, there is another man in the poem whose tears have garnered some consideration. When Beowulf leaves Hroðgar's court after defeating Grendel's mother, he takes his leave of the aged king, who feels strong sorrow at their impending separation:

The king kissed the good noble,
 lord of the Scyldings, the best thegn,
 and took him by the neck; he shed tears,
 grey-haired. There were both expectations for
 the very old man, one of them stronger,
 that afterward he would not have the opportunity
 to see him, brave in council. That man was so dear to him,
 that he could not restrain that breast-surge,
 but bound it fast in his breast with mind-fetters.
 A secret longing for the dear man burned against his blood.

*Gecyste þa cyning æbelum god,
 þeoden Scyldinga ðegn bet[e]stan
 ond be healse genam; hruron him tearas
 blondenfeaxum. Him wæs bega wen
 ealdum infrodum, opres swiðor,
 þæt h[ic] seoðða(n no) geseon moston,
 modige on meþle. (W)æs him se man to þon leof
 þæt he þone breostwylm forberan ne mehte,
 ac him on hreþre hygebendum fæst
 æfter deorum men dyrne langað
 born wið blode.³²⁸*

³²⁷Norris, "Deathbed," 5-10.

³²⁸Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ll. 1870-1880a.

This scene is poignant; a complex range of emotions is in play, and it takes place at a pivotal point in the narrative, as Beowulf, his heroism now firmly established by his exploits at the Danish court and his youthful potential stretching before him, leaves behind the spectres of old age, death, and helplessness that have haunted Heorot. Scholars have offered widely different interpretations of the propriety of Hroðgar's tears at Beowulf's departure. In an article considering evidence for stoicism in Anglo-Saxon literature, Thomas D. Hill takes this scene as evidence that "we may assume that Anglo-Saxons were free from the prejudice that it is somehow dishonorable for a man to cry."³²⁹ Pàroli finds the scene "particularly moving,"³³⁰ although she later qualifies this by observing that while most male mourning in the poem is collective, "only the ancient Hroðgar is allowed to indulge without shame in open and profoundly felt tears in a farewell which is a prelude to his not too distant death."³³¹ Pàroli's statement implies that Hroðgar's age allows him to weep "without shame;" presumably younger men would not be permitted this leeway in Pàroli's view. If true, Pàroli's assessment of Hroðgar's age raises the question of whether he can weep unashamedly because he is old and therefore beyond reproach in such matters, or because he is old and therefore considered less masculine, and thus weeping cannot further demean him. I will return to this question later.

The positioning and staging of this event in the text invite further consideration. Hroðgar's tears, his embrace of the young hero, the roiling emotions he conceals within his breast, all argue that this scene deserves more sustained consideration than it has previously been given. Aside from the scant comments given above, two scholars have offered radically different sustained readings of Hroðgar's tears and his emotional connection to Beowulf. I will examine

³²⁹ Thomas D. Hill, "The Unchanging Hero: A Stoic Maxim in 'The Wanderer' and Its Contexts," *Studies in Philology* 101 (2004), 233-49: 239.

³³⁰ Pàroli, "Tears," 242.

³³¹ Pàroli, "Tears," 244.

these arguments in detail below. First I will consider several significant parallels to the scene, which have thus far garnered little attention.

The formula of a man falling on another's neck, kissing him, and weeping occurs frequently in Biblical texts, and it is certainly possible that the *Beowulf*-poet would have been familiar with this trope from that source, even if it were socially extraordinary in a Germanic context. This trope occurs several times in Genesis. When Jacob is reunited with his brother Esau, "And then Esau, running to meet his brother, embraced him and gripped his neck and, kissing him, wept." (*currens itaque Esau obviam fratri suo amplexatus est eum stringensque collum et osculans flevit.*)³³² When Joseph meets his brothers again after many years of separation, "And then he fell upon the neck of Benjamin his brother and embraced him and wept, and likewise he [Benjamin] also weeping above his [Joseph's] neck." (*Cumque amplexatus recidisset in collum Benjamin fratris sui flevit illo quoque flente similiter super collum eius. Osculatusque est Ioseph omnes fratres suos et ploravit super singulos post quae ausi sunt loqui ad eum.*)³³³ Joseph greets his father with the same warm greeting: "he fell upon his neck and embraced him and wept." (*eum inruit super collum eius et inter amplexus flevit.*)³³⁴ In the Book of Tobit, when Raguhel is informed that Tobias is his kinsman, "tearfully he kissed him and wept upon his neck" (*cum lacrimis osculatus est eum et plorans super collum eius.*)³³⁵ Paul's announcement of his departure to Jerusalem is met with sorrow by the clergy in Ephesus: "A great weeping was made by all and, falling upon Paul's neck, they kissed him" (*magnus autem fletus factus est omnium et procumbentes super collum Pauli osculabantur eum.*)³³⁶

³³² Gen. 33:4. (Vulgate)

³³³ Gen. 45: 14-15.

³³⁴ Gen. 46: 29.

³³⁵ Tob. 7:6.

³³⁶ Acts 20:37.

The Old English translation of Genesis retains several of these scenes. Jacob's meeting with Esau retains the embrace and kiss, but omits the weeping: "Esau met his brother and embraced him and kissed him." (*Esau arn ongen his broþur and clipte hine and cyste hine*).³³⁷ Joseph's reunion with his father includes the embrace and the weeping, but leaves out the kiss: "And when he saw him, he embraced him and wept." (*And þa he hyne geseah, he clypte hyne and weop*).³³⁸ However, there is another instance in the Old English Genesis where the triad of embracing, kissing, and weeping is kept intact, in Joseph's earlier encounter with his brothers: "And he embraced each of them, and kissed them and wept." (*And he clypte hira ælcne and cyste hig and weop*).³³⁹

The Old English version of the *Passio Sancti Eustachii* also uses this formula or variants several times. Eustace's two sons were separated as children, and meet later as adults, unaware of their relationship. The older brother tells the tale of his separation from his family, and "Then he arose and caught him by the neck, and kissed and embraced him, and said, 'By the God whom Christians worship I am thy brother by thy tale.'" (*þa aras he and gelæhte hine be þam swuran, and cyste and clypte, and sæde, 'þurh þone God þe Cristene wurðað, ic eom þin broðor be þire (sic) tale.'*)³⁴⁰ Soon after this their mother is reunited with their father, who "beheld . . . her and recognized her by her beauty, and for great bliss wept and kissed her." (*beheold . . . hi and gecneow hi be hyre wlite, and for micelre blisse weop and hi cyste*).³⁴¹ Eustace's wife had overheard her sons speaking of their separation, and told Eustace that she suspected they were their children. Eustace summons the youths and they tell their tale, "And he then knew that they

³³⁷ Richard Marsden, ed., *The Old English Heptateuch and Ælfric's Libellus de Veteri Testamento et Novo I, Introduction and Text*, Early English Texts Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Gen. 33:4. 62.

³³⁸ Marsden, *Heptateuch*, 83 Gen. 46:29.

³³⁹ Marsden, *Heptateuch*, 80, Gen. 45:14.

³⁴⁰ Walter Skeat, ed. and trans., *Ælfric's Lives of Saints* 2, Early English Text Society 94, 114, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1890, 1900), 210-11.

³⁴¹ Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives*, 212-13.

were his sons, and took them to him, and embraced and kissed them.” (*And he þa gecneow þæt hi his suna wæron, and hi to him genam, and clypte and cyste*).³⁴²

In none of the examples above is there any suggestion of abnormality or effeminacy when a man embraces, kisses, and weeps over another; indeed, it seems to indicate the highest level of love, and with the exception of Eustace and his wife, it is a gesture used exclusively between men, and save for Paul leaving behind the clergymen, it is reserved for reunions between male kin. The utter lack of consensus regarding the date of *Beowulf*'s composition makes an assessment of possible influence on the poem by any of these Old English sources problematic, but it certainly would not be a stretch to assume the poet had some familiarity with Biblical tradition, even if he were unacquainted with any of the extant Old English translations. That the Old English *Heptateuch* does not omit the details that Joseph's reunion with his brothers involved embracing, kissing, and tears, and that the author of the Old English *Passio Sancti Eustachii* uses this same formula for Eustace's reunion with his sons, strongly indicates that this behaviour in and of itself was not viewed as bizarre, effeminate, or sexual. Furthermore, it is frequently, though not always, the case in these reunions that the man who does the embracing, kissing, and weeping is the individual with a higher social status. When Joseph is reunited with his brothers and his father, he has risen high in the court of pharaoh, and they are destitute foreigners seeking aid. Eustace, as father, husband, and military officer, is of greater status in relation to his wife and sons. Hroðgar's initiation of physical intimacy need not be a sign of his weakness next to the taciturn and unresponsive Beowulf, but could be read as a sign of his power: he is the one determining how the social ritual of their friendship will be played out in public.

³⁴² Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives*, 212-13.

In an article examining Joseph's weeping in the Old English *Heptateuch*, Jonathan Wilcox draws attention to the parallels between the weeping of Hroðgar and Joseph.³⁴³ While the focus of Wilcox's article is firmly on explicating Joseph's weeping in the Old English text, his discussion of the farewell scene in *Beowulf* is insightful. He observes that "the climactic gestures in the 'Story of Joseph' provide an analogous emotional highpoint" to Hroðgar's parting from Beowulf, and suggests that "shared weeping" encourages communal bonds.³⁴⁴ In his conclusion, Wilcox argues that

Male weeping by an admired figure of authority is a gesture reclaimed through this biblical narrative. At its most meaningful, the weeping is suppressed but builds up in scenes of tension where recognition and affection is also suppressed but anticipating an outlet. When the weeping bursts forth it is multi-valenced, suggesting, among other things, joy in the relief of finally acknowledging intense emotions and the creation of community among those who share the weeping. Such a handling of weeping is thinkable but not common in more clearly native Old English heroic literature, as is seen in the tears of Hrothgar and the interpretative conundrum they present to critics.³⁴⁵

The build up and release of emotion that Wilcox sees in Joseph's and Hroðgar's tears is also present in the other parallels I discussed above, as is the ability of shared weeping to create, reestablish, and reinforce communal bonds.

There is, however, one point on which Hroðgar's farewell to Beowulf differs markedly from the majority of the parallels cited above: aside from Paul leaving Ephesus, all of the scenes using this series of gestures are of joyful, improbable reunions. The men of the Old Testament weep tears of joy as they embrace brothers, sons, fathers, and cousins, but Hroðgar's tears are tears of sorrow at Beowulf's departure. If the poem's audience would have been familiar with

³⁴³ Jonathan Wilcox, "A Place to Weep: Joseph in the Beer-Room and Anglo-Saxon Gestures of Emotion," in *Saints and Scholars: New Perspectives on Anglo-Saxon Literature and Culture in Honour of Hugh Magennis*, ed. Stuart McWilliams (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), 14-32. I am indebted to Jonathan Wilcox for sending me a copy of his fascinating article. Unfortunately, this article became available to me too late to fully take account of Wilcox's analysis in my own discussion, however, I am planning an expanded version of this section, which will integrate Wilcox's findings into my own.

³⁴⁴ Wilcox, "A Place to Weep," 30.

³⁴⁵ Wilcox, "A Place to Weep," 31.

this trope, its occurrence not at the time of Beowulf's arrival, but at his leave-taking, might have added extra poignancy to the scene.

In 1967 Thomas L. Wright concluded that the king's tears do not stem from grief; rather they "acknowledge, not gratitude and regret, but fellowship and the sense of destined succession."³⁴⁶ This conclusion is not particularly surprising, but the path Wright follows to reach it is somewhat circuitous. The standard reading of lines 1879-80 has troubled some critics. In Klaeber's 1922 edition of the poem, though not in subsequent editions, *born* in l. 1880a was emended from *beorn* in the manuscript. Thomas D. Wright and Mary Dockray-Miller have both argued for the validity of the original reading in the manuscript. Wright notes that "all of the translators have, like Klaeber, construed this as a form of *byrnan* ('to burn'), assuming a fusion of *beornan* and *bærnan*," an editorial choice that Wright finds problematic, as "the result of such a reading is to attribute to Hrothgar an emotional and physiological sensation that at best strains credulity." He would take this half-line as referring to "a warrior of one's own blood."³⁴⁷ Wright is also troubled by *dyrne* in line 1879, which is usually taken as an adjective modifying *langað*. Wright asks how *dyrne* can mean hidden, mysterious, or dark in this line, when "Hrothgar's tears hardly leave his affection for Beowulf either secret or hidden?"³⁴⁸ He attempts to solve this issue by taking *dyrne* as an adverb modifying *langað*, which Wright argues is not a noun but "probably an inflected form of a verb that means 'to belong to,' 'to be proper to,' 'to befit,'" even though such a verb is otherwise unattested. He translates *dyrne* as "'inwardly' or 'deeply,' or

³⁴⁶ Thomas L. Wright, "Hrothgar's Tears," *Modern Philology* 65 (1967), 39-44. 44.

³⁴⁷ Wright, "Hrothgar's," 42.

³⁴⁸ Wright, "Hrothgar's," 42.

even ‘uniquely and specially.’”³⁴⁹ Wright renders the final two lines of this passage as “in the custom that belongs to dear men, // as a warrior of the same blood.”³⁵⁰

The most recent editors of Klaeber’s *Beowulf* uphold the traditional emendation of *beorn* to *born*, and find that Wright’s rejection of the emendation, along with his reading of *langað* as a verb, “makes for a strained interpretation of **wið blode**.”³⁵¹ What of Wright’s concerns that understanding these lines according to Klaeber and subsequent editors would “adduce some unsettling transport burning in the old king’s blood”? Wright states that “the matter is more affirmative and more authentically Teutonic than that: his love for Beowulf is a bond well known among men who have shared combat together.”³⁵² Wright’s discomfort with Hroðgar’s burning affection for Beowulf leads him to contort the grammar and seek unattested verbs and uncommon forms to explain away the accepted reading of this passage. Wright’s phrase “some unsettling transport,” coupled with his appeal to an emotion that is “more affirmative and more authentically Teutonic” suggests a deep distaste for the sort of hidden longing that may burn in one man’s breast for another, and one gets the impression that Wright is strenuously trying to eradicate any hint of erotic longing in Hroðgar’s feelings for Beowulf. His invocation of kinship between the two men in his translation of the last two lines may also be part of his attempt to sidestep such a reading. In Wright’s opinion, the interpretation he suggests for this passage “clarifies the nature of Hrothgar’s feelings.”³⁵³ His reading seems haunted by an interpretation he dares not name.

Certainly, in modern parlance when one speaks of burning affection it is generally in the erotic or romantic sense, although other emotions, such as shame or anger, are also often

³⁴⁹ Wright, “Hrothgar’s,” 42.

³⁵⁰ Wright, “Hrothgar’s,” 41.

³⁵¹ Klaeber’s *Beowulf*, 321, n. on l. 1880.

³⁵² Wright, “Hrothgar’s,” 43.

³⁵³ Wright, “Hrothgar’s,” 41.

described as hot or burning. It is perhaps easy to see why Wright, discomfited by what must have struck him as an incongruous and deeply un-“Teutonic” attachment, would have gone to such pains to contort the text and transformed Hroðgar’s emotion from an intense longing tethered within in his breast, concealed but burning into his blood, to an affection more decorous, and understood within the context of military brotherhood. The fact that neither Hroðgar nor Beowulf burn with longing for any of the women mentioned in the poem may heighten Wright’s anxiety, and certainly the efforts of earlier *Beowulf* scholars to recreate a “lost” section of the poem detailing Beowulf’s marriage to Hygelac’s widow³⁵⁴ may betray a different, though similar, concern with Beowulf’s apparent disinterest in women. However, it is now a truism of medieval scholarship that prior to the rise of courtly love some centuries after the composition of *Beowulf*, the most intensely passionate relationships were most likely same-sex friendships; at least, these are the relationships which are privileged in the literary record. There is no need to explain Hroðgar’s *langað* for Beowulf, or his tears at his departure, as indicative of anything more or less than a deeply loving friendship, with paternal overtones.

Leslie Lockett interprets this passage in light of the of ‘hydraulic model’ of the mind, which I will discuss at greater length in the following chapter. Lockett acknowledges that the *breostwylm* which Hroðgar “*forberan ne mehte*” could refer to the tears he shed, but points out that this contradicts the next lines, which state that Hroðgar bound his *dyrne langað* “secret longing,” in his breast, thus concealing his feelings.³⁵⁵ As mentioned above, Wright also found this contradiction puzzling, and attempted to solve it by arguing that the accepted understanding of the syntax was incorrect. Lockett takes a simpler approach. She translates *breostwylm* literally,

³⁵⁴ Bruce Mitchell discusses some of these efforts in “Literary Lapses: Six Notes on Beowulf and its Critics,” *The Review of English Studies, New Series* 43 (1992), 1-17: 14-16.

³⁵⁵ Leslie Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Traditions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 83.

as “boiling in the breast;” Hroðgar cannot prevent this seething brought on by his emotions, but he does not openly display it.³⁵⁶ It remains tethered in his breast. This distinction is intriguing for the interpretation of the emotions at play in this scene, as it suggests that the emotion causing the tears is separate from that which causes the *breostwylm*. This may indicate that Hroðgar’s tears are part of a formalized ritual, an expected gesture at the departure of an honored guest. They are distinct from the interior feelings he hides. In such a reading, Hroðgar’s weeping would not conflict with his status or his gender, as Mary Dockray-Miller argues in her article “Beowulf’s Tears of Fatherhood.”

While Wright strives to bolster Hroðgar’s masculinity and remove any possible suggestion that the king felt homoerotic desire for Beowulf, Dockray-Miller posits that the old king’s weeping is a sign of his growing weakness and effeminacy, and describes Hroðgar’s decline in terms of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis.³⁵⁷ Hroðgar’s kingly merits or lack thereof will not be debated here, and I am inclined to accept, though not entirely convinced, that the poet depicts the king in decline. However, I disagree with Dockray-Miller’s insistence that “the emotional and homoerotic nature of the farewell scene shows that the ‘normal’ male-male relationship of the *comitatus*, with which the Danes have been having so much trouble since Grendel’s coming, has been broken down to the point where Hroðgar cannot find an unambiguously masculine gesture of parting from the younger man.”³⁵⁸ Perhaps some modern readers find this scene to be seething with unvoiced erotic tensions, but that has more to do with

³⁵⁶ Lockett, *Psychologies*, 83.

³⁵⁷ Mary Dockray-Miller, “Beowulf’s Tears of Fatherhood,” *Exemplaria* 10 (1998), 1-28.

³⁵⁸ Dockray-Miller, “Beowulf’s Tears,” 2.

modern concepts of masculinity and intimacy in the West, than with those of Anglo-Saxon England.³⁵⁹

According to Dockray-Miller, “editors and critics, especially Thomas Wright (the only critic to comment on this scene at length), have interpreted this part of the text in such a way that it glosses over the homoerotics of the scene. The emotional and physical presentation of Hroðgar’s farewell underscores the fragility of Hroðgar’s masculinity as he tries to assert himself as a Father figure but ends up positioning himself as an effeminate Other. The erotics in the farewell scene are intense beyond the norm of male-male social relations (the *comitatus*).”³⁶⁰ She goes on to discuss the implications of the physical gestures:

The first word of the farewell scene, *gecyste*, might seem to set an erotic tone for the scene, but kissing in surviving Old English texts is not necessarily erotic; indeed, more often than not, it is religious. [. . .] The combination of the kiss and the embrace (*be healse genam*), however, suggests that scene is more emotionally charged than the usual goodbye; when Hroðgar starts to cry (*hruron him tearas*), the suggestion is confirmed. [. . .] I contend that the scene shows that Hroðgar’s actions are outside the bounds of “heroic life,” that to cry, embrace, and kiss at a farewell are distinctly non-heroic gestures that indicate desperation rather than resolution. Nowhere else in Old English poetry do men display such overt emotion towards each other.³⁶¹

In a footnote to this statement she briefly entertains, but ultimately dismisses as irrelevant, an example from poetry that could contradict this assertion: “One possible exception could be the fantasy of the narrator of *The Wanderer*, who imagines laying his head in his lord’s lap (41-44); this emotionally charged moment, however, exists only in the narrator’s mind, while the farewell scene occurs within the textual ‘reality’ of *Beowulf*.”³⁶² Why the imaginary nature of the scene should lessen the importance of this parallel is unclear to me. If anything, the fact that the

³⁵⁹ I am not, of course, arguing that the sort of physical intimacy in this scene never had erotic overtones. See David Clark’s Introduction in *Between Medieval Men: Male Friendship and Desire in Early Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3-21, for a discussion of how a hetero-normative understanding of gender roles has influenced the reception and interpretation of relationships in Old English literature.

³⁶⁰ Dockray-Miller, “Beowulf’s Tears,” 18.

³⁶¹ Dockray-Miller, “Beowulf’s Tears,” 19.

³⁶² Dockray-Miller, “Beowulf’s Tears,” 19.

narrator of the elegy chooses *this* scene suggests its significance as a representation of an ideal lord-retainer relationship within the *comitatus*. It is telling that although Dockray-Miller mentions that the narrator envisions laying his head on his lord's lap, she omits that first he “*clyppe ond cysse*” his lord, and that he lays both his head *and* his hand in the lord's lap.³⁶³ This ‘fantasy’ involves more intimate physical contact than Dockray-Miller's summation of it would indicate, yet there is no suggestion that the narrator viewed this behavior as aberrant. Dockray-Miller had earlier described the combination of the kiss and embrace as indicating that Hroðgar's farewell “is more emotionally charged” than would be typical. Likely this is the case; the author of *Beowulf*, like the narrator of *The Wanderer*, is surely intentionally portraying the scene as one of great emotion, but this does not mean that the intensity of the feeling is inappropriate, or in any way erotic.

In her closing, Dockray-Miller asserts that “neither through heterosexual relations with his wife nor through paternal, quasi-erotic relations with Beowulf can Hroðgar regain his once vital, now fading masculine power.”³⁶⁴ Now the “erotics” and “homoerotics” of the argument have been downgraded to merely “quasi-erotic,” but not once does Dockray-Miller explain precisely what she means by these terms: she treats the notion of “erotics” as an unchanging constant, occupying the same semantic position in Anglo-Saxon England as it does today. She never suggests that Hroðgar desires Beowulf sexually, and perhaps she means merely that physical intimacy with an effeminate man, as she contends Hroðgar has become, is automatically imbued with eroticism, but this in itself is an extremely problematic notion.

³⁶³ “*pynceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten clyppe ond cysse, ond on cneo lecge honda ond heafod.*” “The Wanderer,” ll. 41-43a, in *The Exeter Book: The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III*, eds. George Phillip Krapp and Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936-42).

³⁶⁴ Dockray-Miller, “Beowulf's Tears,” 28.

Wolfish Weeping

The gnomic poem *Maxims I*, contained in the Exeter Book, describes an event which some have argued is relevant to our understanding of Anglo-Saxon funeral customs:

The friendless, unhappy man takes wolves as his companions,
very treacherous beasts. Very often that companion rends him;
there will be terror of the grey ones, a grave for a dead man,
it wails from hunger, It does not circle with lamentation,
the grey wolf certainly does not weep over slaughter,
the murder of men, but ever wants more.

*Wineleas, wonsælig mon genimeð him wulfas to geferan,
felafæcne deor. Ful oft hine se gefera sliteð;
gryre sceal for greggum, græf deadum men;
hungre heofeð, nales þæt heafe bewindeð,
ne huru wæl wepeð wulf se græga,
morþorcwealm mæcga, ac hit a mare wille.*³⁶⁵

In an influential article, Tauno F. Mustanoja argued that the Geatish woman who mourns at Beowulf's funeral need not be understood as Hygelac's widow Hygd or Beowulf's wife, but simply as a lamenter, who could be a relative of Beowulf or a professional lamenter.³⁶⁶ Mustanoja is careful not to overstate the evidence for professional lamenters in Anglo-Saxon England, but his successors have not always been so cautious.

Patrizia Lendinara, influenced by Mustanoja's article, offers this passage as a parallel for the lamenting woman in *Beowulf*, arguing that "while in other instances the mourning song could be and is, with the possible exception of *Beowulf*, vv. 3150-3155, an expression of personal grief, a natural outburst of sorrow, here we are confronted with something quite different. It is impossible to establish any personal or emotional relationship between the wolf and the dead man, and the indirect statement of the poet must contain some veiled reference to a hired

³⁶⁵ *Maxims I*, *Exeter Book*, ll. 146-151.

³⁶⁶ Tauno F. Mustanoja, "The Unnamed Woman's Song of Mourning over Beowulf and the Tradition of Ritual Lamentation," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 68 (1967), 1-27: 4.

mourner, whose grief is not felt but feigned.”³⁶⁷ Lendinara’s argument is troublesome on several levels. Funeral lament, though it may be performed with utter sincerity, is nevertheless part of a formalized system of ritual grieving, and thus characterizing any given lament as “a natural outburst of sorrow” is incredibly problematic. Such laments take place within a highly circumscribed set of circumstances, and their poetic language and formulaic nature is indicative of this. While erotic love is considered a human universal and “natural,” no one could characterize the love lyrics of the troubadours, for example, as “natural outbursts of desire.” The emotion is expressed in a manner that is dependent on accumulated poetic tradition and is codified within its particular cultural setting.

Lendinara’s assertion that there is no evidence of a “personal or emotional relationship between the wolf and the dead man” is contradicted by the passage, which states that the friendless man took “wolves for companions;” the lack of connection is only born out if we read the *wulfas* as actual flesh and blood wolves, and understand the notion that they are “companions” or “friends” to the *mon* purely as irony. On the contrary, this text can be read as both a literal account of death by wolves, and as a narrative of a man who falls into the company of wicked men and is betrayed to his death. Proverbial lore depicting wolves as malevolent deceivers (“a wolf in sheep’s clothing”) has a long history, and was certainly current in the medieval period;³⁶⁸ it would be no great stretch to read this passage as exploring the difficulties that may beset a man travelling alone, in particular the danger of being lured into a sense of safe camaraderie before being assaulted and killed.³⁶⁹ In this reading, the companion’s/wolf’s

³⁶⁷ Patrizia Lendinara, “*Maxims* I: 146-151: A Hint of Funeral Lamentation?” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 74 (1973) 214-216: 216.

³⁶⁸ Samuel Singer, *Thesaurus proverbiorum medii aevi* 10 (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000). SCHAF, 1 – 23, 25-52. 54-57, 59- 62. 2-5.

³⁶⁹ Susan E. Deskis has also suggested that the wolves in the passage are outlaws. “Exploring Text and Discourse in the Old English Gnostic Poems: The Problem of Narrative,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104 (2005), 326-44: 337-8.

“feigned” grief is not that of a woman paid for her lament, but a deceptive strategy to mask his actions. By pretending to lament the dead man as one would a beloved companion, the companion/wolf conceals his crime behind a facade of sorrow. This interpretation allows us to take the passage as a consistent whole—positing the wolf as a hired female mourner requires us to take the first two lines as a reference to an unrelated event, and to read the man’s friendship with the wolves/companions and his resulting death as separate from the lament performed by the wolf/woman who pretends, or is paid, to grieve at his grave. Lendinara gives us two sets of wolves, wolves that kill and wolves that imitate grief, but the passage is more thematically cohesive if we assume the same wolves perform both actions.

Finally, Mustanoja’s article provides no concrete references to the existence of professional lamenters in Anglo-Saxon England, and his suggestion that the woman who laments at Beowulf’s funeral may be a hired mourner is highly speculative. Lendinara herself notes that Mustanoja “complains about the paucity of information about the Germanic funeral customs.”³⁷⁰ By attempting to interpret this passage in light of a custom for which we have no evidence in the culture under consideration, she forces a reading unsupported by the text or by external evidence. Her argument that the passage “must contain some veiled reference to a hired mourner” is phrased with too much certainty. The imperative “must” should be replaced by a more tentative “may,” and it would make more sense to treat this passage as offering very slight evidence that hired mourning may have been practiced in Anglo-Saxon England, rather than assuming such a practice and using it to interpret the passage in “Maxims I.”

Furthermore, she ignores the parallel of the warriors’ lament for Beowulf, which W. S. Mackie proposed in 1925. He argues that this scene is evidence of the practice of riders circling a

³⁷⁰ Lendinara, “*Maxims I*,” 214.

grave while lamenting, as in the case of Beowulf's funeral.³⁷¹ Mackie suggests that "the howl of the wolf, the poet may mean, is a cry of hunger, not of grief, and very unlike the lamentation of those who ride round the dead man's grave." The male riders' lament around Beowulf's grave is a much closer parallel to the scene in *Maxims I* than the single female mourner, and I believe that the parallel can be pushed further. The dead man in the poem is "*wineleas*," that is, lacking in companions who would mourn his death. His wolf companions may be read as both literal wolves and as treacherous human companions, and the circling and howling of the wolves is also the false lament of men who betrayed him to his death, who pretend to mourn his passing. Just as the wolf's howl is not regret for his actions, though it sounds mournful to men's ears, so the lament of the friends falsely appears to arise from grief. Whether we can take the evidence of the poem as proof that this practice survived is doubtful, and Mackie is rightly very tentative in suggesting this possibility. If such a tradition underlies the image of circling wolves in *Maxims I*, the poet was familiar with the practice only as a literary motif.

The notion of a wolf's false grief may have a parallel in a Norse skaldic verse found in *Heiðarvíga saga*:

Weep as she may
while I live, this rider
of sea-steed's crests
sends the woman few thanks.
The dark vixen
will be sorely vexed
when she walks to my grave

³⁷¹ "In *Beowulf*, both in the description of the hero's funeral (ll. 3134 ff.) and in other passages referring to funeral ceremony (ll. 1108 ff., 2124 ff.) the dead body is burnt upon a pyre. Yet [. . .] the practice of cremation seems to have passed out of use among the Anglo-Saxons about the middle of the sixth century [. . .] Since *Beowulf* in its present form must be older than the end of the seventh century, its references to cremation must be due to tradition (cf. Chambers, *Beowulf, An Introduction*, 125), and the final funeral song, delivered by a band of horsemen who ride round the memorial mound (ll. 3169 ff.) must be part of the tradition. Probably, however, this funeral-song was little affected by the change from cremation to burial, and when the dead man was a king or lord it may still have been delivered by a band of chosen thanes who rode round the grave. These three lines from the *Exeter Gnostic Verses* are perhaps some evidence of this." W. S. Mackie, "Notes on Old English Poetry," *Modern Language Notes* 40 (1925), 91-93: 91-2.

with her wolf's cheek-rain.³⁷²

*Óþakkir kann ekkju
Áta mars, þótt gráti,
fákrennandi fannar
fagrstrykvins, mik kykvan,
því að áms litar ímu
ofnauð er, er skal dauðan
hlýra hofgum skúrum
heiðingja mik leiða.*³⁷³

Þorbjörn, the speaker of the verse, is caught up in a feud that will soon end his life. When his wife serves him breakfast, he sees a vision of blood, and, thinking she is at fault, he hits her on the back with the serving dish. She says she has served him food and that his vision is an omen of his death. He speaks a verse claiming that she will not don black at his death, and that she wishes him dead. She serves him a cheese and then sits and weeps, prompting him to recite the verse given above. After this, he has another vision, seeing a river rushing through the house, and everything turned to earth, including the cheese. Þorbjörn goes out of the hall, and tells a farmhand of a prophetic dream of battle he had the night before. The stanza implies that his wife's current tears are sincere, but those for his death will be feigned, continuing the theme of her lack of grief described in the previous verse, evidenced by her refusal of widow's weeds.

The idea of a wolf's feigned grief for death in Þorbjörn's verse, and perhaps in *Maxims I*, may be related to the kenning "*eyðir heiðingja sútar*," "destroyer of the wolf's sorrow," found in Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's *Sexsteffa*, as well as elsewhere. The wolf's sorrow, of course, refers to its hunger, and Haraldr destroys its sorrow by slaying men in battle, whom the wolf will consume as carrion. The wolf's plaintive howl, though reminiscent of human lament, does not stem from

³⁷² Keneva Kunz, trans., *The Saga of the Slayings on the Heath*, in *The Complete Sagas of the Icelanders: Regional Feuds*, eds. Viðar Hreinsson, Robert Cook, Terry Gunnell, Keneva Kunz, and Bernard Scudder (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 110.

³⁷³ Sigurðar Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, eds., *Borgfirðinga sögur*, Íslenzk fornrit 3 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), 290, Verse 6.

grief. While the wolf and a person both cry out mournfully as a result of death, the human laments the death, and the wolf its hunger. One can imagine the howls of wolves scenting carrion after a battle intermingling with the wailing of the bereaved.

In the Norse saga, as in the Old English poem, the notion of a wolf's grief being false is presented. Granted, the Old English poem predates the saga by several centuries, however, the saga is set around the time of Iceland's conversion around the year 1000, and it is possible that some of the skaldic poetry preserved in the saga may date from that period, which is close to the probable composition date (late tenth century) of the Exeter Book. The verse in *Sexsteffa* is slightly later. If these examples reflect a tradition of proverbial lore regarding wolves, rather than innovation on the part of the individual poets, it could have come into both literatures from a shared Germanic proverb tradition, or travelled between them by way of the numerous cultural connections between Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England.

Chapter Three

Perilous Grief

“To follow after the beloved dead: I know the desire.”³⁷⁴

³⁷⁴ Rebecca Goldstein, *Properties of Light*, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 233.

The Old Irish tale *Scél Baili Binnbér-laig* is an account of a tryst gone wrong, resulting in the deaths of both would-be lovers. Baile, the heir to the kingdom of Ulster, and Ailinn, a Leinster princess, arrange a tryst. During Baile's journey with his companions to meet Ailinn, they pause to let their horses graze, and while the men are relaxing and laughing amongst themselves, they spy a phantom travelling fitfully in their direction. Baile commands his followers to stop the phantom and interrogate him as to his purpose. The phantom announces that he comes from Leinster, and has no news "but that the daughter of Lugaid, son of Fergus, has given love to Baile, son of Buan, and was coming to meet him, when the warriors of Leinster overtook her and killed her, as druids and good seers foretold of them, that they would not meet in life, and that they would meet after their deaths, never to part."³⁷⁵ (*'no Lugdach maic Fergusai tuc grad do Baili mac Buain & tainic dia dal, corucsat oic Laigevn fuirri & bathaid, amail rusgellsad draide & degfaidi doib, na comraicdis a m-bethaid et conricfaidis iarna nás & nach scerdais tre bithu sir.*)³⁷⁶ The phantom then departs, and the men are unable to detain him. Baile falls dead upon hearing this news, and the Ulstermen raise his tomb and tombstone, and hold his funeral games. A yew grows from his grave, and at its top is the shape of Baile's head.

Meanwhile, the phantom approaches the bower of Ailinn, who is still very much alive. She asks the phantom where he comes from and what news he brings, and he tells her "I have no news worth lamenting here, but by the side of Tráig Baili I saw the men of Ulster at funeral games, digging a rath and placing a stone and writing the name of Baile, son of Buan, the royal heir of Ulster, who was coming to meet a sweetheart and lady-love to whom he had given love; for it is not their fate to meet in life, nor that one of them should see the other alive."³⁷⁷ (*Ni fuil sceloí is cointi sund, acht adconnorc Ultai ac oenuch guba et oc cloidi ratha & ic sadad lia & ac*

³⁷⁵ Kuno Meyer, ed. and trans., "Scél Baili Binnbér-laig," *Revue Celtique* 13 (1892), 220-7: 224.

³⁷⁶ Meyer, *Scél Baili*, 222.

³⁷⁷ Meyer, *Scél Baili*, 225.

*graifned a anma Baili maic Buain rigdamnoi Ulad do thin Trago Baili, et se ic torrachtain lennain & mna serce dia tard tal, ar ni fuil a scoth doib coristais a m-bethaid no nech dib d'faircsin aroili ina m-biu).*³⁷⁸ She dies of grief for her beloved, and is buried. In time an apple-tree grows from her grave, with the shape of her head at its top.

After seven years have passed, both trees are harvested to provide wood for poets' tablets. Cormac mac Airt holds a feast on Samhain, and all of the poets attend. Cormac asks to see the tablets made from the trees over the lovers' graves, and when he holds one in each hand, "the one tablet of them sprang upon the other, and they twined together as the woodbine round a branch,"³⁷⁹ (*imusling an tabold for araili dib cor' imnaisced amail fet[h]lind im urslait*),³⁸⁰ and no one is able to separate them again. The conjoined tablets are kept in the Tara treasury until its destruction by fire.

The embellishments added to the international motif of the grave-trees joining lovers who were separated in life thoroughly integrate the motif into an Irish context, speaking to the redactor's care in adapting this motif to the uses of this particular tale. While the trees in other versions of this motif are often chopped down in an effort to prevent them from scandalously embracing and visibly manifesting the illicit passion of the dead lovers, here it is the cutting down of the trees and the transporting of the tablets which permits the lovers to be joined in death, as they were unable to be joined in life. Fittingly, the Leinster wooing-tales are said to be carved on the tablet made from Ailinn's apple tree, and the Ulster wooing-tales on Baile's tablet, and thus Ailinn and Baile's story becomes a part of the tradition of romantic narratives inscribed on the physical manifestation of their enduring passion for one another. Baile and Ailinn's deaths in the tale are presented in a very similar fashion, with the primary difference being that Baile is

³⁷⁸ Meyer, *Scél Baili*, 222.

³⁷⁹ Meyer, *Scél Baili*, 225.

³⁸⁰ Meyer, *Scél Baili*, 223.

travelling but Ailinn is in her bower at the time of death. Their deaths are described with nearly identical turns of phrase: Baile “fell dead without life” (*crinniur marb cin anima*), while “Ailinn fell dead without life” (*difuit Aillinn marb cin anmoin*).³⁸¹

The occasion of a death not only impacts the deceased, but has tremendous effect on the living. The society in which the dead person lived must bring its resources to bear to ritually contain the death. The rituals of mourning create a known, navigable space around the disruptive force of death. Refusal to carry out the expected behaviors is portrayed as actually physically dangerous; without going through the rituals the mourner cannot be reintegrated into society, and so remains in perilous proximity to the world of the dead. The previous chapters examined literary accounts of properly performed mourning rituals and customs; this chapter will consider narratives depicting the failure of these rites, where grief is not contained and channeled, but overflows the carefully placed boundaries of social strictures to sweep away the griever. Illness, sometimes leading to death, is a frequent response to grief in the literature, as is death from grief. Suicide also occurs, although in a narrower range of circumstances. Depression and neglect of responsibilities are also described as originating in grief.

Arnold van Gennep’s theory of “rites of passage,” introduced in his 1909 study *Les rites de passage*, has had a strong influence on the study of funeral and mourning customs.³⁸² Van

³⁸¹ Meyer, “*Scél Baili*,” 222.

³⁸² In “Ibn Fadlan’s Account of a Rus Funeral: To What Degree Does It Reflect Norse Myths?” Jens Peter Schjødt analyses the account of the funeral of a (presumably) Scandinavian chieftain in Russia in terms of van Gennep’s schema. In *Reflections on Old Norse Myths*, eds. Pernille Hermann, Jens Peter Schjødt, and Rasmus Tranum Kristensen (Belgium: Brepols, 2007), 133-148. Pádraig Ó Riain examines the “Wild Man” legend in Irish sources, and concludes that a number of features frequently occurring in these narratives are also associated with novices, and that the “wild man” state shares with the state of novitiate “the basic theme of separation from wonted or due status.” Ó Riain suggests that these features can be explained as reflexes of Van Gennep’s *rites de passage*. “A Study of the Irish Legend of the Wild Man,” *Eigse* 14 (1972), 179-206: 205. Angela Partridge, drawing on Ó Riain’s argument, rejects as simplistic the notion that certain behaviors common to both the “wild man” and the grieving woman of Irish literature, such as leaping and wandering in the wilderness, can be explained by the suggestion that “the *bean chaointe* is typically thought of as being crazed with grief, and that therefore her behavior should be that which is associated with crazy people.” Angela Partridge, “Wild Men and Wailing Women,” *Éigse* 18, 25-37 :34-35.

Gennep proposes that in “all the ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another,” rites of passage, subdivided into rites of separation, transition, and incorporation, take place, although, he notes, these three kinds of rites may not be equally represented in any particular rite of passage.³⁸³ Furthermore, a rite of transition, occurring between rites of separation and incorporation, may itself contain all three kinds of rites.³⁸⁴ On the subject of mourning, van Gennep states the following: “It is a transitional period for the survivors, and they enter it through rites of separation and emerge from it through rites of reintegration into society (rites of the lifting of mourning). In some cases, the transitional period of the living is a counterpart of the transitional period of the deceased, and the termination of the first sometimes coincides with the termination of the second, that is, with the incorporation of the deceased into the world of the dead.”³⁸⁵ “During mourning, the living mourners and the deceased constitute a special group, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and how soon living individuals leave that group depends on the closeness of their relationship with the dead person.”³⁸⁶

In the texts examined in this chapter, the failure, whether through inability or unwillingness, to carry out mourning and funeral rites is dangerous, having dire effect on both the living and the dead. If mourners remain too close to the border of death for an extended period of time, they may die in turn, and such proximity may also pull the dead back towards the border between life and death, leaving them unable to establish themselves fully in their new society. These texts thus warn against intense, prolonged grief, emphasizing the need for the

Partridge concludes, following Ó Riain, that “both categories are in transition and both are temporarily outside the normal structure of society,” 37.

³⁸³ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 10-11.

³⁸⁴ van Gennep, *Rites*, 10-11.

³⁸⁵ van Gennep, *Rites*, 147.

³⁸⁶ van Gennep, *Rites*, 147.

mourner to be reincorporated into normal society. A mourner's death is arguably the ultimate failure to reintegrate. While the deaths and suicides resulting from grief in these texts are attributed to both men and women, the situations under which they are provoked and the manner in which they occur varies, at times greatly, between the genders. This tendency will be shown to be particularly pronounced in Scandinavian and Icelandic texts, however, I will demonstrate that this proceeds not from concepts of appropriate gender performance, but rather from the disparities of power encoded in social relationships, which are informed, but not wholly determined, by gender.

On one level, when employed as literary devices, both suicide and death from grief may be seen as solutions to the same difficulty: a character's inability or unwillingness to continue to live. In a literary context, committing suicide and dying from grief are undeniably dramatic, and such deaths are attributed to countless famous historical figures and literary characters. While these kinds of deaths may be universal in narrative, their deployment within a particular literary tradition reveals a great deal about that culture's beliefs and values.

Although the Bible mentions several suicides, it does not examine the morality of the act itself to any particular extent, and it is primarily Augustine's discussion of suicide in his *De Civitate Dei* and elsewhere which establishes its status for the medieval Church: absolutely forbidden and resulting in damnation. As a violation of the commandment against killing, and an act which allowed no chance to reform one's ways, suicide permanently alienated one from God.³⁸⁷ There are some attempts by theologians to soften the Church's strict stance under certain

³⁸⁷ Mary Clayton, "Suicide in the Works of Ælfric," *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 60 (2009), 339-370: 341-343.

conditions, such as suicide brought on by insanity or diabolical delusions, or as a means to avoid being raped, but on the whole, it remained an unforgiveable sin.³⁸⁸

The taboo nature of suicide may have resulted in what Mary Clayton describes as “very sparse” evidence for suicide in “the period from about the sixth century to after the millennium;” a reticence which would not be broken until the thirteenth century.³⁸⁹ An unwillingness to attribute individual deaths to suicide certainly led to the use of euphemism; in his important and groundbreaking book on medieval suicide, Alexander Murray writes: “The use of the expression ‘to die of grief,’ for instance, will be shown in literature sometimes, but not always, to represent the deliberate softening of a suicidal incident in a model. The same expression in a chronicle or *exemplum* may, or again may not, envisage suicide.”³⁹⁰

This overlap of terminology raises the question of how suicide and dying from grief were differentiated by the communities that produced and circulated texts dealing with these issues. While some examples are clearly deliberate suicides, such as falling on one’s sword or hanging oneself, and some are clearly deaths from grief, as when a woman falls dead upon hearing of her lover’s death, some defy easy categorization, and the death of a particular figure may be attributed to different causes in various sources.

Grieving Women in Irish Sources

³⁸⁸ Clayton, “Suicide,” 346-8. A medieval Irish penitential offers the following discussion on suicide: “Anyone who kills himself while insane, prayers are said for him, and alms are given for his soul, if he was previously pious. If he has killed himself in despair or for any other cause, he must be left to the judgment of God, for men dare not offer prayers for him -- that is, a Mass: -- unless it be some other prayer, and almsgiving to the poor and miserable.” (*Nech nothoirc fadesin tria dasacht ernaigti aire 7 almsana hara hanmain mad craibdech riam. Mad ar derchainiuth ronoirnecht fadesin nó ar nach tucait ali is lecti immessair ndé ar ni lamther ernaigti airi .i. oifrend acht mad nach n-ernaigti aile 7 almsan do thruadaib 7 do bochtaib*). Gwynn, “An Irish Penitential,” 166-67.

³⁸⁹ Clayton, “Suicide,” 340-1.

³⁹⁰ Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages: The Violent against Themselves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 35.

Suicide is infrequently depicted in medieval Irish literature. Philip O’Leary considers it an “extraordinary” event, and he points out that the minimal references to suicide in early Irish law texts consider it a case of *finjal*, that is, kinslaying.³⁹¹ In the case of women, suicide from grief is largely confined to prose narratives, while death from grief is abundantly represented in poetry and prose. The corpus of *dindshenchas*, texts dealing with the lore of placenames, is an especially rich source of such deaths. Placenames in medieval Irish tradition are frequently attributed to the deaths or burials of individuals occurring on that spot, and deaths from grief are therefore frequent in this genre.

Longes mac n-Uislenn is one of the tales that traditionally precedes the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, and it explains why the Ulster hero Fergus fights on the side of Connacht against Ulster in the *Táin*. Deirdre is prophesied before her birth to be fantastically beautiful, and to cause great strife in Ireland. Though advised by his warriors to kill the infant, Conchobor, king of Ulster, decides to have her raised in seclusion, until she is old enough to wed him. Instead of marrying the king, Deirdre elopes with Naoise, and they, along with Naoise’s brothers and a retinue, flee from Conchobor’s wrath, eventually landing in Scotland. However, rumour of Deirdre’s beauty prompts the local king to attempt to woo her, and when rebuffed, he plots to murder her protectors and take her against her will. They flee, and Conchobor invites them to return home. They agree to do so, on the condition that Fergus and several others accompany them, as protection. Fergus is delayed by *geas*, and without his protection Naoise and the rest are slaughtered by Conchobor’s army, and Deirdre is brought to Conchobor. Fergus goes into exile in Connacht because of this treachery. Deirdre spends a miserable year under Conchobor’s supervision. He grows weary of her constant sorrow, and decides to send her to the warrior who

³⁹¹ Philip O’Leary, “Jeers and Judgments: Laughter in Early Irish Literature,” *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 22 (1991), 15 -30: 27-8.

killed Naoise, Eogan mac Durthact, whom Deirdre hates more than anyone else. While Deirdre is riding in a chariot with Conchobor and Eogan, Conchobor makes a derogatory sexual quip, likening her to a sheep between two rams. Deirdre leans out of the chariot and lets her head be dashed upon a stone.³⁹²

Créd, the young wife of king Marcán, trysts yearly with her lover, Cano. As they approach their arranged meeting, Créd's stepson Colcu (whose attempts to woo her have been refused) arrives by ship and attacks Cano. Cano is wounded and barely escapes his ship. Créd watches the battle, and when she sees that her lover is mortally wounded, she, like Deirdre, dashes her head against a rock and dies.³⁹³ The wife of the slain Leinster king Mesgegra asks his killer, who has taken her captive, for a moment's respite to mourn her husband: "[s]he let out a wail and cry that was heard as far as Tara and Allen, and then fell back dead."³⁹⁴ (*Tuargaib iarum a foid guil esti. co clos co Temraig. 7 co Alind. 7 fosceird dara cend 7 sí marb*).³⁹⁵ Karen Burgess points out that "the phrase translated above 'fell back dead' is *fosceird dara cend sí marb*, which literally means 'she threw herself over backwards, [and] she was dead.' The implication seems to be that it is not the intensity of grief alone that kills Mesgegra's wife, but that she intentionally threw herself backwards to her death."³⁹⁶ In the *dindshenchas* poem *Mag Tibra*, Tibir, a woman of the Tuatha Dé Danann, commits suicide after Irial, her fosterson and high king, dies of a sudden illness while visiting her: "Tibir plunged into the sea for grief of noble Irial, and the solid wave buried with its force the wife of Palap son of Eremon." (*Dochuaid*

³⁹² Vernam Edward Hull, ed. and trans., *Longes mac nUislenn* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1949).

³⁹³ Binchy, Daniel A, *Scéla cano meic Gartnáin*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 18 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963), 19.

³⁹⁴ Patrick Ford, *The Celtic Poets: Songs and Tales from Early Ireland and Wales* (Belmont, MA: Ford & Bailie, 1999), 76.

³⁹⁵ R. I. Best and M. A. O'Brien, eds. *Talland Etair*, in *The Book of Leinster, formerly Lebar na Núachongbála* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1956), 426-33: 433.

³⁹⁶ Karen Elaine Burgess, "Disintegrating Lugaid Ríab nDerg: Medieval Irish Lore about a Legendary King," (Ph.D. diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2004), 321.

*Tibir isa muir / do chumaid Irel uasail/ cor' chuir in tonn tiug da treoir/ ben Palaip maic Eremoin).*³⁹⁷

The wife of Ronan mac Aeda attempts and fails to initiate an affair with her stepson. As revenge for his refusal, she tells her husband that he has attempted to seduce her, and the king has his son killed. His son's fosterbrother kills the queen's father, mother, and brother, and throws their heads on her: "Thereupon she arose and threw herself on to her knife, so that it came out through her back."³⁹⁸ (*At-raig suas iar sin co tarlaic imma scín co m-buí triana druim suas iar sin.*)³⁹⁹

Out of the five Irish female suicides listed above, one, Tibir, drowns herself out of grief for her dead fosterson. The other suicides all involve the death of a spouse, lover, or beloved. Mesgegra's husband is dead, and she, like Deirdre, is being claimed by her husband's killer. The suicides of Deirdre and Créd have several factors in common. Both commit suicide by dashing their heads against a rock, and both, at the time of suicide, are caught between two undesirable mates: Deirdre is being given to the man who killed her beloved by the man who arranged that he would be killed, while Créd is married to a much older man and is sexually pursued by her stepson, who attacks and fatally wounds her lover. Both women are dissatisfied with the marriages arranged for them, and seek other partners. Although Conchobor's age is not given, and he does take the kingship of Ulster while yet a child, he is old enough at the time of Deirdre's birth to claim her for himself, and a reasonably large age difference may be implied. When approaching Naoise, Deirdre declares that she'd prefer a young man to one who is old like

³⁹⁷ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 3, 434-5.

³⁹⁸ Tom Peete Cross and Clark Harris Slover, eds. and trans., "How Ronan Slew his Son," in *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1936), 538-45: 543.

³⁹⁹ David Greene, ed., *Fingal Rónáin and Other Stories*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 16 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1955), 9.

Conchobor,⁴⁰⁰ and medieval Irish literature, indeed, medieval literature in general, is densely populated with women who prefer a young lover to their older husbands.

Ronan mac Aeda's wife falls into this category, and her stepson is the object of her desire. His refusal to become her lover prompts her to accuse him of rape, and it is his death that prompts his fosterbrother to kill her family. Contrasting with Deirdre and Créd, it is not the death of the man she desires that prompts her suicide, but the deaths of her mother, father, and brother.

Female sexual desire in these texts is portrayed as potentially disruptive and dangerous, but the authors are still capable of creating female characters whose decisions to act on their desires, though damaging to society, are not vilified. It can hardly be doubted that Deirdre, in spite of all the destruction wrought by her very existence, has the author's sympathy. Although Ronan mac Aeda's wife is depicted as the villain of the piece, her husband is warned by his stepson to take an older wife: "'Truly, you are not a mate for a girl,' said the youth. 'Will you not take a sedate woman? That would be more fitting than a little skittish thing of a girl.'"⁴⁰¹ (*Nida céili ingine ém, 'or in gilla. 'Nach ben forusta do-béire? Ba córu lim duit ol-dás scintline ingine'*).⁴⁰² In the cases of Ronan mac Aeda's wife, Deirdre, and Créd, the situation leading to the suicide resulted in part from the character's willingness to make decisions against the societal, patriarchal, power structure. Female desire, and the male jealousy it incites, brings about the deaths of the men pursued by these women, and further destruction may also result. However, much of the blame in *Longes mac nUislenn* and *Fingal Rónáin* is laid by the author at the feet of the foolish kings who are advised by other men to choose a more suitable wife, and refuse. These texts counsel not only against the illicit expression of female sexuality, but also

⁴⁰⁰ Hull, *Longes*, 46.

⁴⁰¹ Cross and Slover, "Ronan," 538.

⁴⁰² Greene, *Fingal*, 3.

against the acquisition by older men of beautiful young women as sexual status objects, and suggests the importance of mutual desire.

Philip O'Leary argues that sexual shame, rather than grief, motivates Deirdre to commit suicide:

Her death in the two major early versions of the tale is a suicide, and modern re-workers... have focused on grief as her major motive for taking her own life. Yet while her grief is undeniable, it cannot be forgotten that she does survive the death of Naisi by a year, albeit a year of misery. Indeed she does not kill herself even after hearing of Conchobar's plan to send her to Eogan, rather, she waits yet another day . . . she does not kill herself until she is out of the privacy of the house and on her way to the great Assembly of Macha, where her degradation will be presented as a public spectacle. Furthermore, it should be noted that Conchobar's crude sexual joke underlines the exact nature of the shame she faces. Confronted by the thought of ridicule and disgrace, she reacts as would a male in such a dilemma, and opts for death.⁴⁰³

O'Leary makes some excellent points, and Burgess also suggests that Deirdre and Mesgrega's wife kill themselves from shame and "as a means of preserving personal honour."⁴⁰⁴ However, while Deirdre's shame at being given by Conchobar to Eogan serves as the proverbial last straw, she has previously told Conchobar "Do not break today my heart; Soon shall I reach my early grave," (*Na briss in-diu mo chride; Mos-ricub mo moch-lige*),⁴⁰⁵ and pointed out that she will not be reunited with her lover until her death.

Earlier in the same article, O'Leary suggests that although *Tochmarc Ferbe* describes Ferb, her mother, and 150 captive women as dying from grief for their dead men, "in light of their predicament as prisoners, shame seems a more plausible cause for their demise."⁴⁰⁶ Irish literature frequently attributes deaths to grief or shame, and we should be hesitant to dismiss

⁴⁰³ Philip O'Leary, "The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature," *Ériu* 38 (1987), 27-44: 42.

⁴⁰⁴ Burgess, "Lugaid," 321.

⁴⁰⁵ Hull, *Longes*, 51.

⁴⁰⁶ O'Leary, "Honour," 41-2.

what a text explicitly says about the emotional states of its characters. In a note, O’Leary continues his argument on this point: “Indeed, since loss of a husband could seriously affect the prestige of his wife, it is possible that concern about future shame further exacerbated the grief that put an end to the lives of many Irish women.”⁴⁰⁷ The correlation between grief for the dead and the vulnerability resulting from diminished social status is often demonstrated in elegiac poetry, as I discussed in the previous chapters. In the absence of a clear statement, as in Deirdre’s case, it is difficult to untangle the threads of grief, shame, and fear in any given characterization; these emotions may all coexist at once, providing motivation to seek death.⁴⁰⁸

The *dindshenchas* tradition is a rich source for material on death from grief. One explanation for the name of Benn Étar is as follows: “Étar wife of Gand son of Dela, the fifth king of the Fir Bolg, she was the first woman that here formerly died of grief for her husband, and where she was buried was on Benn Étar.”⁴⁰⁹ (*Etar ben Gaind meic Deladha, an coicedh ri Fer mBolg, is í sin an cétna ben atbath do cumaid a fir sund prius, 7 is and roadnacht, i mBeinn Étar.*)⁴¹⁰ The entry on *Mag Findbabrach* in the *Rennes Dindshenchas* gives two placenames derived from deaths from grief, although for the moment I am only concerned with the first: “So then his daughter Findabair came from the west of Cetha Forngairi[?] to learn about her father, and on yon plain she met the news of her father’s death, and her heart broke in her like a nut. And in like manner the heart of her fosterling Brech son of Broichde broke out of grief for her. Whence are *Mag Finnabrach* <<Finnabair’s Plain>>, and *Brech-mag*.”⁴¹¹ (*Dotoet dano Findabair ingen Luig[d]ech aniar os cethaib forngaire do comfis a athar, conid condrainicc fri*

⁴⁰⁷ O’Leary, “Honour,” 42.

⁴⁰⁸ Death from shame occurs quite commonly in medieval Irish sources, and is an interesting topic in its own right; though beyond the scope of the current discussion, I plan a future study on deaths from shame and grief in medieval Irish literature. For now, I will confine my discussion to deaths that are either directly attributed to grief by the text, or occur in a context that suggests grief is the cause.

⁴⁰⁹ Stokes, “Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” 331.

⁴¹⁰ Stokes, “Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” 330.

⁴¹¹ Stokes, “Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” 71.

*tasc a hathar isin mag ucut, co r[o]eimid a cride cnomaidm inde 7 ina dalta díá cumaidhsi .i. Brech mac Broichdi. Unde [Mag Finnabrach 7 Brechmag].*⁴¹² *Dumae n-Aicle* (The Mound of Acall) is the burial-place of Acall, who “left her husband Glan son of Carbad, and came out of Ulster to bewail her brother. For nine days she kept at the lamentation, till her heart broke in her like a nut.”⁴¹³ (*Co tainic Acall a derbsiur a hUlltaib oa fiur .i. o Glan mac Carbaid, do cháiniudh a bráthar, co mbai .ix. trath [oc] an guba, gor’ cnomuidh a cride indti*).⁴¹⁴

The fair *Oenach Carmuin* is named for the mother of three Athenian men. The family came to Ireland and blighted the grain crop. The Tuatha Dé Danann succeeded in driving the men away, but Carmun, their mother, remained behind as a hostage, and perished: “Their mother died of grief here in her hostageship, and she asked the Tuatha Dé Danann to hold her fair (*oenach*) at her burial-place, and that the fair and the place should always bear her name.”⁴¹⁵ (*Ba marb afus a máthair sin do cumaid ina giallacht, 7 rocuindig for Tuaith de Danann airm n-adnaicfidea co n-agtais a hænach and, 7 co mbad hé a hainm nobeith an ænach sin 7 in maigin semper*).⁴¹⁶ Cend Finichair is named for Finichair, who was killed by his lover’s husband. His mother and wife grieve for him and perish: “Murenn mór-ainech, daughter of Eochaid Find Fuath nAirt, was his mother, and Tuirenn of Tamnaige his wife, and they died of grief for him.”⁴¹⁷ (*Murend mor-ainech, ingen Echach Find Fuath n-Airt a máthair. Et Tuirend Tamnaige a ben, ocus atbathadar dia chumaid*).⁴¹⁸ Delgnat, the mother of Laiglinde, mourns her drowned son: “Delgnat daughter of fierce Lochtach, wife of Partholon after the primal Flood, was mother of famous Laiglinde, on whom the wave wrought dire vengeance. Fifty women (great was the

⁴¹² Stokes, “Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” 70.

⁴¹³ Stokes, “Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” 290.

⁴¹⁴ Stokes, “Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” 289.

⁴¹⁵ Stokes, “Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” 313.

⁴¹⁶ Stokes, “Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” 311.

⁴¹⁷ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 310-19.

⁴¹⁸ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 310-19.

deed) attended Delgnat, the high king's wife: she went into the grave-mound, when all were dead, and died of mourning for the tidings.”⁴¹⁹ (*Delgnat ingen Lochtaig luind, ben Parrthalóin don phrím-thuind, máthair Laiglinde co m-blaid ara tuc tonn trom-dígail. Cáeca ban, ba mór an gním im Delgnait, 'ma mnaí in aird-ríg, dochóid 'sin дума ara n-éis: romarb guba re n-aisnéis*).⁴²⁰

Other genres also relate the origins of placenames in this fashion, although in tales the reference to the placename is usually incidental to the narrative, and not its purpose. In *Bruiden Da Choca*, after the eponymous hosteler is killed, “his wife Lúath, daughter of Lumm Lonn, went to Loch Lúatha, and her heart burst in her breast [Stokes: a burst of gore broke from her heart in her breast], so that Loch Lúatha was named after her.”⁴²¹ (*Di-coid immorro a banchéile .i. Lúath ingen Loma Luind, co Loch Lúathu, co raimid cromaidm dia cride ina cliab, conud uaithi ainmnighther Loch Lúathæ*).⁴²² In *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, the heart of Cessair, whose father has recently died, and whose husband has fled from the fifty women in Ireland who want to share him as their husband, breaks “within her for the absence of her husband and for the death of her father.” (*7 muigis a crīdhi inti do ingnais a fir 7 do ēc a hathar*).⁴²³

Two women die of grief for Muirchertach mac Erca: his queen, and his supernatural lover, who brought about his death. The king is approached by a beautiful woman, who agrees to become his paramour on three conditions. He must never say any of her names, the mother of his children must never be in her sight, and the clerics must leave the house when she enters it. He complies with these conditions for a time, but one night pronounces one of her names, Sín,

⁴¹⁹ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 257.

⁴²⁰ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 256.

⁴²¹ Toner, *Bruiden*, 137. Whitley Stokes, “Dá Choca’s Hostel,” *Revue Celtique* 21 (1900), 388-402: 390-1.

⁴²² Toner, *Bruiden*, 136.

⁴²³ R. A. Stewart Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Érenn* 2, Irish Texts Society 35 (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1939), 192-3.

which is also the word for “storm.” She sets his house on fire and conjures phantoms to surround the dwelling. Muirchertach attempts to shelter in a wine cask, but drowns in the wine, even as he burns from the fire.

The next day the king’s clerics find his corpse and wash his body in the river. As they are bringing him to be buried, “Duaibsech, the wife of Muirchertach, met the clerics while the corpse was among them, and she made a great, mournful lamentation, and struck her palms together, and leant her back against the ancient tree in Oenach Reil; and a burst of gore broke from her heart in her chest, and straightaway she died of grief for her husband.”⁴²⁴ (*Do-rala Duaibsech .i. ben Muirchertaig dona clérchib iar sin & in corp eturru & do-rigneséin nuall guba móir toirsig & ro buail a basa & do-beir a druim iarum frisin mbile I nÓenach Réil & ro mebaid cró-maidm dia craide 'na cliab & fuair bás fo chétóir ann sin do chumaid a fir*).⁴²⁵

The clerics bury Duaibsech and Muirchertach, and then they observe Sín coming towards them. They recognize her, and ask her parentage, and why she had destroyed the king. She tells them her father’s name, and reveals that her father, mother, and sister had all been killed by Muirchertach in battle. Sín confesses and repents, “and straightaway died there of grief for the king.”⁴²⁶ (*7 fuair bás fo chétóir and sin do chumaid in rí*).⁴²⁷

Cath Finntrágha concludes with the death from grief of Gelges, whose husband Cael mac Crimthainn, has just drowned in battle: “Then Gelges’ soul departed from her body for grief (at the loss) of Cael, the son of Crimthann.”⁴²⁸ (*Is ann sin do scar a hanam re’ corp do Gheilghéis do chumaidh Chaíl mic Crimthainn*).⁴²⁹ The death of Gelges in *Cath Finntrágha* appears to be

⁴²⁴ Stokes, “*Aided Muirchertaig*,” 427.

⁴²⁵ Stokes, “*Aided Muirchertaig*,” 426.

⁴²⁶ Stokes, “*Aided Muirchertaig*,” 429.

⁴²⁷ Stokes, “*Aided Muirchertaig*,” 428.

⁴²⁸ Cecile O’Rahilly, ed. and trans., *Cath Finntrágha* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1962), 57.

⁴²⁹ O’Rahilly, *Cath Finntrágha*, 57.

modeled on that of Créde in the *Acallam*, which uses this motif to great effect throughout its narrative. When the hero Cael drowns in battle, his wife Créde speaks a lament, then lays down by his side and perishes: “Créde then lay down beside Cael and died of sorrow.”⁴³⁰ (*Ocus do shin an ingen re taebh Chaeil & fuair bás da chumhaid*).⁴³¹ The *Acallam* uses this motif frequently. We are told that “Sadb, daughter of Conn, died in Tara of the Kings . . . grieving for her well-loved son, Mac Con.”⁴³² (*‘As marbh Sadb ingen Chuinn do chumaid a meic mhór-ghrádhaig .i. Meic Con a Temhraig na rígh.*).⁴³³ Clidna’s mother dies from grief over her daughter’s death: “Clidna the fair-haired died here on this shore./ A sad event. From grief her mother died.”⁴³⁴ (*Clidna Cheindfhind, búan in bét /ar in traig tainic a h-éc,/ damna da mathair beith marb / in ní dia tarla in sen-ainm*).⁴³⁵ Dáirine dies of grief for her sister, after her sister’s death from shame: “When Dáirine saw that her sister had died thus in her presence, she died at once grieving for her sister.”⁴³⁶ (*Ocus ó’ t-connaire in ingen aile sin .i. a siur do éc ina fiadnaissi mar sin, fuair bas do chumaid a sethar fo chetoir*).⁴³⁷ Three women sleeping on a hill awake and are told of their lovers’ deaths in battle. They lament and then die of grief on that hill.⁴³⁸

Women who commit suicide in these texts usually, though not always, do so in the context of a sexual or marital relationship, but death from grief occurs over a much wider range of relationships. Women die from grief for loss of husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, and fostersons, and though more rarely, from the loss of a daughter or sister. The contrast between the women who exhibit a great deal of agency and are far more likely to die by suicide, and the

⁴³⁰ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 28.

⁴³¹ Stokes, *Acallam*, 25.

⁴³² Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 36.

⁴³³ Stokes, *Acallam*, 33.

⁴³⁴ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 115.

⁴³⁵ Stokes, *Acallam*, 109.

⁴³⁶ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 123.

⁴³⁷ Stokes, *Acallam*, 118.

⁴³⁸ Stokes, *Acallam*, 97.

women who are generally more passive and die from grief, is striking. As shall be seen, the conflation of women's agency with suicide and passivity with death from grief also occurs in Scandinavian sources.

Grieving Women in Scandinavian Sources

In *Völsunga Saga*, Signý voluntarily reenters the burning hall of King Siggeir, her husband, in order to die with him. His death was plotted by Signý and her brother Sigmundr, and before she walks into the fire, she states “And I have done so much to achieve vengeance that to go on living is out of the question.”⁴³⁹ (*Hefi ek ok svá mikit til unnit, at fram kæmist hefndin, at mér er með engum kosti líft.*)⁴⁴⁰ In addition to Siggeir, his four sons with Signý and all of his retainers have been killed in the course of vengeance. Prior to reentering King Siggeir's burning hall in order to die with him, Signý converses with her brother, Sigmundr, and their son, Sinfjötli, at her brother's request: “He told his sister to come out and receive from him every consideration, and high esteem, meaning in this way to make up for what she had suffered.”⁴⁴¹ (*Hann biðr systur sína út ganga ok þiggja af honum góð metorð ok mikinn sóma ok vill svá bæta henni sína harma.*)⁴⁴² She responds:

“You'll know now whether or not I have remembered King Siggeir's killing of King Volsung against him!” she answered, “and I had our children killed when they seemed to me all too tardy in avenging our father, and in the shape of some sorceress I came to you in the forest, and Sinfjötli is your son, and mine. His immense vigour comes from being King Volsung's grandson on his father's as well as his mother's side. Everything I have done has been to bring about King Siggeir's death. And I have done so much to achieve vengeance that to go on living is out of the question. I shall now gladly die with King Siggeir, reluctant though I was to marry him.”⁴⁴³

‘Nú skaltu vita, hvárt ek hef munat Siggeiri konungi dráp Völsungs konungs. Ek lét

⁴³⁹ R. G. Finch, ed. and trans., *Völsunga Saga* (London and Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1965), 14.

⁴⁴⁰ Finch, *Völsunga saga*, 14.

⁴⁴¹ Finch, *Völsunga saga*, 13.

⁴⁴² Finch, *Völsunga saga*, 13.

⁴⁴³ Finch, *Völsunga saga*, 13-14.

*drepa börn okkur er mér þóttu of sein til fjoðurhefnda, ok ek fór í skóg til þín í völvulíki, ok er Sinfjötli okkarr sonr. Hefir hann af því mikit kapp, at hann er bæði sonarsonr ok dóttursonr Volsungs konungs. Hefi ek þar til unnit alla hluti at Siggeirr konungr skyldi bana fá. Hefi ek ok svá mikit til unnit at fram kæmist hefndin, at mér er með engum kosti lift. Skal ek nú deyja með Siggeiri konungi lostig er ek átta hann nauðig.*⁴⁴⁴

In this monologue, Signý confesses the incestuous parentage of Sinfjötli, revealing to Sigmundur that the youth is not only his nephew, but his son as well. The notion that her tireless work to avenge her family has rendered her unfit to live is intriguing, not only in the context of other Scandinavian noblewomen who join their husbands or lovers on the pyre, but also in the specific context of the *Volsunga Saga* and related materials.

Although Signý's death is a suicide, and Sín dies from grief, their narratives share some details. Signý's husband betrayed and killed her father and nine of her ten brothers. Before Sín's death, "the clerics were asking her who she herself was, or who was her father or her mother, and what cause she had from the king when she ruined him as aforesaid."⁴⁴⁵ (*Ro batar na clerig iarsin ica iarfaigid di cuich hi fein nó cia a hathair nó a máthair, 7 cia cúis do bí aice don rig in uair ro mill-si mar siúd he.*)⁴⁴⁶ Sín replies by giving her name and her father's, then explains why she set out to destroy the king: "Muirchertach mac Erca killed my father, my mother, and my sister in the battle of Cerb on Boyne, and also destroyed in that battle all the Old-Tribes of Tara and my fatherland."⁴⁴⁷ (*Muirchertach mac Erca [...] ro marb m'athair 7 mo máthair 7 mo derbshiur iccath Chirb for Boinn, 7 ro dicenn sentuatha Temrach 7 m'atharda uile isin cath sin fos*).⁴⁴⁸ Signý and Sín both plot vengeance for their families while engaging in a sexual relationship with the man they seek to ruin. Each woman ends her life after making a confession

⁴⁴⁴ Finch, *Volsunga saga*, 13-14.

⁴⁴⁵ Stokes, *Aided Muirchertaig*, 429.

⁴⁴⁶ Stokes, *Aided Muirchertaig*, 428.

⁴⁴⁷ Stokes, *Aided Muirchertaig*, 429.

⁴⁴⁸ Stokes, *Aided Muirchertaig*, 428.

of her transgressions to a male audience; Signý to her brother and son, Sín to the gathered clerics. The careful staging of the death scene suggests that for the creators of these texts, that much female agency must be curbed, reigned in by the proper (masculine) authority and, in Signý's case, cleansed by fire.

In a scene occurring both in *Völsunga Saga* and in the poem *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta*, Brynhildr, after engineering the death of Sigurðr, stabs herself with a sword and commands that she and Sigurðr be burned together on one pyre.⁴⁴⁹ Book 1 of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* relates how Gunnilda, the wife of King Asmundus, stabs herself when she learns of her husband's death in battle, after which her body is placed in the burial mound with her husband.⁴⁵⁰ In Book 7, Signe and her handmaidens make a pact to set their bedchamber on fire and simultaneously hang themselves, when her lover Hagbarth is executed by her father.⁴⁵¹

As in the Irish texts discussed above, several of the Scandinavian heroines who commit suicide engage in transgressive sexual relationships, and revenge is frequently a component in Norse texts. Signý avenges her father and brothers, and has a child with her brother; Brynhildr avenges her own betrayed honor, Signe takes as a lover a man who killed her own brothers. The characters who die from grief are often more passive, and this fits with the notion that it is uncontrollable grief which causes the deaths of these women, rather than their own will.

This correlation between personality and manner of death plays out in the life of Guðrún in the *Völsunga* material. She is arguably the most tragic of all the saga heroines, and her fate is related in a series of Eddic poems, as well as in *Völsunga Saga*. She marries Sigurðr, who is murdered by her brothers. The poem *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* depicts her sitting over his corpse.

⁴⁴⁹ Finch, *Völsunga saga*, 61; Klaus von See, Beatrice La Farge, Eve Picard, Katja Schulz, Matthias Teichert, eds. *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda* 6 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009), 277.

⁴⁵⁰ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 27.

⁴⁵¹ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 236.

The prose introduction to the poem states that “she was about to burst from grief” (*hon var búin til at springa af harmi.*)⁴⁵² The opening stanzas state that “Guðrún prepared to die” (*Guðrún gørðiz at deyia*)⁴⁵³ and that “she was so impassioned, she might have burst asunder” (*svá var hón móðug, mundi hon springa.*)⁴⁵⁴ Her death by grief is averted, and she later marries Atli, whom she eventually kills, along with their two sons, in revenge for the murder of her brothers. After this, she attempts to drown herself in the sea, but instead the waves carry her to shore,⁴⁵⁵ and to another husband. Guðrún’s final scene in the saga and the related Eddic poems both depict her lamenting her fate after inciting her two sons to avenge the death of their sister. In the saga this lament is spoken in her chamber, but in the poem *Guðrúnarhvöt* she concludes her lament with a command that a funeral pyre be built. She clearly intends or expects to die; the manner of her death is not specified, but clear parallels with Brynhildr’s death scene make death by sword seem likely.

Guðrún is relatively passive as Sigurðr’s wife, and does not seek vengeance for his death. When Atli kills her brothers, she murders him and their children, and finally, she incites her sons to avenge their sister, an act that will end in their deaths. Her increasingly active role in seeking vengeance is paralleled by her shift from a passive, paralyzed victim of grief to a figure who actively seeks her own destruction.

Brynhildr’s own death in the saga occurs almost immediately after Sigurðr is murdered in his bed, and appears to be motivated by grief and remorse:

Then Gunnar stood up and embraced her and begged her to live and to accept riches, and all the others urged her not to die. But she rebuffed all who came to her and said it was

⁴⁵² von See, *Kommentar zu den Liedern* 6, 190 .

⁴⁵³ von See, *Kommentar zu den Liedern* 6, 223.

⁴⁵⁴ von See, *Kommentar zu den Liedern* 6, 224.

⁴⁵⁵ Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn, eds., *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius, Nebst Verwandten Denkmälern*, 4th edition (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1962), 263. Ursula Dronke proposes that “the statement that ‘she could not sink’ suggests that a witch-like character was already attributed to her, for witches cannot drown.” *The Poetic Edda, vol. 1, The Heroic Poems*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 145.

useless to try to turn her from her purpose. Then Gunnar appealed to Hogni and asked him for advice and told him to go and see if he might soothe her, and said it was now very necessary if her grief could be lessened until time healed it! “Let no one tell her not to die,” answered Hogni, “for she’s been no use to us, or to anyone else, since she came here.”⁴⁵⁶

Þá reis Gunnarr upp ok lagði hendr um háls henni, ok bað at hon skyldi lifa ok þiggja fé, ok allir aðrir lottu hana at deyja. En hon hratt hverjum frá sér er at henni kom, ok kvað ekki tjóa mundu at letja hana þess er hon ætlaði. Síðan hét Gunnarr á Hogni ok spyrr hann ráða, ok bað hann til fara ok vita ef hann fengi mýkt skaplyndi hennar, ok kvað nú ærna þorfr vera á hǫndum ef sefask mætti hennar harmr, þar til er frá liði. Hogni svarar, “Leti engi maðr hana at deyja, því at hon varð oss aldri at gagni ok engum manni síðan hon kom hingat.”⁴⁵⁷

Brynhildr’s intent is to join Sigurðr in the afterlife. She claims that “if I accompany him the door will not swing shut on his heels, nor will our funeral be paltry if five bondswomen and eight servants given me by my father accompany him.”⁴⁵⁸ (*eigi fellr honum þá hurð á hæla ef ek fylgi honum, ok er vár leizla þá ekki aumlig ef honum fylgja fimm ambáttir ok átta þjónar er faðir minn gaf mér.*)⁴⁵⁹

Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta presents a more psychologically complex scene. The beginning of the poem posits Guðrún’s bursting from grief as a very real danger. The courtiers have gathered around Guðrún, whose inability to weep causes fear that she will die from her unexpressed grief. There are numerous other examples of Norse heroines who die by bursting from grief, but the specific details of this text, particularly the tears providing release from the threat of deadly grief, are not matched in other Icelandic and Scandinavian texts, a fact which is in itself puzzling, given the prominence of the Vǫlsung cycle in the Nordic imagination. In an

⁴⁵⁶ Finch, *Vǫlsunga Saga*, 60.

⁴⁵⁷ Finch, *Vǫlsunga Saga*, 60.

⁴⁵⁸ Finch, *Vǫlsunga Saga*, 61.

⁴⁵⁹ Finch, *Vǫlsunga Saga*, 61.

unpublished paper given at the 45th International Congress in Medieval Studies,⁴⁶⁰ Thomas D.

Hill considers the problem posed by this unparalleled constellation of details. Hill argues that

in terms of a purely formal reading of “Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta” one can make a strong case for the conception that tears and the open expression of grief are important to the healing process and that denying the expression of grief is potentially destructive and indeed life-threatening. Similar ideas are widely expressed in contemporary popular psychology and elsewhere and it could be argued that such ideas are virtually a human universal. But one would not want to explicate an Eddic poem on the basis of modern American popular psychology and the balance between emotional expressivity and restraint differs so widely in different cultures that appeals to universal human ideals are suspect at best.”⁴⁶¹

Hill goes on to provide several close analogues from twelfth-century medieval romances. In

Gottfried’s version of the Tristan legend, when Tristan’s mother Blanche-flor learns that her lover is dead, the narrator marvels that she neither weeps nor laments, explaining that grief has turned

her heart to stone. She dies after four days, giving birth to Tristan.⁴⁶² Hill also cites the death of

King Bran in the Old French *Lancelot du Lac*, where the king’s grief over the destruction of his realm and his family’s future fall from privilege and status causes such great sorrow that his tears

cease to flow, his heart closes up, and he falls fainting from his horse. Upon waking he prays for

his wife and child, then his heart breaks and he dies. Hill proposes that “it is not so much grief

that kills him as the fact that his grief cannot find some appropriate outlet.”⁴⁶³ He concludes by

suggesting that, while a topos of medieval Icelandic literature “is a kind of stoic suppression of emotion,” we need not assume that this was the only perspective on emotional expression

circulating in the culture and present in the literary tradition. “The author,” Hill writes, “was

aware of the larger emotional truth that grief can only be suppressed at a very high price. The

⁴⁶⁰ Thomas D. Hill, “Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta: “Guðrún’s Healing Tears,” *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2012).

⁴⁶¹ Hill, “Guðrúnarkviða,” 6.

⁴⁶² Hill, “Guðrúnarkviða,” 9-10.

⁴⁶³ Hill, “Guðrúnarkviða,” 12.

poet may have learned this truth from romance narratives of the twelfth century. . . , or this may well have been a theme in the native Germanic poetic tradition which the Eddic poets for the most part drew upon. The familiar debate between nativists and comparatists is both irresolvable and boring.”⁴⁶⁴

The Old English prose *Life of Guthlac* contains another close parallel. Pega, Guthlac’s sister, is informed of her brother’s death, and “She fell at once to the ground and was filled with a great heaviness, so that she was unable to speak. When she recovered, she drew from her breast a long sigh, and then gave thanks to the Lord.” (*heo þa sona on eorðan feoll and mid micelre hefignysse gefylled wearð, þæt heo word gecwepan ne mihte. Mid þan heo þa eft hig gehyrte, heo þa of þam breostum inneweardum lange sworetunge teah, and þa þam Wealdende þanc sæde.*)⁴⁶⁵ Pega spends the next three days singing hymns for her brother’s soul, and then Guthlac is buried. In much the same way as Guðrún, Pega outlives her crushing grief to oversee her brother’s funeral, and in both cases survival appears to be caused by a physical release: tears in the case of Guðrún, and Pega’s sigh (or sob). *The Life of Guthlac* is a text about a Christian, and so it is fitting that where Guðrún sings a lament for her dead husband, Pega praises God.

Like Brynhildr, Sigrún is a rebellious valkyrie, defying Óðinn to take Helgi as her husband. Unfortunately, Sigrún’s father wants her to marry someone else, and in the ensuing battle Helgi kills not only his rival, but also Sigrún’s father and one of her brothers. Eventually the surviving brother, Dagr, allies himself with Óðinn, and the god gives him a spear with which to achieve his revenge. Sigrún is devastated by Helgi’s death, and her grief is so powerful that it compels Helgi, whom the poem has already shown being welcomed in Valhøll by Óðinn, to return to his burial mound, with a company of many men. These men play no role other than to

⁴⁶⁴ Hill, “*Guðrúnarkviða*,” 14.

⁴⁶⁵ Paul Gonser, *Das angelsächsische Prosa-Leben de heiligen Guthlac Anglistische Forschungen* (Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger, 1909), 167.

accompany Helgi, but their presence reinforces the fact that Helgi is now part of a warrior fellowship, and Sigrún's grief is an intrusion and disrupts his new state. Sigrún's handmaid witnesses the men's arrival and speaks briefly with Helgi. She asks if she truly sees dead men riding, if it is Ragnarøk, and whether the fighters have been allowed to come home. He tells her it is no delusion, but the world is not ending, and that the fighters have not been allowed to come home. The maid reports this to Sigrún, who joins Helgi inside the gravemound. She greets her dead husband:

‘Now I am as glad, at our meeting,
as are the greedy hawks of Odin
when they know of slaughter, steaming food,
or, dew-drenched, they see the dawn.’

‘First I want to kiss the lifeless king,
before you throw off your bloody mail-coat;
your hair, Helgi, is thick with hoar-frost,
the prince is all soaked in slaughter-dew,
Hogni's son-in-law has clammy hands.
How, lord, can I find a remedy for this?’⁴⁶⁶

*Nú em ek svá fegin
fundi okrom
sem átfrek[i]r
Óðins haukar,
er val vito,
varmar bráðir,
eða dögglitir
dagsbrún síá.*⁴⁶⁷

*Fyrr vil ek kyssa
konung ólifðan
en þú blóðugri
brynio kastir;
hár er þitt, Helgi,
hélo þrungit,
allr er vísi
valdogg sleginn,*

⁴⁶⁶ Carolyne Larrington, ed. and trans., *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 139.

⁴⁶⁷ Klaus von See, Beatrice La Farge, Wolfgang Gerhold, Debora Dusse, Eve Picard, Katja Schulz, eds. *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda 4* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2004), 782.

*hendr úrsvalar
Hogna mági;
hvé skal ek þér, buðlungr,
þess bót of vinna?*⁴⁶⁸

Helgi tells her that the blood and frost she sees are of her own making:

‘You alone, Sigrun, from Sefafell,
cause Helgi to be soaked in sorrow-dew;
you weep, gold-adorned lady, bitter tears,
sun-bright southern girl, before you to sleep;
each falls bloody on the breast of the prince,
cold as dew, burning hot, thick with grief.’⁴⁶⁹

*Ein veldr þú, Sigrún
frá Sefafjallom,
er Helgi er
harmdogg sleginn:
grætr þú, gullvarið,
grimmom tárom,
sólbírt, suðræn,
áðr þú sofa gangir;
hvert fellr blóðugt
á brióst grami,
úrsvalt, innfiálgt,
ekka þrungit.*⁴⁷⁰

They spend the night together, but Helgi must return to Valhöll before cockcrow, and though Sigrún’s maid waits by the mound, when dusk falls Helgi has still not appeared. His widow’s initial hope that he will return to her soon fades. According to the prose following the poem in the manuscript, “Sigrún was shortlived from grief and sorrow.”⁴⁷¹ (*Sigrún varð skammlíf af harmi ok trega.*)⁴⁷² In this text, the woman’s unceasing grief not only ends her own life, but also troubles the hero’s existence in the afterlife. As a valkyrie, Sigrún would have been responsible

⁴⁶⁸ von See, *Kommentar zu den Liedern* 4, 786.

⁴⁶⁹ Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, 140.

⁴⁷⁰ von See, *Kommentar zu den Liedern* 4, 788.

⁴⁷¹ Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, 141.

⁴⁷² von See, *Kommentar zu den Liedern* 4, 806.

for choosing men to be slain and escorting them to Valhøll; here her role has been inverted, and rather than acting as a psychopomp escorting the dead, she impedes the journey to the afterlife.⁴⁷³

In Snorri's account of Baldr's funeral, when Nanna saw her husband's body placed on his funeral ship "she burst from grief and died," (*sprakk hón af harmi ok dó*).⁴⁷⁴ Her body is burned with his on the pyre. Nanna is something of a cipher in *Snorra Edda*; she never speaks, and aside from dying of grief for Baldr, her only action is the sending of gifts for Frigg and Fulla back with Hermóðr, when he visits her and Baldr in Hel.⁴⁷⁵ As John Lindow points out, "Nanna's role, like that of Baldr, is to die,"⁴⁷⁶ and her passivity and utter lack of voice support this observation; only in death does she gain any personal agency at all. In Saxo's version of the Baldr myth, Nanna is a mortal, a king's daughter, and foster-sister to Hotherus, whom she loves. Saxo's Nanna is resourceful and clever, putting off the demi-god Balderus' attentions by claiming that the poverty of her status as a mortal prevented any union with such an exalted entity as himself.⁴⁷⁷ Hotherus defeats his rival and marries Nanna. After this happy event, however, Nanna vanishes from the narrative, and though the ongoing feud between Hotherus and Balderus will lead to both of their deaths, her presence is not mentioned at either of their funerals. Fittingly, the last reference to Nanna in the text is of phantoms, who take on her form and torment Balderus in the night; she has disappeared from the story, and the reader, like the lovesick Balderus, is taunted by specters and reflections in her absence.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷³ I analyze this scene more extensively in Chapter 4.

⁴⁷⁴ Faulkes, Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 46.

⁴⁷⁵ Faulkes, Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 47.

⁴⁷⁶ Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, 91.

⁴⁷⁷ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 73.

⁴⁷⁸ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 74.

King Halfdanr's wife grieved so much at hearing of her husband's death that "she burst from grief" (*hún sprakk af harmi*) in *Sorla Saga Sterka*,⁴⁷⁹ and in *Laxdæla Saga* to describe the death of Hrefna after her husband Kjartan's death: "*hón hafði sprungit af stríði*," "she had burst from grief."⁴⁸⁰ In one version of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, Ingibjorg kills herself when she learns that her betrothed is dead (*má eigi lifa eftir hann ok ræðr sér sjálf bana*).⁴⁸¹ however, a different version states that "she immediately burst from grief" (*hún sprakk þegar af harmi*).⁴⁸² This phrase, or variants of it, is commonly used to describe a death from grief, and will be considered more fully later in this chapter.

Death from grief is sometimes portrayed as a fatal illness: "In the meantime Regner of Sweden died. His wife, Svanhvita, herself very soon contracted a disease through her sorrow and passed away, following her husband, from whom she had never been able to bear separation during his life; it often happens that people who have lavished outstanding affection on the living struggle to accompany them when they depart this life."⁴⁸³ (*Interea Regnero apud Suetiam defuncto, coniunx eius Suanhuita paruo post et ipsa morbo ex mesticia contracto decedit, fato uirum insecuta, a quo uita distrahi passa non fuerat. Fieri namque solet, ut quidam ob eximiam caritatem, quam uiuis impenderant, eciam uita excedentes comitari contendant.*)⁴⁸⁴

I will conclude this section with the description of another bereaved queen, this one in a Christian Norse setting, whose grief is described at length, and whose behavior complicates the distinction between the categories of deliberate suicide and dying from grief. This example is

⁴⁷⁹ Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds., *Sörla Saga Sterka*, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda* 3 (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Forni, 1944), 211.

⁴⁸⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Laxdæla Saga*, Íslenzk fornrit V (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), 158.

⁴⁸¹ G. Turville-Petre, ed., *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1956, repr. 1976), 10.

⁴⁸² Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda* 1 (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Forni, 1943), 429.

⁴⁸³ Fisher and Davidson, *History of the Danes*, 51-2.

⁴⁸⁴ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 52.

taken from *Ólafs Saga Tryggvassonar*, the Norse translation of a no longer extant Latin text, written by an Icelandic monk in the late 12th century. Queen Þyri, the widow of Ólafr Tryggvasson, reacts to news of her husband's death with bitter weeping, and her grief leaves her unable to eat or drink. Jarl Eiríkr, who now controls her husband's kingdom, hears of this and assures her that her high status and rank will continue under his rule. She replies: "Even if I were to make the choice to live rather than to die with King Ólafr, my heart is so dashed with the access of sorrow and so swollen with the enervation of my mind that no spark of life can restore or resuscitate me." (*En þó at ec velia mer þann lut til handa at liva helldr en deyia með Ólaft konungi. Þa er þó hiartat mitt sua akafliga lostit með hormum hryggleiksins. Oc síþan þrutit orðit iumegni hugarins. At engi gneisti lifsins ma mek nu nóra eða lifga.*)⁴⁸⁵ The queen wishes to die, but not to commit the sin of suicide, and she consults an "eminent" (*dyrlegr*) priest, who advises her that if she sustains herself by a single apple "she might be free of guilt and without sin," and yet still bring about her own death. She follows his advice, and after nine days she perishes.⁴⁸⁶

Like many others who die of grief in Scandinavian texts, Þyri is a widow whose heart is distended with emotion. Þyri presents herself as the helpless victim of her grief; even if she were to choose life, her body is too ravaged by sorrow for her to survive. Nevertheless, she does not burst from grief, despite the swelling of her heart, and her suicide seems both determined and oddly submissive: it is an act of will, but also of surrender.

Þyri's Christianity had earlier caused her to flee from marriage to a pagan and marry instead the Christian Ólafr, and here it circumscribes her desire for death; physical violence against her own person is forbidden. The author of the text makes no criticism of the priest's

⁴⁸⁵ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Ólafssaga*, (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gads Forlag, 1932), 238.

⁴⁸⁶ Jónsson, *Ólafssaga*, 238. The account of the queen's grief and suicide is followed in the next chapter of the saga by the lachrymose sorrow and death by self-starvation of Vígi, the king's hound. Jónsson, *Ólafssaga*, 239-40.

rather unorthodox advice, and he may have seen it as a reasonable solution to a difficult problem. The use of an apple, a fruit with strong associations with the pagan otherworld and afterlife in both Norse and Celtic literature, is an intriguing detail. According to Snorri, the goddess Iðunn “keeps in her basket apples that the gods must eat when they grow old, and then they all grow young, and so it will be until Ragnarøk.” (*Hon varðveitir í eski sínu epli þau er goðin skulu á bíta þá er þau eldask, ok verða þá allir ungir, ok svá mun vera allt til ragnarøks.*)⁴⁸⁷ In the Irish tale *Echtrae Conli*, Connla “the Fair” is approached by a woman from the otherworld, who has loved him from afar, and entices him to accompany her to her homeland. She speaks of a land without weeping or sorrow, and tells Connla that if he accepts her offer, he will retain his youth and beauty until the Day of Judgment. Connla’s father entreats his druid to banish the woman, but before she departs, she tosses an apple to her beloved. The apple has magical properties: it provides nourishment for a month, and is never diminished, although it is all that Connla eats during that time. At the end of the month, the woman returns, and Connla joins her in her boat of crystal, never to be seen again by mortal eyes.⁴⁸⁸ In these two accounts, apples are connected with otherworld, and with eternal youth and beauty. The Irish tale has particular resonance with Þyri’s choice to die: both Connla and Þyri subsist solely on the fruit, and in both cases the act is related to longing for a lover and desire to leave the mortal world and join the beloved in a place beyond death.

The action advised by Þyri’s priest may have been construed as acceptable because it resembles, in form though not in intent, religious fasting. Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that control of food, including personal consumption and refusal, played an important role in the

⁴⁸⁷ Faulkes, Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 25.

⁴⁸⁸ Kim McCone, ‘*Eachtrae Chonnlaí*’ and the Beginnings of Vernacular Narrative Writing in Ireland: A Critical Edition with Introduction, Notes, Bibliography and Vocabulary. (Maynooth: Department of Old and Middle Irish, National University of Ireland, 2000).

construction of female identity and sanctity in the medieval Church.⁴⁸⁹ Bynum discusses a number of holy women and their relationship to food, but of particular interest to the current discussion is the case of Lidwina, a woman living in the Netherlands in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Lidwina rejected her family's attempts to arrange a marriage for her, and she became ill and bedridden at fifteen, which Bynum argues may indicate that she was "cultivating illness—perhaps even rejecting food," a short time before she was injured while skating, an accident that would paralyze her whole body save for her left hand.⁴⁹⁰ Lidwina dies in 1433 at the age of 53,⁴⁹¹ and between the onset of her paralysis and her death her abstention from food became gradually more severe, with reports indicating that towards the end of her life, she subsisted solely on the eucharist.⁴⁹² "At first, she supposedly ate a little piece of apple each day, although bread dipped into liquid caused her much pain. Then she reduced her intake to a bit of date and watered wine flavored with spice and sugar; later she survived on watered wine alone – only half a pint a week – and she preferred it when the water came from the river and was contaminated with salt from the tides. When she ceased to take any solid food, she also ceased to sleep. And finally she ceased to swallow anything at all."⁴⁹³

Lidwina lived centuries after Pyri, but Lidwina's example suggests that we may read Pyri's self-starvation as a religious fast, moving towards a socially sanctioned model of female piety. Both Pyri and Lidwina exert control over their circumstances by abstention from eating,

⁴⁸⁹ "Taken together, this evidence demonstrates two things. First, food practices were more central in women's piety than in men's. Second, both men and women associate food -- especially fasting and the eucharist--with women ... Yet the most telling argument for the prominence of food in women's spirituality is the way in which food motifs interweave in women's lives and writings until even phenomena not normally thought of as eating, feeding, or fasting seems to become food-related. In other words, food becomes such a pervasive concern that it provides both a literary and a psychological unity to the woman's way of seeing the world." Caroline Walker Bynum, "Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women," *Representations* 11 (1985), 1-25: 4. For a discussion of suicide by self-starvation in classical Greek and Roman society, see Veronika E. Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting, The Evolution of a Sin: Attitudes to Food in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1996), 57.

⁴⁹⁰ Bynum, "Fast, Feast," 5.

⁴⁹¹ Bynum, "Fast, Feast," 5.

⁴⁹² Bynum, "Fast, Feast," 7.

⁴⁹³ Bynum, "Fast, Feast," 5.

and both are socially vulnerable individuals, one an adolescent on the cusp of marriage, the other a widow, who reject food at a point of unwanted transition in their lives: Lidwina from unwed girl to potential wife, and Þyri from queen to widow. The potential relationship between fasting and suicide is surprisingly absent in the discourse surrounding fasting.

The text attempts to accommodate both sensibilities: the pagan obligation for a queen to follow her husband in death, and the Christian prohibition on suicide. It fails in this, I think, but the fact that it is attempted at all tells much about the conflicting value systems at play in these texts, and hints at ambivalence towards traditional values in light of the adoption of Christianity. Like the Icelanders who sought guarantees that the practice of infanticide would not be outlawed if they converted, Þyri seeks to accommodate deeply held cultural beliefs about mortality within a system that views life and death from a radically different perspective.

Grieving Men in Irish Sources

As is the case with women in Irish sources, men in Irish texts rarely commit suicide, from grief or any other motivation. Aed killed his father, Garaid, after Garaid had burned down Finn's house with all the inhabitants within. After the patricide, Aed is so stricken with grief that he flees and drowns himself in the waves. Father and son are buried side by side.⁴⁹⁴ The death of the hero and king Lugaid Riab nDerg is often attributed to grief for his wife Derbforgaill, who dies from a brutal mutilation inflicted by women jealous of her sexual allure. The exact circumstance of his death, however, is portrayed in several different ways. Several texts relate that he fell on his sword, some specifying that this happened twenty-five years after his wife's death. Karen Burgess notes that even the verb used to describe Lugaid's suicide emphasizes the agency of the

⁴⁹⁴ E. J. Gwynn and J. J. Lloyd, "The Burning of Finn's House," *Ériu* 1 (1904), 13-37: 33.

act: “The verb translated as ‘lept’ is *lingid*, which means ‘leaping’ or jumping. Lugaid’s suicide is no passive accidental ‘falling’ on his sword, but a decisive act of self-destruction.”⁴⁹⁵

Other texts keep the twenty-five year interval, but make no mention of suicide as the cause of death. A single text, *Aided Derbforgaill*, has him die immediately upon seeing his dead wife. The author of *Aided Derbforgaill* may have been aware only that Lugaid died of grief, and not that traditionally this death occurred more than two decades after that of his wife. Burgess observes that a stanza from the poem *Derbforgaill* speaks as she is dying in *Aided Derbforgaill* is found in Rawlinson B 502, following mention of Lugaid killing himself from grief for his wife twenty-five years after her death, showing that the poem, at least, is older than the 1130’s, when this manuscript was compiled.⁴⁹⁶ This suggests that the author of *Aided Derbforgaill* may have been aware of the traditional interval between *Derbforgaill* and Lugaid’s deaths, although this is not certain. However, even if the author was aware of the other tradition, he may have deliberately modified the details of Lugaid’s death to fit the sense of tragic romance that pervades this narrative. The multitude of other narratives using this motif may have made such an addition or alteration to the received tradition an attractive option for the author.

The *dindshenchas* poem *Mag Life* relates that “Child-birth was the death of eager Life at Port Agmar in Aran; thereby the son of Drucht got his death, from his great grief for heroic Life.”⁴⁹⁷ (*Lámnad roloit Lifi laind i Purt Ágmar i n-Áraind ruc muidaid mac Druchta de, di chumaid lór láech-Life*).⁴⁹⁸ *Loch Gile*, another *dindshenchas* poem, relates the death of Gile, who drowned herself when her lover spied her bathing in a spring. Her father Romra killed her lover, but “Romra died outright of his sorrow on the fair hill-side: from him is lordly Carn Romra

⁴⁹⁵ Burgess, “Lugaid,” 317.

⁴⁹⁶ Burgess, “Lugaid,” 317.

⁴⁹⁷ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 2, 60-1.

⁴⁹⁸ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 2, 60-1.

called.”⁴⁹⁹ (*Douair Romra in bas bunaig da cumaig sa chaem-thulaig: is uaada Carn Romra ran*).⁵⁰⁰ When Findabair, as mentioned above, died of grief for her father Lugaid, her fosterson followed her in death: “After Findabair, her nursling died of grief for loss of his mistress: ‘tis right to set his name in her lay: from him Bréch-mag is called.”⁵⁰¹ (*Ruc bás cumad cen chodnach a dalta i n-diaid Findabrach: ina dúain dlegar a chur, is úaid atberar Brécmag*).⁵⁰²

Two *dindshenchas* describe how Tulach Dér (The Hill of Tears) became Druim Suamaig. Originally named for the tears shed by the Dagda for his son, it is renamed after Suamach, who dies of grief on the hill when he sees the fire that kills his fosterson. “Druim Suamaig I” narrates the death through Suamach’s final words:

When Cormac, dangerous foeman, reached Da Choca's Hall of Judgements. undimmed by faintness, he met death in fatal fire.
 Suamach hastened across the rivers, he and his proud stern mate, as far as the massy Hill of Tears, to stop him and stay his steps.
 (The Dagda's tears—for the Hill is his—the warrior king of Colt let fall in mourning for Aed of Ath No, over his pyre on the mighty hill.)
 When the brave boy's foster parents reached the spot, without faltering, they see the flames of ruin fringing the blazing Hall.
 ‘I see the smoke of the slaying of Cormac where he lies on a bitter bed’, said Suamach:
 ‘the nursling that was my pride till now: let me live no longer after him!’

(*Ó rosiacht bruidin na m-breth Cormac, duilig a debech, Da Choca, cen tlás temil, fúair bas ocus beó-thenid.*
Cechaing Súamach dar cach sruth dia aurgaire, dia astud, is a ainder ér arnaid co Tulaig nDér n-dron-adbail.
Déra in Dagdai, díles dó, ic cáiniud Áeda ó Áth Nó: roscí rí Cuilt, in curaid, ina thuirt 'sin trom-thulaig.
Ó doriacht cen laice ille aite in maic maith 's a muime, adciat in daigid n-duilig 'na brainig don beó-bruidin.
*‘Díaid oirgne Cormaic adciu’, ol Súamach, ‘ic serb-laigiu:’ ‘dalta romdechair cose,’ ‘ní beo im bethaid dia ésse.’).*⁵⁰³

⁴⁹⁹ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 12-13.

⁵⁰⁰ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 12-13.

⁵⁰¹ Stokes, “Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” 70-1.

⁵⁰² Stokes, “Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” 70-1.

⁵⁰³ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 236-7.

The poem leaves the manner of Suamach's death unclear. Druim Suamaig II gives a briefer account, but mentions the cause of Suamach's death directly:

Here on his hillside is the grave of Suamach son of Samguba, skilled in liberal arts: he died of a sudden on his hill, not by battle, but of grief for Cormac. When valiant Suamach came, following his brave nursling, he died on his hillside, without feat of arms, when he beheld the Hall.⁵⁰⁴

*Feart Suamaigh sund ara leirg, meic Samhthuba co saer-ceird: adbath ara tulaig tric gan cath da cumaidh Cormaic. Dia tainic Suamach slatra a n-deadhaigh a dheadhealta meabais gan ceird ngaisgidh de sa le irg ag faicsin bruigne.*⁵⁰⁵

Fergal's wife, Heile, is seen in the company of a man and accused of taking a lover, although the man is actually her brother. Fergal commands that she be burned to death, but later dies of grief for her.⁵⁰⁶

As mentioned above, Lugaid Riab nDerg is sometimes said to have died from grief, as opposed to suicide. In *Aided Derbforgaill*. Lugaid's wife Derbforgaill is brutally mutilated by women jealous of her allure. She shuts herself away and dies from her wounds, and "her soul was not in her when they came into that house. They say then that Lugaid died immediately upon seeing her." (*ní baí a hanim inti-si in tan tancatar-som is tech innund. As-berat dano ba marb Lugaid a chétóir oca déscin.*)⁵⁰⁷ In *Tóitean Tighe Finn*, another Lugaid's death of grief for his wife is mentioned: "That death which Lugaid found, it was no seemly death for a hero, to die of grief for his wife -- keen Lugaid son of Luchorman."⁵⁰⁸ (*An bás-sin fuair Lugaid. níor bhás cnesoa do churaid/ a éag do chumhaidh a mná/ Lugaid géar mac Lúcmáin.*)⁵⁰⁹ The speaker of

⁵⁰⁴ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 239.

⁵⁰⁵ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 238.

⁵⁰⁶ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 326-29.

⁵⁰⁷ Kíckí Ingridsdóttir, "Aided Derbforgaill: 'The Violent Death of Derbforgaill: A Critical Edition with Introduction, Translation, and Textual Notes," (Ph.D. diss, Uppsala Universitet, 2009), 86-7.

⁵⁰⁸ Gwynn and Lloyd, " Burning," 25.

⁵⁰⁹ Gwynn and Lloyd, " Burning," 24.

the ballad later states that “there died of grief for their wives three hundred like white-handed Lugaid.”⁵¹⁰ (*gur éag hdo chumhaidh a mban/ deich gcéad mar Lugaid Láimhgheal*).⁵¹¹

The *Acallam* also contains several scenes of men dying from sorrow. The Cataract of the Kin-Slaying is named for seven brothers who quarreled and killed each other on that site. Their father, Crónán, came to the spot to grieve for his dead sons, and his heart broke in the night. Subsequently the landmark is known as the Cataract of Crónán.⁵¹² Another site, the Cairn of the Kin-Slaying, also concerns brothers set against one another. Lám Luath is one of ten brothers. He seeks the hand of Níam, daughter of Borbchú. Unbeknownst to Lám Luath, his brothers have each approached Borbchú and asked for his daughter, and, cowed by death threats, he has promised her to each brother.

One evening around that time Lám Luath said to his brothers on this hill, “Is it true, dear brothers,” said he, “that you have asked Borbchú for the woman that I have sought?” “It is true,” they said. He was then struck by a pang of jealousy and rose up and took his sword. He gave a blow to the brother closest to him and killed him, and the other seven brothers who were there, seeing him slay one his kin, put their mouths to the ground and died from grief. They were placed in this cairn, which is, for this reason, called the Cairn of the Kin-Slaying . . .⁵¹³

*Ocus is annsin adubairt Lám Luath adhaig n-aen ann ar in tulaig-sea: ‘In fír sib-si, a m’ anum, a braithri’, ar se, ‘d’ iarraid na mná ro t-shiris-sa ar Borbchoin?’ ‘Is fír’, ar siat. Ocus is annsin táinic idhu éta da indsaigi, & ro eirig, & ro gab a chlaidim, & tuc béim don brathair ba nessa dó, cor’ marb h-é, & in mor-sheisir derbrathar ro badur tucsat a m-beil re lar ac faicsin na fíngaile do denum dó-sum, & fuaradur bas do chumaid annsin, & ro cuirid issin carnn-so iat, conid uathaib- sin atá Carnn na Finga(ile) (in) carnn-so . . .*⁵¹⁴

Of particular interest is the fact that aside from Cailte and Oisín, the surviving Fenians

⁵¹⁰ Gwynn and Lloyd, “Burning,” 26-27.

⁵¹¹ Gwynn and Lloyd, “Burning,” 26-27.

⁵¹² “*Is ann (táncatar) rompo co h-Es na Fíngaile, frisa raiter Es Cronain Meic in Bailb isin tan-so. Uair mor-sheissir derbrathair ro badur ann, & tarra eturru immon n-es, co ro marb cach a cheile dib, conid uathib-sin atá Es na Fíngaile fair, & ro mairistar a n-athair da n-éis, & ticed conice- seo .i. Crónan mac in Bailb, & do-nith Crónan ann acáined a mac, & ro moid a craide ina medhon adhaig ann. Conid uad ata Es Crónain.*” Stokes, *Acallam*, 203.

⁵¹³ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 209.

⁵¹⁴ Stokes, *Acallam*, 209.

choose to die, in one of the final scenes of the text:

On that occasion twenty-seven of the remainder of the *Fian* that was with Cailte came onto the hill to the west of Tara, and became aware of their lack of activity and of full vigour, and the fact that they did not have the good fortune that people would talk with them. They put their mouths to the ground of the earth on that hill and perished there. They were placed under the earth there and it is called the Hill of the Nines after them.⁵¹⁵

*IS si-sin uair & aimsir tangadur tri nonbair d' iarsma na Feinde ro bó i f-farrad Chailti ar in tulaig leth aniar do Themraig, & tucsat da n-úidh & da n-aire beith a n-ingnais a luith & a lán- choiblidh, & gan a beith do rath orro nech ac comrad ríu, & tucsat a m-bel re lár talman issin tulaig-sin, & fuaradur bás ann, & ro cuired fo thalmain iat, conid Cnoc na Nonbur ainm in chnuic-sin dia n-eis.*⁵¹⁶

Grieving Men in Scandinavian Sources

Male suicide in Norse and Scandinavian sources generally happens under two circumstances: a man whose lord has been killed will sometimes seek death, and a man whose son has died may commit suicide. Another cause for suicide is dishonour, and while grief is the focus of my discussion, I will begin with an account of near suicide that was prompted by motivations other than grief.

The friendship of Erik and King Frothi begins uneasily: King Frothi's court is corrupt, his queen is adulterous, and his counselors are wicked. Erik comes to court with his brother, and, through martial skill and trickery, kills several of the king's followers, exposes the queen's deception, and manages to obtain a betrothal to Frothi's sister Gunvara. Gunvara advises Erik to flee her brother's anger, and they do so, but Erik first damages the ships of Frothi's fleet before setting out to sea. When Frothi chases after his sister and her lover, his ships swiftly take on water, and Erik and his brother rescue Frothi from drowning. As soon as he is able to speak, Frothi berates Erik for his rescue: "In vain you have saved one who wished to perish. As you

⁵¹⁵ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 20.

⁵¹⁶ Stokes, *Acallam*, 221.

forbade me to drown, at least I can stab myself... Why do you grant me life when you have divested me of honour? I have lost my sister, my kingdom, my treasure, my household possessions and, worst of all, my reputation... Why should I survive only for such deep disgrace?"⁵¹⁷ (*Frustra uolentem perire seruastis. Aquis michi interire negatum est, ferri saltem officio moriar. [. . .] Quid uita donas, quem gloria spoliasti? Sororem, regnum, gazam, supellectilem et, quod iis maius est, claritudinem perdidisti [. . .]. Quid tanto superstes dedecori reseruabor?*)⁵¹⁸ Frothi goes on to reason with Erik, suggesting that he deserves death at Erik's hands, and he concludes with a warning: "Should you refuse to use steel on me, I shall take care to court destruction with my own hand."⁵¹⁹ (*Si fato ferrum negatis, propria michi manu cladem con<s>siscendam curabo.*)⁵²⁰

Erik responds at length to Frothi's suicidal aspirations, alternating between praising, cajoling, and criticizing the king. He opens with a request that Frothi put death out of his mind: "Please the gods to turn aside your stubbornness and stop you from putting a shameful end to a distinguished life. Sure the heavens forbid a benefactor of others to be his own unnatural murderer."⁵²¹ (*Dii a te, queso, quertant stolidam mentem; auertant, inquam, ne clarissime uite finem flagicio queras. Sane quidem ab ipsis prohibitum est, benignum in alios in se parricidam fore.*)⁵²² He speaks then of fate and luck, and enumerates the king's accomplishments and good fortune, before downplaying the king's mishaps as adequate cause for suicide:

I should hate to think you were so superficial that you ran away from troubles and, because you could not confront them, even wanted to throw away your life. Most unmanly of all is the one who fears hardship so much he loses his zest to remain alive. A person with his wits about him does not buy off misfortunes at the price of his death. To

⁵¹⁷ Fisher and Davidson, *History of the Danes*, 134.

⁵¹⁸ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, p.142.

⁵¹⁹ Fisher and Davidson, *History of the Danes*, 134-5.

⁵²⁰ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 143.

⁵²¹ Fisher and Davidson, *History of the Danes*, 135.

⁵²² Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 143.

lose one's temper with others is silly, to do it with oneself is crazy; it is a cowardly madness which drives a man to end himself. If you seek extinction deliberately because of some affront or trivial disturbance in your mind, whom can you leave behind to avenge you? Who is insane enough to punish vacillating Fortune by suicide?"⁵²³

*Numquam hoc tibi leuitatis inesse uellem, ut non modo fugere aspera, sed etiam ob eorum impacienciam uitam abiicere cupias. Quouis effeminacior est, qui aduersorum metu uiuendi fiduciam perdit. Nemo sapientum morte res aduersas redimere solet. Stulta est in alium indignacio, temeraria in se. Ignauus est furor, qui suum condemnat auctorem. Quod si ultro ob iniuriam aut leuem animi commocionem fatum appetis, quem tui uindicem derelinquis? Quis tam amens, ut dubium fortune habitum proprio ulcisci interitu uelit?*⁵²⁴

Frothi is persuaded to live, marries his sister to Erik, and gives his new friend a military command. While this narrative does not deal with grief for the dead, it does concern emotional distress at the loss of status, and the extended discussion of suicide is relevant to some of the other texts under consideration. Like Regnerus's wife, Erik uses accusations of effeminacy to jolt Frothi out of his despair. Many of Erik's statements point to the notion that suicide is an intemperate act; Erik, as the text has previously depicted him, practices calm moderation, and remains unruffled even when an attempt is made on his life.

In Book 4 of *Gesta Danorum*, Denmark, ruled by the blind King Wermundus, is under attack by the Saxons. A duel is proposed, to be fought between the two kings' sons, and Uffi, Wermundus' son, declares that not only will he fight the Saxon heir to defend Denmark, but he will allow a Saxon warrior to fight alongside his prince. The duel takes place on an island in a river, and Wermundus sits "at the very edge of a bridge, meaning to drown himself if his son should be defeated, for he preferred to share in the downfall of his kin rather than look upon his country's overthrow with grief-stricken heart."⁵²⁵ (*Wermundus in extrema pontis parte se collocat, si filium uinci contigisset, flumine periturus. Maluit enim sanguinis sui ruinam*

⁵²³ Fisher and Davidson, *History of the Danes*, 135-6.

⁵²⁴ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 143.

⁵²⁵ Fisher and Davidson, *History of the Danes*, 108.

comitari, quam patrie interitum pleris doloris sensibus intueri).⁵²⁶ Uffi hangs back to get the measure of his opponents before attacking, and “since Wermundus believed that this passivity in receiving blows was due to his feebleness, he edged slowly towards the bridge’s parapet, wishing to fling himself to his death if it should be all over with his son.”⁵²⁷ (*Quem Wermundus imbecillitatis uicio tantam recipiendorum ictuum pacienciam prestare existimans, paulatim in occiduam pontis oram mortis cupiditate se protrahit, si de filio actum foret, fatum precipicio petiturus*).⁵²⁸ Upon being informed that his son has killed the foreign warrior, Wermundus draws back from the edge, “now thirsting for life as eagerly as he had done for death before,”⁵²⁹ (*eodem studio lucem expetens, quo fatum optauerat*),⁵³⁰ and when Uffi defeats the Saxon prince, “the old man’s countenance dissolved tears with an excess of joy”⁵³¹ (*nimietate gaudii uultum fletu soluit*).⁵³²

Egils Saga contains the well-known scene in which Egill Skallagrímsson, grieving for his drowned son, locks himself in his bedchamber and attempts to starve himself to death. Egill’s daughter tricks him into drinking milk and eating seaweed, and, his fast now broken, she suggests that he compose a poem for his son. The result is the famous skaldic elegy, *Sonatorrek*. This episode strongly resembles an earlier scene in the text, where Kveldulfr, Egill’s grandfather, takes to his bed “from sorrow and age” (*af harmi ok elli*) at the death of his son Þórofr. Skallagrímr, his other son, comes to his father, and tells him that anything would be preferable to his father’s current state, and advises vengeance. Kveldulfr composes a short poem, saying that

⁵²⁶ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 115-6.

⁵²⁷ Fisher and Davidson, *History of the Danes*, 108.

⁵²⁸ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 116.

⁵²⁹ Fisher and Davidson, *History of the Danes*, 109.

⁵³⁰ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 116.

⁵³¹ Fisher and Davidson, *History of the Danes*, 109.

⁵³² Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 116.

his son has been taken too soon, and that old age prevents him from achieving a swift revenge.⁵³³

In Chapter 2 I discussed the reaction of King Regnerus to news of his son's death: he takes to his bed to die, vocal in his grief, and is roused by his wife's accusations of effeminacy, and the hope that he might avenge his son's death.

While most of the examples of the phrase "burst from grief" refer to women's deaths, it is used of a man's death in *Páttir af Ragnars Sonum*. When King Gormr was told of his son's death, "he fell back and burst of grief the next day at the same hour" (*pá hné hann aftr ok sprakk af harmi annan dag eptir at jafnlengd.*)⁵³⁴ Gormr's fatal grief for his son is noted briefly in the *páttir*, but it is treated more fully in other texts. Saxo's account follows:

At this period Gorm had advanced to the very end of his days, having passed a long succession of years in blindness. In prolonging his old age to the ultimate bound allotted to human beings he became more concerned about his sons' lives and advancement than the remnant of his own existence. So dear to his heart was the elder boy that he swore he would personally kill the one who first brought tidings of his death. When Thyra chanced to hear the news that he had definitely been slain, as no one dared to broach the matter to Gorm she grasped at her own ingenuity for aid and revealed by actions the disaster she was afraid to betray by word of mouth. After taking the royal robes from her husband's shoulders, she draped him with the shabbier ones and brought other symbols of grief to show there was a reason for mourning. Our ancestors used to have these accoutrements on funeral occasions and would demonstrate bitter sorrow by the severity of their dress.

"What are you telling me? That Knut is dead?" Gorm asked.

"They were your words," Thyra answered. "I didn't announce it." Her reply brought about her husband's end and her own widowhood, so that she bewailed her son and spouse at one and the same time.⁵³⁵

Quo tempore Gormo, ad ultimum etatis sue finem prouectus, ingentem annorum seriem luminibus captus exegerat, senectam ad ultimos humane condicionis terminos prorogando, magis de filiorum vita et incrementis quam reliquo spiritu suo sollicitus. Tanta autem maioris filii caritate tenebatur, ut a se occidendum iuraret, qui prior ipsius exitum nunciasset. Cumque forte Thira haud dubium de eiusdem exicio nuncium accepisset, nemine id Gormoni palam insinuare audente, presidium calliditatis amplexa, casum, quem ore prodere timuit, opere explicauit. Maritum namque regio cultu exutum tetriore circumdedit, aliaque doloris insignia, per que causam luctus, aperiret, admouit,

⁵³³ Bjarni Einarsson, *Egils saga*, 31-2.

⁵³⁴ Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds., *Páttir af Ragnars Sonum*, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda* 1 (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Forni, 1943), 301.

⁵³⁵ Fisher and Davidson, *History of the Danes*, 297.

*quod antiqui talibus inter exequiarum acciones uti consueuerant, acerbiter meroris habitus asperitate testantes. Tunc Gormo: En michi, inquit, Kanuti fatum publicas? Et Thira, Id ipsum, ait, tuo potius quam nostro declaratur augurio. Quo dicto marito mortem, sibi uiduitatis causam prebuit, nec ante filium quam coniugem planxit.*⁵³⁶

Jómsvíkinga saga contains a slightly different account:

King Gormr had sworn that if he ever heard of the death of his son Knútr both he and the man who told him the news would die. The queen had the hall draped with grey wadmal. All the people in the hall stopped talking when the king took his seat and so he asked: 'Why has everyone stopped talking? Is there any news?' The queen says: 'Sir, you had two hawks, one white and the other grey. The white one had flown a long way into the desert when a flock of crows attacked him, plucking and stripping him of all his feathers. And now the white one has gone, but the grey one has returned and he shall now hunt the birds for your table.' Then King Gormr said: 'So droops Denmark as my son Knútr is dead.' The queen replies: 'These are true tidings which you speak of, sir.' And all those in the hall confirmed this. King Gormr took ill the same day and died at the same hour the following day.

En Gormr konungr hafði þess heit strengt at hann skyldi deyja ef hann spyrði fall Knúts, sonar síns, ok svá sá er honum segði. Þá lét dróttning tjalda hollina grám vaðmálum. En er konungr kom til borðs þá þögðu allir þeir er inni váru. Þá mælti konungr: 'Hví þegja allir menn; eru nokkur tíðendi at segja?' Þá segir dróttning: 'Herra, þér áttuð tvá hauka, annar hvítr, en annar grár. Hinn hvíti hafði flogit langt í eyðimörk. Þar kómu at honum krákur margar ok plokkuðu hann svá at allar fjaðrar váru af honum reyttar. Ok nú er hinn hvíti floginn en hinn grái apr kominn, ok mun hann nú drepa fugla til borðhalds yör.' Þá mælti Gormr konungr: 'Svá drúpir Danmörk sem dauðr sé Knútr, son minn.' Þá segir dróttning: 'Sonn munu vera þessi tíðendi er þér segið, herra'—ok sonnuðu þat þá allir er inni váru. Þann sama dag tók Gormr konungr sótt ok andaðisk annan dag at jafnlengd.⁵³⁷

The loss of a son, then, causes fathers to entertain thoughts of death, even if they do not choose that course in the end. Outside of this familial relationship, men are rarely shown wanting to die as a result of bereavement. The closest example of a man at least threatening to die from grief over his wife is to be found in the passage in *Heimskringla*, considered in my Introduction

⁵³⁶ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 321.

⁵³⁷ N. F. Blake, ed. and trans., *Jómsvíkinga saga* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), 6-7.

and again in Chapter 2, when Sighvatr Skáld, returning from a pilgrimage to Rome, overhears a man loudly mourning the death of his wife, saying that he wants to die.⁵³⁸

A negative illustration of a man's grief for his wife occurs in *Heimskringla*, although the man does not die from grief. The Lappish wife of King Haraldr Harfagr dies but her corpse does not decay, and she retains the colour of a living woman. For three years the king grieves over her corpse, hoping she will return to life, while his people suffer from his neglect. Finally the king is counselled that the queen's bedclothes should be changed, and he permits this. When her body is lifted from the bed, the resulting reek prompts a quick funeral pyre, before which the corpse turns blue and is abandoned by creeping creatures which had been inhabiting it. The text portrays the incident as treason or deceit (*svik*) carried out by the queen.⁵³⁹

Readers of the sagas will be familiar with the term *draugr*, the walking corpse of Norse tradition who torments the living, and the queen's unnaturally preserved corpse is suggestive of the living dead. Her foreign origins are suspicious; in the minds of medieval Norse authors, Lappland's inhabitants are associated with wicked magic, and Queen Gunnhildr, the famous witch queen whose curses haunt Icelanders in such texts as *Egils Saga* and *Njáls Saga*, was said to have been trained in wizardry by two Lappish sorcerers before marrying Eiríkr Blóðøx, Haraldr Harfagr's son.⁵⁴⁰ In a thirteenth-century account by Jean de Mailly, a demon occupies the corpse of a beautiful woman in order to tempt a virtuous man; when the demon abandons the corpse, it immediately falls into decay,⁵⁴¹ much like the corpse of Harald's queen, which is revealed to be inhabited by vermin when it is moved.

⁵³⁸ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla* 2, 15.

⁵³⁹ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla* 1, 126-7.

⁵⁴⁰ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla* 1, 135-6.

⁵⁴¹ Jean de Mailly, *Abrege des gestes et miracles des saints*, cxix.16, trans. A. Dondaine (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1947), 338-9.

Nancy Caciola considers the numerous accounts of walking corpses in medieval literature, and concludes that these narratives suggest a widespread medieval belief that “[t]here is a liminal period in which the death of the personality is absolute, but the death of the flesh is not yet complete. Psychic death and physical death do not coincide. It is only when the body has passed through its ‘wet’ enfleshed stage, and become ‘dry’ bones... that it is fully defunct. Dichotomies between flesh and spirit, as well as between living dead, are broken down.”⁵⁴² Based on her survey of medieval textual and visual depictions of revenants, Caciola states that “we are left with the belief that cadavers are only in danger of becoming revenants before they ‘corrupt’ and are reduced to bones.”⁵⁴³ As long as the queen’s corpse does not appear to rot, this liminal period of potential activity is unnaturally prolonged. The immediate burning of the corpse after it is moved may be a typical of a royal funeral, but it also suggests an attempt to obliterate the flesh, thus hastening the arrival of the safe ‘dry’ bones stage.

However, alongside these notions of the walking dead as malevolent and destructive, there are also narratives in which the corporeal dead interact in a positive fashion with the living, and are at times able to pass back over the boundary of death, to resume a place among the living. Walter Map writes of two dead women who, while dancing, are seized by living men. One is taken by the man who was her husband while she was alive, and they go on to have children. The other woman marries the nobleman who snatches her, and they have a son.⁵⁴⁴ These tales lack the sense of horror and disruption that is so prevalent in many other accounts of medieval revenants, and illustrate that the return from death was not always viewed as a negative event. *Heimskringla*’s audience, and the characters who are witness to the king’s grief in the text,

⁵⁴² Nancy Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants, and Ritual in Medieval Culture,” *Past and Present* 152 (1996), 3-45: 33.

⁵⁴³ Caciola, “Wraiths,” 32.

⁵⁴⁴ Walter Map, *De nugis curialium*, ed. and trans. M. R. James, C. N. L. Brooke, and R. A. B. Mynors, ii. 13 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 160.

are aware that this dead woman's unnatural preservation is the result of evil magic, which has bewitched the king and prevented him from resuming governance of his kingdom. From Haraldr's perspective, his hope that she will revive, and his related unwillingness to accept her death and give her a proper funeral, may be informed and justified by other narratives in which death is overcome.

Haraldr's intense and prolonged grief is supernaturally induced, and though his example is particularly dramatic, it reflects the attitude found in the rest of the literature towards a man's grief for his wife: he was not expected to indulge overlong in his sorrow, but to move on and resume his responsibilities. *Hrólfs Saga Gautreksson* opens with the marriage of King Gautrek's only daughter, and Gautrekr's grief over her mother's death: "By this time King Gautrek's wife was dead, and he himself was getting on in years, though he was still a vigorous man. He'd felt the loss of his wife so deeply that he used to spend most of the time sitting on her gravemound, and he was so bitter about her death that he was letting the country go to pieces. So his friends begged him to marry again..."⁵⁴⁵ The grief that Haraldr and Gautrek feel for their dead queens is presented as a distraction from their responsibilities. Unlike the grief of wives and lovers for dead heroes, this grief lacks any connotation of tragic nobility. When a heroine like Brynhildr, Guðrún or Saxo's Signe commit suicide out of grief, it is a tribute to the exceptionally heroic nature of her beloved. The wives mourned by Haraldr and Gautrekr are not singled out as paragons of womanhood. No details are provided about Gautrekr's wife; presumably she is the mother of his daughter, but even that is not specified by the text. Haraldr's wife is a witch, whose powers linger after her death to treacherously bind the king to her deathbed. In a stark departure from many of the male deaths discussed in the previous chapter, and in contrast with the example

⁵⁴⁵ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, eds. and trans. *Hrolf Gautreksson: A Viking Romance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 25.

of the villager who weeps for his wife's death, these kings are not described as shedding tears for their wives. This lack of weeping may correspond to their ceaseless grieving, in that they do not indulge in the tears which may bring catharsis, but the narratives make no mention of weeping at all, and given the general absence of men weeping for their wives in Norse texts, it seems more likely that such a loss did not merit tears.

Book 11 of *Gesta Danorum* tells of the strong friendship of King Sven of Denmark and Bishop Wilhelm. When word of King Sven's funeral procession reaches Wilhelm, he goes to meet it, and orders two graves to be dug: one for his king, and one for himself. The grave diggers suppose he is speaking out of grief, but he tells them that he "would not be deprived of what he had prayed for, when he had wanted to dwell with him forever,"⁵⁴⁶ (*non se uoto fraudandum inquiens, quo cum eo commori semper optasset*).⁵⁴⁷ He orders two trees to be cut down to be used as a bier, and soon spreads his cloak upon the ground and lies down. He prays to God for death, and this is granted. When his followers try to wake him, they realize he has died. His body is placed upon the bier, and drawn by horses to the cathedral. His body and the king's are placed in adjacent graves. Saxo observes that "These are the admirable wages of friendship, that when one of two companions dies, the survivor, disenchanted with the sweetness of life, engenders within himself an appetite for death."⁵⁴⁸ (*Hec sunt ueneranda amicitie stipendia, que, cum e duobus eius consortibus alter excidit, reliquo, uite dulcedine fastidita, mortis appetitum ingenerant*).⁵⁴⁹

Grieving Men in Anglo-Saxon Sources

⁵⁴⁶ Christiansen, *Danorum Regum* 1, 68.

⁵⁴⁷ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 379.

⁵⁴⁸ Christiansen, *Danorum Regum* 1, 68-9.

⁵⁴⁹ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 380.

In *Beowulf*, Hreðel, ruler of the Geats, is the father of three sons, Hæðcyn, Herebeald, and Hygelac. Herebeald is killed by Hæðcyn in a hunting accident, causing Hreðel to experience great grief: his sorrow so afflicted him that “he gave up the pleasures of men, chose God’s light; he left land and towns to his descendants, as does the prosperous man, then he departed from life” (*gumdream ofgeaf, Godes leoht geceas;/ eaferum læfde, swa deð eadig mon,/ lond on leoðbyrig, þa he of life gewat*).⁵⁵⁰ Hygelac rules after his father but dies childless, and is succeeded by Beowulf.

Scholars have long recognized a relationship between this incident and the myth of Baldr’s death. The names Hæðcyn and Herebeald contain elements parallel to Hǫðr and Baldr, and the elements of kinslaying and paternal grief are shared by both narratives. However, while Hreðel’s withdrawal to his bed and intention to die after the loss of a son is paralleled by Egill, Kveldulfr, and Regner, and Egill views his grief in terms of Óðinn’s grief for Baldr,⁵⁵¹ in the surviving references to Baldr’s death there is no reference to Óðinn taking to his bed or committing suicide in his sorrow. He does “sacrifice himself to himself,” ritually hanging himself on the world tree while piercing his side with a spear, but this act is framed as a means of gaining occult knowledge, not achieving death; there is no explicit causal connection between his sacrifice and Baldr’s fate. The evidence of *Sonatorrek* and *Beowulf*, however, suggests that a version of the Baldr myth in which Óðinn attempts or commits suicide out of grief might have been in circulation at some point.

The precise mechanism of Hreðel’s death is unclear; if “to die of grief” may be used to soften the record of a suicide, as Murray suggests, then “to choose God’s light” is almost a

⁵⁵⁰ Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, ll. 2469-2471.

⁵⁵¹ See Joseph Harris, “Sacrifice and Guilt in *Sonatorrek*,” in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 173-96, and “*Homo necans borealis*. Fatherhood and Sacrifice in *Sonatorrek*,” in *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, ed. S. Glöeckel (Tempe, Arizona: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 2007), 152-73.

euphemism for a euphemism. The statement is maddening in its ambiguity, but the close similarity of this situation with examples from Scandinavian texts suggests that there may have been a tradition in which Hreðel committed suicide by starvation, even if the author of *Beowulf* was unaware of this, or preferred to omit that detail. The phrasing in *Beowulf* is perhaps intended to remove the taint of pagan suicide, framing it instead as a thoroughly Christianized yielding of the soul to God. Mary Clayton discusses the opening paragraph of the text *De octo uitiiis et de duodecim abusiuis gradus*, a composite work attributed to Ælfric. The text opens as follows:

‘Omnia nimia nocent et temperantia mater uirtutum dicitur.’ That is in English: ‘All excessive things are harmful and temperance is the mother of all virtues.’ Excess in food and drink makes a man unhealthy and makes his soul hateful to God, as our Lord said in his gospel. On the other hand, intemperate fasting and too much abstinence in food and in drink makes a person unhealthy and leads him into great danger, as books tell us, that some people fasted so that they afflicted themselves very severely and had no reward for their great effort but were the further from God’s mercy by virtue of it. A man can easily discover how he may destroy himself but we ought to know that no suicide, that is self-slayer, comes into God’s kingdom.’

*Omnia nimia nocent et temperantia mater uirtutum dicitur. Ðæt is on Englisc: Ealle oferdone þingc deriað and seo gemetegung is ealra mægna modor. Se oferlyfa on æte and on wæte deð þone man unhalne, and his sawle Gode læðetteð, swa swa ure Drihten on his godspelle cwæð. Eft þærtogeanes, ungemetgod fæsten and to mycel forhæfdnyss on æte and on wæte deð þone man unhalne and on mycelre frecednysse gebringð, swa swa us secgað bec, þæt sume men fæstan swa þæt hi geswencton hy sylfe forþearle, and nane mede næfdon þæs mycclan geswines, ac þæs þe fyrr wæron from Godes miltsunge. Eaðe mæg se mann findan hu he hine sylfne amyrre, ac we sceolan witan þæt nan sylfwala, þæt is agenslaga, ne becymð to Godes rice.*⁵⁵²

Ælfric goes on to state that through fasting a man may learn how to destroy himself, and suicides cannot enter heaven. Clayton argues that

introducing suicide into a passage on fasting in this way is striking and surprising, and also difficult to interpret. While lack of moderation in fasting could, of course, lead to death, it is not something that we would expect Ælfric to regard as suicide; the ascetic way of life was one that had been approved by the church for centuries and becoming closer to God, not death, was the desired outcome of fasting. . . . Patristic writers on fasting never suggest that it could be regarded as a form of suicide and there is nothing like this elsewhere in Old English literature. It seems unlikely, therefore, that Ælfric’s

⁵⁵² Clayton, “Suicide,” 362.

point here is that excessive fasting is in itself a form of suicide; his statement on suicide is couched in general terms, avoiding an explicit link with fasting, but it is the suggestive juxtaposition of the two that invites speculation on the connection between them. How, then, does the statement about suicide relate to the preceding statement about harming oneself by fasting?⁵⁵³

Clayton finds an answer to her question in a passage in Cassian's *Consolationes*, where the death of a monk, who had spent fifty years in the desert as an ascetic, is brought about by a devil's suggestion that his virtue would enable him to throw himself down a well and survive unharmed. The monk's excessively severe fasting had rendered him vulnerable to demonic persuasion, and Clayton argues that this passage would have been known to Ælfric, and that it inspired him to connect fasting with suicide: the monk's abbot is only persuaded with difficulty not to bury the monk among the suicides.⁵⁵⁴ Clayton's argument is persuasive, but it is also possible that Ælfric may have been aware of cases of deliberate suicide by starvation, either from Scandinavian legends, or accounts of such suicides among the Anglo-Saxons. I argued above that Pyri's suicide by fasting seems to be an uneasy mingling of paganism and Christianity, and Hreðel's ambiguously described death may be in the same tradition of trying to accommodate pre-Christian ideals after conversion.

Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* contains two accounts of holy men whose deaths coincide with or closely follow that of a dear companion. St. Cuthbert, warned by God that his time in the world draws to a close, tells Herebert, a priest with whom he has had a long friendship, that he will soon die. Herebert weeps and beseeches Cuthbert to intercede with God on his behalf, in order that he may depart the earth with Cuthbert. Cuthbert complies and wins God's agreement,

⁵⁵³ Clayton, "Suicide," 362-3.

⁵⁵⁴ Clayton, "Suicide," 363.

and, though Herebert and Cuthbert never meet again in the world, they die on the same day and are reunited in death.⁵⁵⁵

King Oswine gifts Aidan, the bishop, with an excellent horse, which Aidan gives to a beggar. Oswine complains of the disposal of his gift and Aidan chastises him, and the king fervently repents. Aidan grows melancholy, and tells a priest that he knows so humble a king will not be allowed to rule for long, because the nation is unworthy. Oswine dies shortly after this prediction, and Aidan follows “the king he loved” after twelve days. Bede does not explicitly state that Aidan wished to die as a result of Oswine’s death, but the pairing of a bishop’s grief and death with the death of his king appears frequently enough to suggest a motif.⁵⁵⁶ These three Anglo-Saxon examples match the findings from Norse and Scandinavian sources: men die or commit suicide from grief for sons and companions of higher relative social status. The circumstances of Aidan’s and Hereberth’s deaths are especially close to that of Bishop Wilhelm in *Gesta Danorum*.

Welsh Death from Grief

Few deaths are attributed to grief in medieval Welsh literature. A triad records “Three People whose heart broke from bewilderment” (*Tri dyn y torres ei gallon o Annifyged*).⁵⁵⁷ The

⁵⁵⁵ Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, eds., Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 4.29.

⁵⁵⁶ Colgrave and Mynors, Bede, *Historia*, 3. 14, 212-66. While a fuller excursion into hagiographical texts would no doubt yield a great deal of comparable material, it is beyond the scope of the current discussion.

⁵⁵⁷ The word *annifyged* occurs infrequently and is problematic; Ifor Williams drew on a Breton gloss of *aandemecet* for Latin *ex improviso*, and suggested that the Welsh term meant “bewilderment.” Brynley Roberts argues that *enyvyget*, translating *miseriam*, is a close parallel, and Rachel Bromwich suggests that the meaning of the word developed differently in Welsh and Breton. Rachel Bromwich, ed. and trans, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 3rd ed., 2006), 242.

three people mentioned in the triad are Branwen daughter of Llyr, Caradog son of Bran, and Ffaraon Dandde. Branwen and Caradog's deaths are recorded in *Branwen Ferch Llyr*, but Ffaraon Dandde is a mysterious figure. His death from a broken heart is also referenced in *Cyfranc Llud a Llefelys*, where it is stated that Dinas Emrys was once known as Dinas Ffaraon Dandde, and we are told that "he was one of the three Chief Officers, who broke his heart from bewilderment" (*Trydid cynweissat uu hwnnw a torres y gallon anniuyged*).⁵⁵⁸ There is a triad referencing three Chief Officers, but Ffaraon Dandde does not appear on the list. Rachel Bromwich suggests that Ffaraon Dandde is described as a Chief Officer in *Cyfranc Llud a Llefelys* because both he and Caradog ab Bran traditionally die of a broken heart, and Caradog is one of the Three Chief Officers.⁵⁵⁹ Unfortunately, we have no information regarding the circumstances of Ffaraon Dandde's death from heartbreak.

Branwen is a British princess who marries the king of Ireland, Matholwch. His brutal mistreatment of her eventually causes the two islands to go to war, with Branwen's brother Bran leading the British warriors. An attempt to bring peace between the two forces goes horribly wrong; Branwen's brother Efnisien discovers the Irish plan to ambush them at the feast, and although he kills the concealed warriors, he later throws Branwen's son with Matholwch into the fire. The ensuing battle devastates the population of Ireland, and only seven of the warriors who had fought for Bran survive. The British survivors sail home, taking Branwen with them. They rest after disembarking, but Branwen looks at Ireland and Britain and is struck by the effects of the war: " 'Alas, son of God,' she said, 'woe is me that I was born: two good islands have been destroyed because of me!' And she heaved a great sigh, and broke her heart at that." (*Oy a uab*

⁵⁵⁸ Roberts, *Cyfranc Llud a Llefelys*, 1.

⁵⁵⁹ Bromwich, *Trioedd*, 26.

*Duw, 'heb hi, 'guae ui o 'm ganedigaeth. Da a dwy ynys a diffeithwyt o 'm achaws i. 'A dodi ucheneit uawr, a thorri i chalon ar hynny).*⁵⁶⁰

Bran's son Caradoc is left behind with stewards to guard the kingdom while his father leads the campaign in Ireland. With Bran away, Caswallawn decides to usurp the rule of Britain. Rendered invisible by an enchanted cloak, he murders the stewards in Caradoc's presence. Caradoc can see the sword decimating his companions, but not the man wielding it, and his heart breaks from bewilderment (*aniuyget*).⁵⁶¹

A third figure dies of a broken heart in *Branwen*. After Efnisien throws his nephew on the fire, he watches the resulting battle. The Irish possess a magic cauldron which revives the corpses of the warriors who are placed inside it, and this constant replenishment of the Irish forces turns the battle in their favor. Efnisien conceals himself in a pile of Irish corpses, and in turn is cast into the cauldron. He stretches himself against the sides of the cauldron, and as it breaks into four pieces, his heart breaks. His broken heart is not attributed to *aniuyget* like those of his sister and nephew, and it may be that his heart breaks from physical exertion and not emotion. However, he caused the initial friction between the British and the Irish by mutilating the horses given to Matholowch as a wedding gift, and has just murdered his sister's innocent son. While watching his countrymen die, he expresses regret that he is the cause of their deaths, using phrasing similar to his sister's final words later in the text.

Of all the Four Branches of the Mabinogi, *Branwen* has by far the most Irish content, and scholars have debated the extent of Irish influence on the text.⁵⁶² The widespread use of the

⁵⁶⁰ Derick S. Thomson, ed. *Branwen Uerch Lyr* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976), 15.

⁵⁶¹ Thomson, *Branwen*, 16.

⁵⁶² See Proinsias Mac Cana, *Branwen Daughter of Llyr: A Study of the Irish Affinities and of the Composition of the Second Branch of the Mabinogi*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958); Patrick Sims Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); John Carey's *Ireland and the Grail* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2007).

“broken heart” motif in Irish literature, compared with its paucity in medieval Welsh literature, led Proinsias Mac Cana to suggest that it owed its presence in *Branwen* to Irish influence.

MacCana points out that deaths like Branwen’s are “almost a commonplace of [Irish] tradition,”⁵⁶³ and he cites several examples. He concludes that

One can see quite easily that these few examples cited from Irish literature are all of one type. The pattern upon which they are based is traditional in the sense that native story-tellers regarded it as an accepted mode of consummating a tragic narrative or of merely providing a mechanical explanation of a placename. We have no evidence that the same was true of Welsh literary tradition, although it must be admitted that, in view of the lack of material in Welsh, we cannot automatically concluded the opposite. . . . The question which follows naturally is, Has the author of *Branwen* been influenced by similar accounts which he had read in Irish?, and obviously one can answer only very tentatively. On the one hand, it is quite feasible that a Welsh story-teller should, while working independently, choose to make his heroine die with a broken heart caused by grief and sadness and associate the event with a certain landmark; on the other is the insidious and persistent recollection that this particular story-teller did not work independently in other parts of his tale, and also the impressive fact of the popularity which this death by what might be termed emotional seizure held throughout the centuries in Irish literature.⁵⁶⁴

Liam Mac Mathúna comes down more strongly on the side of borrowing from Irish sources: “It certainly does seem that Irish influence was at work at this point, as elsewhere in the Second Branch, when the notion of dying through heartbreak clearly took the author’s fancy.”⁵⁶⁵ While MacCana focuses on the Irish parallels for Branwen’s death, the circumstances of Caradoc’s death are similar to the *Carn na Fingaile* episode in the *Acallam*, discussed above. Both involve murder with a sword, take place on a hill, and involve an individual or individuals dying from grief while watching the murder. The question of whether this motif is “native” to Welsh tradition or is borrowed from Irish is probably impossible to resolve, and several scholars have drawn attention to possible connections between *Branwen* and medieval Scandinavian and

⁵⁶³ Mac Cana, *Branwen*, 99.

⁵⁶⁴ Mac Cana, *Branwen*, 100-01.

⁵⁶⁵ Liam Mac Mathúna, “Lexical and Literary aspects of ‘Heart,’ in Irish,” *Ériu* 53 (2003), 1-18: 17.

Icelandic literature, which complicate this issue further.⁵⁶⁶ The small size of the extant Middle Welsh corpus when compared to the Irish makes it difficult to make useful assertions about the motif's prevalence in medieval Wales, but it does seem that, whether the motif was 'native' or not, Welsh authors employed with far less enthusiasm than the Irish literati.

Dying from Grief and the Gendered Body

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that the intensity of expressed grief in Germanic cultures is heavily determined by the social relationship the mourner had with the dead. Medieval Icelanders and Scandinavians wept and lamented the deaths of their social superiors, and this pattern of grief also manifests in suicides and deaths from bereavement. Just as literary accounts do not praise kings for choosing to die in battle after the death of a friend, men in these texts do not die from grief for their wives. However, as a man's social status and influence wane with advanced age, he becomes vulnerable and more dependent upon his male offspring, and the death of a son, as with the death of one's lord, provokes the strongest displays of bereavement. Women in these cultures are depicted as reacting the most strongly to the death of close male kin, primarily husbands or lovers. In contrast, Irish literary tradition shows that men and women grieved, and died of their grief, in manners less strictly constrained by gender and social relationship.

It is intriguing that the ritual of taking to one's bed in grief seems to be deployed frequently as a means of demonstrating how grief was overcome; Kveldulfr and Regner are incited to pursue revenge against their son's killers, and Egill composes *Sonatorrek* in lieu of attempting revenge; given that his son died by drowning at sea, surely the wiser course. The men

⁵⁶⁶ Brent Miles, "Branwen: A Reconsideration of the German and Norse Analogues," *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 52 (2006), 13-48; Alaric Hall, "Gwŷr y Gogledd? Some Icelandic Analogues to *Branwen Ferch Lŷr*," *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 42 (2001), 27-50.

choose death in this way because they feel they have no hope of accomplishing vengeance, an interesting contrast to women such as Signý, who commits suicide not only because she feels bound to die at the side of her husband, but also because her vengeance has been so thoroughly accomplished. Although male saga characters may regret the revenge they have achieved, they rarely feel that carrying it out has rendered them unfit to live.

The men who die from grief or take to their beds are generally old men. Carol Clover has argued that women and old men occupied the same semantic category in “social binary” that placed “able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman)” in one category, category A, and everyone else in Category B.⁵⁶⁷ Looking at the topic from this perspective raises some interesting questions: should a woman’s suicide, such as Brynhildr’s or Signý’s, be viewed an expression of masculine power? That is to say, are Brynhildr and Signý acting as persons in Category A? Is the ritual of retiring to one’s bed in grief a ‘male’ equivalent of bursting from sorrow, and are both acts the behavior of persons who, by their gender or age, belong in Category B? I will return to these questions later.

The concept of the mind as something that must be bound or contained occurs frequently in Old English literature, particularly in poetry.⁵⁶⁸ Modern readers of Anglo-Saxon texts often interpret these descriptions as mere metaphor, but Leslie Lockett argues persuasively that they represent actual folk psychology in Anglo-Saxon England. In her recent, groundbreaking analysis of the Anglo-Saxon concept of the mind, Leslie Lockett analyzes depictions of thought, emotion, and the mind in Anglo-Saxon literature, concluding that the native Anglo-Saxon culture

⁵⁶⁷ Carol Clover, “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women and Power in Early Northern Europe,” *Speculum* 68 (1993), 363-87: 381-5.

⁵⁶⁸ For a recent and thorough discussion of this concept, see Britt Mize, “The Representation of the Mind as an Enclosure in Old English Poetry,” in *Anglo-Saxon England* 35 (2006): 57-90.

viewed the mind as being physically present in the breast and capable of effecting physical changes on the body, causing shifts in temperature and size related to emotional state. She sees

a loose psycho-physiological pattern, in which psychological disturbances are associated with dynamic changes of pressure and temperature in the chest cavity. These physical changes resemble the behaviour of a fluid in a closed container, which expands and presses outward against the walls of the container when heated, threatening either to boil over or to burst the container if too much heat is applied. When the moment of intense emotion or distress passes, the contents of the chest cavity cool off and are no longer subject to excess pressure, just as if a heat source were removed from a container of boiling liquid.⁵⁶⁹

She refers to this system as the “hydraulic model,” preferring this term to “hydraulic metaphor,” because it “alludes to the physically dynamic dimension of the pattern . . . while leaving open the question of whether this concept of the mind is necessarily metaphorical.”⁵⁷⁰ Lockett gathers an impressive amount of evidence to show that the “hydraulic model” of the mind has been and continues to be prevalent in many cultures, and that a literal interpretation of accounts of the mind seething with cares is the best explanation for the prominence of this type of imagery in Old English texts. While the modern Western reader “knows” that the mind is in fact located in the head and not in the chest cavity or the heart, this was merely one of several competing theories known to some of the Christian literati of Anglo-Saxon England, and it would not come to dominate the thought-world of the English until a later period.

The comparative material brought to bear by Lockett is gathered from modern and ancient cultures over a wide geographical span, demonstrating not only that this cluster of ideas has circulated for millennia, but also that the hydraulic model is still in use. As far as the cultures with the closest temporal and spatial ties to Anglo-Saxon England, Lockett devotes several pages to Old and Middle Irish texts, stating that “Old Irish texts employ a hydraulic model as well, in

⁵⁶⁹ Lockett, *Psychologies*, 5.

⁵⁷⁰ Lockett, *Psychologies*, 5.

which heat and swelling are the most prominent symptoms, and they are chiefly associated with anger, the battle-rage of heroes, and other aggressively passionate mental states.”⁵⁷¹

Lockett omits a detailed investigation of these phenomena in Old Norse literature, observing that “the tendency to emphasize the external manifestations rather than the internal effects of psychological heat and swelling is a feature that the medieval Irish idiom shares with that of Old Norse literature, very possibly as a result of centuries’ worth of cultural exchange beginning in the early Middle Ages. In the present chapter I have not included a section on Old Norse reflexes of the hydraulic model, but all of its core features are well represented in the literature: cardiocentric localization, heat, boiling, pressure and heaviness of the breast.” She cites Þórhallr Ásgrímsson’s swelling in *Njáls saga* as an extreme example of these “external manifestations.”⁵⁷² I disagree with Lockett’s assertion that Old Norse and Irish emphasize the external effects over the internal, but it is true that the descriptions of emotions causing grotesque transformations of the body are more striking and strange than when these emotions work on the body’s interior, especially if one is inclined to view the latter as metaphors. However, the former, though more memorable, are far rarer than the latter.

Several other classic examples of swelling from emotion in Old Norse literature may be added to the one provided by Lockett. In *Egils saga*, “it was then said, that when Bǫðvarr was buried, Egill was wearing tight-fitting hose and a red fustian tunic, tightly laced at the sides. It is said by people that he swelled so much that that his tunic was rent, and also his hose.” (*En svá er sagt þá er þeir settu Bǫðvar niðr at Egill var búinn: Hosan var strengð fast at beini, hann hafði fustanskyrtíl rauðan, þröngvan upphlutinn ok láz at síðu. En þat er sagn manna, at hann þrútnaði*

⁵⁷¹ Lockett, *Psychologies*, 143.

⁵⁷² Lockett, *Psychologies*, 147. When he heard of Njáls death he was so upset “that he swelled all over and blood flowed from his two ears, and it would not stop, and he fell into a faint, and then it stopped” (*at hann þrútnaði allr ok blóðbogi stóð ór hvárritveggju hlustinni, ok varð eigi stöðvat, ok féll hann í óvit, ok þá stöðvaðisk.*) Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls*, 344-5.

svá, at kyrtillinn rifnaði af honum ok svá hosurnar).⁵⁷³ In *Laxdæla saga*, a youth who rides to avenge his father's death "seemed as if he were swollen with grief" (*sem þrúttinn mundi vera af trega*).⁵⁷⁴ Sigurðr is so moved when he speaks to Brynhildr of their doomed love, that "his sides swelled so that the links of his mail burst"⁵⁷⁵ (*svá þrúttuðu hans síður at í sundr gengu brynjuhringar*).⁵⁷⁶ When Ivarr the Boneless learns of his father's death, he flushes and turns pale, and becomes so swollen that his skin bruises (*enn litr hans var stundum rauður, enn stundum blárr, enn lotum var hann bleikr, ok hann var svá þrúttinn, at hans hörund var alt blásit af þeim grimmeik, er í brjósti hans var*).⁵⁷⁷ For the authors of these sagas, the swelling and bursting associated with grief is literal; it is a visible sign of the griever's suffering, and can manifest so strongly that it can cause clothing or even chainmail to tear. To my knowledge, all of the saga characters who experience external swelling from emotion are men. Women's grief does not inscribe itself on the surface of the flesh. However, earlier in this chapter I discussed numerous examples of women (and one elderly man) who burst from grief, usually using the verb *springa*. *Springa* is also used to describe deaths that do not result from grief; *Heimskringla* tells of a battle where "some burst entirely and died unwounded" (*sumir sprungu með ǫllu ok dó ósárir*),⁵⁷⁸ and elsewhere the word is used for horses or oxen which are ridden or worked to death. While men in this literary tradition almost never *springa af harmi*, they do exhibit somatic symptoms of swelling from emotion that are probably related in folk psychology to the idea of women bursting from grief, and also to the 'hydraulic model.'

⁵⁷³ Bjarni Einarsson, *Egils saga*, 145.

⁵⁷⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, 187.

⁵⁷⁵ Finch, *Volsunga saga*, 56.

⁵⁷⁶ Finch, *Volsunga saga*, 56.

⁵⁷⁷ Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds., *Ragnars saga lóðbrókar in Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda 1* (Reykjavík, 1943), 137-8.

⁵⁷⁸ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla* 3, 192.

In *Skírnismál*, Skírnir threatens creatively and thoroughly to curse the giantess Gerðr if she will not consent to marry his lord Freyr, and among the litany of unpleasant potential fates is that she “be like the thistle which was *þrunginn* at the end of harvest” (*ver þú sem þistill, sá er var þrunginn í qnn ofanverða*).⁵⁷⁹ Some scholars have suggested that *þrunginn* be translated here as crushed or cast aside, but Joseph Harris has argued that in fact the image in *Skírnismál* is of a thistle “succumbing to *internal* forces,”⁵⁸⁰ that the thistle is being pressed from within. Harris interprets this line in light of the thistle curse in OE Metrical Charm 9, where a would-be thief is cursed to be “as fragile as a thistle” (*swa breðel seo swa þystel*), and argues that there may have been a tradition of thistle-curses, although in the reprinted version of this article he backs away from such an assertion. Harris references Reichardt’s interpretation of this line in *Skírnismál*; in his translation of Reichardt’s German, “just as the thistle is filled to bursting with seed after the summer, so will Gerðr be filled by her unsatisfied lust, looking forward to her destruction.”⁵⁸¹ In the afterword to his article, Harris counters an argument presented by Heizmann, that a thistle filled with seed in the autumn would be “redolent of fertility,” and thus not appropriate for a curse. Harris points out that “death by bursting in the process of self-replication as a hated weed is hardly the dream of a young girl.”⁵⁸² Reichardt’s assumption that the thistle’s seeds are parallel to Gerðr’s lust is not the only possible interpretation of the line. The previous two stanzas of the poem invoke her tears and sorrow, and while Skírnir does curse her to be *verlauss*, husbandless, if she does not accept a three-headed giant as mate, there is no indication that he curses her to feel sexual desire for the giant; indeed, quite the opposite. That interpretation requires us to take

⁵⁷⁹ Klaus von See, Beatrice La Farge, Eve Picard, Ilona Priebe, Katja Schulz, eds. *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda 2* (Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1997), 118.

⁵⁸⁰ Joseph Harris, “Cursing with the Thistle: *Skírnismál* 31, 6–8 and OE Metrical Charm 9, 16–17,” in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, eds. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York: Routledge, 2002), 79–94.

⁵⁸¹ Harris, “Thistle,” 85.

⁵⁸² Harris, “Thistle,” 87.

geð to mean longing in the sense of erotic desire, and there is no reason to prefer this usage over ‘mind.’ “may your mind seize you, may mourning waste you, may you be like the thistle, swollen (with grief) at the end of harvest.” An additional physical level of meaning is possible, if we infer that she may be pregnant as result of cohabiting with the three-headed giant, and this would also match the notion of the thistle’s fertility and death, given the risk of death in childbirth (which would presumably be elevated in the event of three-headed offspring. In the circumstances described by Skírnir, sorrow seems at least as likely a cause of *þrunginn* as lust.

In Scandinavian texts there is a pronounced link between, grief, anger, cathartic speech acts, and revenge. Men are permitted, even expected, to act on their grief, using the anger of bereavement to propel them to avenge the dead. Their emotional turmoil expresses itself outwardly, to engorge the surface of the body. One might argue that this symbolically parallels the rage that will burst forth into violence, but in light of Lockett’s arguments, it should probably be read as different aspects of the same event: the grief/rage of the men being expressed outwardly from the bodily seat of the emotions, both physically and socially. Women are prohibited from seeking revenge, and use mourning rituals, including weeping and lament, to find release from their grief.

Women’s bodies do not display the same external signs of uncontrollable grief. Their emotional turmoil remains tethered within the breast, exerting interior pressure that will be fatal unless released. Because women’s bodies in this tradition appear to lack the mechanism that would permit the body to dispel the emotional pressure by swelling, they must be rid of it through other means. Thus Guðrún will weep or die. Although the women who perish from grief are described as having ‘burst,’ their corpses are rarely described as disfigured, unlike the

swelling bodies of the grieving men; the bursting is entirely contained within the vessel of the body.

There are figures who do not conform to this pattern. Egill swells grotesquely after his son's death, but takes to his bed to die instead of seeking (impossible to achieve) revenge. He intends to starve to death, not burst from his grief, but verbal art is what restores him and reintegrates him into society. Gormr bursts from grief in one account of his death, and he, like Egill, is an old man who cannot attempt vengeance. Using Clover's system, we might say that Egill is transitioning between Category A and Category B, while Gormr is fully ensconced in Category B. Brynhildr takes to her bed in grief but emerges to orchestrate her revenge and commits suicide by sword, acts which appear to be gendered masculine within this system. Arguably her revenge is achieved through incitement, an act typically considered feminine, but there is still a strong case for placing Brynhildr in Category A.

Men's bodies do not swell with sorrow in Irish tradition, however, the grotesque bodily transformation of battle-rage is well-documented for male heroes. Mention of hearts cracking like nuts, and the closely related idiom of a "gore of blood" breaking forth from the heart or being vomited up at death, is a motif that appears to be employed more frequently to describe women's deaths, although men are often depicted dying in this manner. A more thorough survey than I am able undertake here would be required in order to make a definitive statement as to its relative frequency for each sex. At the least, the motif of death from heart-break is far less gendered in medieval Irish texts than texts from Scandinavia.

I will conclude by discussing a brief fenian text, tentatively dated to the ninth century by Kuno Meyer,⁵⁸³ that depicts a woman's body swelling in relation to emotional distress. Finn seeks to marry Gráinne, who demands a supposedly impossible bride-price in order to avoid the marriage. Finn, assisted by Cailte, accomplishes the feat, and they marry. Gráinne is sickened by her loathing for Finn. Her father, Cormac, holds the feast of Tara, and Gráinne attends with Finn. Cormac notices his daughter's misery, and inquires as to its cause. She tells him that because of hatred of her husband, there is a lump of gore beneath her heart, and all the sinews of her body are swollen. Finn overhears this exchange, and agrees to end the marriage.⁵⁸⁴ The lump of gore beneath her heart undoubtedly is the same as the gore and blood that is often vomited up at death; perhaps the heart is envisioned as a dam or valve holding back the gore, which bursts free when the heart breaks. The lump of gore around the heart is an unusual detail, but not unexpected, given how often heartbreak is associated with the vomiting blood. The swollen sinews are rather less common, but unfortunately space does not permit a thorough examination of this idea at present. For now I will tentatively suggest that it corresponds to the other types of swelling from emotional distress surveyed above.

⁵⁸³ Kuno Meyer, ed. and trans., *Fianaigeacht: Being a Collection of Hitherto Inedited Irish Poems and Tales Relating to Finn and his Fiana, with an English Translation*, ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1910), xxxiii.

⁵⁸⁴ Kuno Meyer, ed. and trans., 'Finn and Gráinne', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 1 (1897), 458-61.

Chapter Four

Envisioning the Afterlife

Nicole Loraux describes women's mourning in the Greek cities as "(a) threat to be contained, but also to be fantasized about," and suggest that we ask, "is it contained so that we may fantasize about it in complete safety? Which suggests that we should analyze the manipulations of processes of thought that the civic community uses to get rid of the threat without completely freeing itself from it, in ritual practice just as in the politics of myth." The conceptualization of the afterlife speaks strongly to the manner in which individuals and societies grappled with their awareness of death and loss. Beliefs about one's own and others' existence after death influence behaviour while alive, as for example an individual may commit suicide in order to follow another into the land of the dead, or a wife may curtail her mourning so as not to adversely affect her husband's condition in the afterlife. Here the influence of beliefs about the afterlife on grief and mourning behaviour is clear, and it follows that the ideologies of gender at play in the cultural construction of mourning would likewise be reflected in afterlife traditions.

This chapter will consider the literary representations of the afterlife in light of the foregoing discussion of gender and mourning, focusing on how Irish and Scandinavian sources construct and navigate the relationship between death, gender, and sexuality. The chapter will open with a survey of the Irish and Scandinavian materials relevant to my discussion of the relationship between gender and the afterlife, examining what they reveal about the manner in which living social relationships affected the perception of the afterlife. How did men and women imagine their own existence after death? Which familial or social connections are privileged by the literary culture, and which devalued? In what manner does the information in

these sources relate to that presented in the preceding chapters? From this discussion I will move into an examination of the habitually sexualized relationships between mortals and female death deities, psychopomps, and other supernatural figures connected to death and the afterlife. While the focus here will remain on Scandinavian texts, I will incorporate an examination of this thematic connection in Irish texts, applying the findings of scholarship on Celtic goddesses, death, and sovereignty to illuminate some of the more vexing features of the Norse material. Finally, I will conclude by juxtaposing two scenes, one from the Eddic heroic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, the other from the Old Irish *Reicne Fothaid Canaine*. Both describe a meeting between a woman and her dead lover in a grave mound, and invoke erotic imagery and the figure of death goddesses for polemical purposes. A close reading of the scenes will demonstrate that the portrayal of the women in the poems reflects societal unease about death, sex, and women's role in social institutions.

Gender and Community after Death

Examining pre-Christian notions of the afterlife in Irish and Norse literary traditions is a difficult task. Only Scandinavian sources provide a cohesive picture (in itself questionable), and the late or indeterminate date of much of the material makes it suspect as a source of real pagan beliefs. The same issues attend Irish sources. However, as the intent of this chapter is not an elucidation of pagan beliefs, but rather an examination of the use of such beliefs in literary texts, the accuracy of late evidence for pagan beliefs is less significant. That these pagan themes continued in use after the cultures' respective conversions to Christianity indicates that the themes remained relevant to the culture, despite their demotion from mythology to fiction.

Irish sources offer a full picture of pre-Christian belief, but the function of the pagan deities has been altered by monastic redactors; they are presented as a race of powerful

magicians, the Tuatha Dé Danaan, rather than as gods. This group migrated to Ireland, conquering the previous inhabitants, and were conquered themselves in turn by the Sons of Míl, the current inhabitants of the island. In the conflict between the Tuatha Dé Danaan and the Milesians, the former claimed the realm beneath the surface of Ireland, yielding the upper territory to the invaders.⁵⁸⁵

While there is relatively little hard evidence of the pre-Christian ideologies of the Irish, there appear to have been two main systems of belief about what occurs following death. The first, and more explicit, locates the afterlife on a small island off the southwest coast of Ireland. Donn ‘The Dark One,’ one of the Sons of Míl, drowns and is buried on an island, which afterward is known as *Tech nDuinn*, ‘The House of Donn’. This island is where the Irish abide after death. Donn’s role is analogous to, and cognate with, other Indo-European myths of the first man to die, who consequently becomes king of the afterlife.⁵⁸⁶ The earliest explicit attestation of Tech nDuinn as land of the dead is found in the 9th century, in *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* there is a reference to setting out at morning “to the House of Donn” (*do thig Duind*).⁵⁸⁷ In a 9th century poem, there is a reference to “*Tech duind damaig*,”⁵⁸⁸ literally “The House of Donn having a retinue,” perhaps more elegantly rendered as the ‘crowded’ or ‘teeming’ ‘House of Donn.’ The

⁵⁸⁵ For the medieval account of these successive invasions, see *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, ed. and trans. R. A. S. Macalister (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1938-56). See also Elizabeth Gray, ed. and trans. *Cath Maige Tuired: the second battle of Mag Tuired* (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1982), and the following studies by John Carey: “The Name ‘Tuatha dé Danaan,’” *Éigse* 18 (1981), 291-4; “*Lebor Gabála* and the Legendary History of Ireland,” in *Medieval Celtic Literature and Society*, ed. Helen Fulton (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 32-48; “Myth and Mythography in *Cath Maige Tuired*,” *Studia Celtica* 24/25 (1989/90), 53-69.

⁵⁸⁶ For the most comprehensive account of Donn in Irish literature, see Kuno Meyer, “Der irische Totengott und die Toteninsel,” *Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin: 1919). Bruce Lincoln has persuasively argued that this Donn, and that other famous Donn, the Donn Cúalnge, the bull pursued by Mebd in the *Táin*, both reflect a myth wherein one brother sacrifices another as an act of world creation, and the sacrificed brother then becomes ruler of the realm of the dead. Bruce Lincoln, “The Lord of the Dead,” *History of Religions* 20 (1981), 224-41. 227-30. See also Bruce Lincoln, *Priests, Warriors, and Cattle: A Study in the Ecology of Religions* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 87-90.

⁵⁸⁷ Knott, *Togail*, 22.

⁵⁸⁸ *Irische Texte mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch* 3.1, eds. Whitley Stokes and Ernst Windisch (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1891), 22.

tenth-century *Airne Fingein* speaks of travelling to the House of Donn for a tryst with the dead (*co Tech Duind frisndálait mairb*).⁵⁸⁹

The Irish otherworld⁵⁹⁰ also has an affiliation with the dead, though more loosely than *Tech nDuinn*. Like *Tech nDuinn*, some Irish sources describe island otherworlds. John Carey points out that the earliest Irish records locate the otherworld in a variety of locations, but never across the sea, prior to *Immram Brain*.⁵⁹¹

Outside the *immrama*, then, and the two closely linked tales *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Conlae*, the early sources give us no grounds for postulating belief in an overseas Otherworld; nor does there appear to be satisfactory evidence for such a belief in either contemporary Irish folklore or the traditions of Wales. Such a vacuum is clearly significant, despite the view of Ludwig Bieler that ‘the “happy otherworld” at the end of the earth is a *Menschheitsgedanke*. . . I do not see why [it] should have been absent from Celtic belief even if there is little positive evidence,’ or Oskamp’s assertion that the idea of an overseas Otherworld ‘is inherent in the religious system of an island society.’ It seems reasonable to suggest, in light of the age and popularity of *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Conlae*, that it is they and the Ulster literary movement which produced them which introduced this topos into Irish literature; that it was foreign to the native tradition at every stage appears evident.⁵⁹²

Carey’s discussion of the development of this tradition raises the question: is the notion of the island of the dead originally distinct from that of the otherworld, and does this distinction collapse after Christianization? It is possible that as the religious/mythological idea of the island of the dead lost its sway, the island came to be thought of as a more general supernatural location, taking on aspects of the Irish otherworld as seen in other texts.

The Irish Otherworld is generally depicted not as the land of the dead, but as a paradise inhabited by immortals. Scholars, however, have rightly noted that this land is peopled by the previous peoples who ruled over Ireland, and as such, they are, in a sense, the predecessors of the

⁵⁸⁹ Joseph Vendryes, ed., *Airne Fingein* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1975), 20.

⁵⁹⁰ See Patrick Sims-Williams, “Some Celtic Otherworld Terms,” in *Celtic Language, Celtic Culture: a Festschrift for Eric Hamp*, eds. Ann T. E. Matonis and Daniel F. Melia (Van Nuys, Ca.: Ford & Baille, 1990), 57-84.

⁵⁹¹ *Immram Brain* is usually dated to the 7th or 8th century, but see Seamus Mac Mathúna, *Immram Brain: Bran’s Journey to the Land of the Women* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1985), for arguments in favour of a later date.

⁵⁹² John Carey, “The Location of the Otherworld in Irish Tradition,” in *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. Jonathan M. Wooding (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 113-19: 119.

medieval Irish.⁵⁹³ Their tendency to dwell in hills is another hint connecting the Tuatha Dé with the dead: megalithic chambered turf mounds, such as Newgrange, often contain bone fragments, and some of them certainly appeared to have played a role in funerary rituals.⁵⁹⁴ The landscape of Ireland is often directly equated with mythological personages, with conspicuous features of the landscape serving as the seat of a god or goddess, or as the physical body of a deity, such as the two mountains that are considered the breasts of the goddess Anu.⁵⁹⁵

John Carey “posit[s] a direct symbolic equivalence between the Otherworld and the tribal assembly or *oenach*; the dead, belonging both to the *tuath* and the hereafter, constitute a third element in this ideological complex. One might express the triad’s unity by saying that society, affirmed and symbolized by the *oenach*, derives its legitimacy from the traditions received from ancestors who have departed into the Otherworld; or that the *oenach* establishes a link between the life of the *tuath* and the transcendent validity of an eternal state of which both death and immortality are aspects.”⁵⁹⁶ Carey goes on to draw a number of parallels between the Otherworld and the *oenach*, and their connection to the dead. He observes that ancient burial mounds are not only associated with access to the Otherworld, but were also sites where the *oenach* would be held. He notes that the festival of Samain is associated with the *oenach*, contact with the Otherworld, and the temporary return of the dead.⁵⁹⁷ While there are differences between the afterlife and the otherworld, the lines are blurred, and in some texts, completely elided.

⁵⁹³ Katherine Briggs considers a number of medieval romances and later folklore that associate fairies with the dead. “The Fairies and the Realms of the Dead,” *Folklore* 81 (1970), 81-96.

⁵⁹⁴ The Boyne Valley Complex, of which Newgrange is a part, continues in use until the Christian period. Old Norse literature explicitly speaks of people “dying into the hills,” and at times the living glimpse the dead living in their barrows.

⁵⁹⁵ Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, (London: B. T. Batsford, 1973), 166.

⁵⁹⁶ John Carey, “Time, Space, and the Otherworld,” in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 7 (1987), 1-27: 13.

⁵⁹⁷ Carey, “Time,” 13-14.

The Irish otherworld often functions as a sort of retirement home for heroes whose time in the mortal world is finished, but who are not depicted as residing in Heaven, perhaps because this would be anachronistic in the temporal setting of the text, or because mortal heroes dwelling in the otherworld offer more narrative possibilities. The otherworld functions as an alternative destination in the *Acallam*, where the last living members of the *fian* extend their lives far beyond the normal mortal span, surviving until the arrival of St. Patrick in Ireland. The text opens with a group of survivors from a long-ago battle gathering on a hill, grief-stricken over their losses. The text does not explicitly state that they have been dwelling in the otherworld, but the characters' survival for several centuries after the devastating battle, and the freshness of their grief, strongly implies this circumstance. While all of the survivors have connections to the otherworld, the two main characters, Caílte and Oisín, have particularly strong ties. Oisín's mother is a woman of the *sídh*, and Caílte spends several extended interludes in the otherworld during the course of the narrative. After the last of these visits, Caílte leaves knowing that he will never be able to return until after Judgment Day:

Caílte and Cas then bade farewell to the people of the *síd*, and went to the Hill of the Sound. The people of the *síd* made a great sound when Caílte parted from them, so that it has been called the Hill of the Sound ever since. Caílte said, "shall not return to this place before the judgment of the destruction of the world."⁵⁹⁸

*Ocus is annsin ro thimnadur ceilebrad do lucht in t-sida, & tángadar co Cnoc in Nuaill amach, & tucsat lucht in baile nuall mor annsin ac deiliugud ré Cailte. Conid Cnocc in Nuaill a ainm ó sin anall. "ócus ní thiucub-sa ar in baile-seo no có tí in brath dithi in betha."*⁵⁹⁹

This severing of the mortal and immortal worlds is connected to Caílte's release of his sorrow for the pagan past and his grief for his dear friend and lord Finn, a release which precipitates his

⁵⁹⁸ Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, 204.

⁵⁹⁹ Stokes, *Acallam*, 203.

full acceptance of the Christian afterlife and his impending mortality.⁶⁰⁰ The otherworld is presented in the *Acallam* as an alternative to death and Heaven, but one that a Christian should reject.

In a modern fenian text, “*Laoidh Oisín ar Thír na nÓg*,” Oisín spends three centuries in the Otherworld as the husband of the Otherworld king’s daughter, who has summoned him from the mortal world. Homesick, he returns to Ireland, where he breaks a prohibition and is stranded. All of his old companions are long dead, but he does meet Saint Patrick. “It is remarkable,” Ó Briain observes, “that this explanation of Oisín’s longevity and his survival of the Fianna until St. Patrick’s era does not appear in Fenian literature until the eighteenth century, although the general theme of the lay, a visit to the land of the Everliving, resembles many Old- and Middle Irish literary tales, especially *Echtrae Conlai* and *Imram Brain* . . .”⁶⁰¹ Oisín’s journey to the otherworld as the lover of an otherworldly woman is paralleled by accounts of medieval Irish heroes who attract the amorous attention of women of the *sídh*. Connla the Fair decides to journey with his immortal beloved to the otherworld, here called *Mag Mell*, ruled by Bóadach.⁶⁰² Cú Chulainn is seduced by Fand, wife of the sea-god Mannanán Mac Lir, and remains with her for a time before returning to his mortal wife.⁶⁰³

Imram Brain, the account of Bran mac Febail’s journey to *Tír inna mBan*, “The Land of Women,” is an early occurrence of this topos.⁶⁰⁴ Bran is walking near his fortress, when he

⁶⁰⁰ Stokes, *Acallam*, 199.

⁶⁰¹ Mártín Ó Briain, “Some Material on Oisín in the Land of Youth,” in *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney*, eds. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach, and Kim McCone (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1989), 181-199: 184.

⁶⁰² McCone, *Eachtrae Chonnlaí*.

⁶⁰³ Myles Dillon, ed., *Serglige Con Culainn*. Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 14. (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1953). Cú Chulainn’s relationship with Fand may be compared to that between Norse valkyries and the *einherjar* considered below, as part of Fand’s motivation for Cú Chulainn’s seduction is to induce him to fight in a war between two otherworld kingdoms.

⁶⁰⁴ Kuno Meyer and Alfred Nutt, eds. and trans., *The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal to the Land of the Living*, 2 vols (London: David Nutt in the Strand, 1895-7).

hears music coming from an unseen source. He is lulled to sleep by the sound, and upon waking spies a branch of silver with white flowers. Bran takes the branch into his house, and a strange woman appears and declaims a poem of fifty quatrains to Bran and the host. She speaks first of an island paradise inhabited by women, then prophesies the birth of Christ, before summoning Bran to undertake the voyage to seek the island. She departs by unknown means, taking the magic branch with her. In the morning Bran sets out to find the island, with three companies of nine men. They meet Manannán Mac Lir, who rides a chariot over the waves, on his way to keep a tryst with a mortal woman. Manannán also prophesies of Christ. After losing one of their men to the Island of Joy, whose inhabitants laugh and gape but refuse to converse, the host arrives at their destination. The leader of the women calls for Bran to come ashore, but he hesitates. She throws a ball of thread at him, holding onto one end of the thread. The ball sticks to Bran's palm, and the woman reels him in. The 27 men disembark and enter a house, which is appointed with 27 beds, one for each mortal man and his otherworldly lover. Though it seemed that only a year passed, the men feasted in the house for many years, before one of the men became homesick. Bran is asked to return to Ireland, but Bran's female companion warns him that he will regret the journey, and advises them not to touch the land. The host travels home, where they encounter people standing on the shore. Bran announces himself to them, and the people reply that they do not know him, "though the Voyage of Bran is in our ancient stories." (*Atá hi senchasaib linn chene Imram Brain.* ")⁶⁰⁵ The homesick man leaps onto the shore and turns to ashes. Bran relates the tale of his voyage to the people, then departs, "(a)nd from that hour his wanderings are not known" (*ocus ní fessa a imthechta ónd úair sin.*)⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰⁵ Meyer and Nutt, *Voyage*, 32-3.

⁶⁰⁶ Meyer and Nutt, *Voyage*, 34-5.

The extent of Christian influence on *Immram Brain* and the related issue of the precise nature of the Irish men's relationship with the women of the *Tír inna mBan* have been the subject of much scrutiny. James Carney argues that the text is a Christian allegory,⁶⁰⁷ but Proinsias Mac Cana has argued against Carney's view in a series of articles.⁶⁰⁸ Of particular relevance for the present discussion is Carney's argument that the otherworld kingdom of Mannanán in *Immram Brain*, where men and women sport under the bushes "without sin, without blame" (*cen peccad, cen immorboss*)⁶⁰⁹ is an extension of the Christian paradise, whose inhabitants eschew sexual companionship to live chastely.⁶¹⁰ Mac Cana disagrees with Carney's interpretation: "Professor Carney himself has to make a rather *ad hoc* differentiation between Mannanán's realm and the Land of Women, because whatever virtues the female inhabitants of this latter could boast, chastity was not one of them. But even if we allow this arbitrary distinction and confine ourselves to the actual account of Mannanán's kingdom, we shall still not find much support for this interpretation . . . the phrase *fo doss* lit. 'under/in a bush' alone puts the matter beyond any conceivable doubt, for it and its synonyms are commonplace throughout the languages and literatures of the world to express the idea of illicit and promiscuous love."⁶¹¹ Mac Cana sees Carney's reading as stemming from his assumption that the text is completely Christian, and thus sinlessness and blamelessness would require chastity. According to Mac Cana, "the inhabitants of the Otherworld as represented by the monastic authors and redactors were sinless, not because

⁶⁰⁷ James Carney, "The Earliest Bran Material," in *Latin Script and Letters AD 400-900: Festschrift presented to Ludwig Bieler on the occasion of his 70th birthday*, eds. J. J. O'Meara and Bernd Naumann (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 174-93.

⁶⁰⁸ See the following by Proinsias Mac Cana: "The sinless otherworld of *Immram Brain*," in *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature. An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. Jonathan M. Wooding (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 52-72; "On the 'prehistory' of *Immram Brain*," *Ériu* 26 (1975), 33-52; "Mongán Mac Fiachna and *Immram Brain*," *Ériu* 23 (1972), 104-42.

⁶⁰⁹ Meyer and Nut, *Voyage*, 21, stanza 41.

⁶¹⁰ Carney, "Earliest Bran Material," *passim*.

⁶¹¹ Mac Cana, "Sinless Otherworld," 100-01.

they did not indulge in sexual pleasure, but because they did so in the same pristine innocence that had prevailed among men before they became conscious of evil.”⁶¹²

While the Irish otherworld is frequently presented as a *Tír inna mBan*, ‘Land of Women,’ in other texts the otherworld is more frequently inhabited by both sexes, like any mortal kingdom. *Tech nDuinn* likewise appears to be an equal opportunity afterlife. Of course, the relative parity in Irish depictions of the afterlife is by no means a guarantee that the pre-Christian Irish would have envisioned the afterlife in such a way, but it does reflect the general lack of gendered difference in grieving in medieval Irish sources. However, while the otherworld has both male and female denizens, the mortals who are depicted journeying there are almost always men.⁶¹³

These journeys are not always the result of seduction; the Morrígain also appears to have some claim on, or at least some connection with, mortal men who die in battle. In the next section of this chapter I will consider Patricia Lysaght’s suggestion that the baleful female war spirits of Irish tradition are incorporated into the category of Sidh women depictions over time.⁶¹⁴ For the moment, it will suffice to point out that the association between the Morrígain, the Babd, and similar war-related figures and the female immortals inhabiting the otherworld again suggests a connection between otherworld and afterlife. The Irish evidence presents two possibilities for life beyond the mortal realm: an ‘inclusive’ afterlife where all the dead reside, and an otherworldly paradise where male heroes are received, and feast in the company of beautiful supernatural women, with whom they often have sexual or romantic relationships. The

⁶¹² Mac Cana, “Sinless Otherworld,” 101.

⁶¹³ In folklore it is common for mortal women to be lured into the otherworld, and in the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* a queen is kidnapped by the king of the fairies. Aside from the heroine in *Tochmarch Étaín*, who is an otherworld woman reincarnated as a mortal, I am not aware of this motif in medieval Irish sources.

Ernst Windisch, “*Tochmarch Étaíne: Das Freien um Etain.*” in *Irische Texte mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch I* (1891): 117–133.

⁶¹⁴ Patricia Lysaght, *The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death Messenger*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: O’Brien, 1996), 191–218.

men who journey to the otherworld are typically kings or princes, and the all-male institution of the *fian* is known for its aristocratic membership.

Scandinavian sources are dominated by two realms of the dead, Hel and Valhøll, although the evidence is clear that these were not the only afterlives. As with *Tech nDuinn* and the Irish otherworld, there is a distinction between the general social status of the individuals who journey to Hel or to Valhøll. Snorri's discussion of these two locations in his *Edda* is the *locus classicus*, and although this text's late date makes it a poor source for deciphering pagan beliefs, it does provide a perspective on how a thirteenth-century Christian Scandinavian court recycled these traditional beliefs for its own purposes. Snorri describes Hel:

He (Óðinn) threw Hel down into Niflheim and he gave her dominion over nine worlds, such that she has to administer board and lodging to those who were sent to her, and that is those who die of sickness or old age. She has great mansions there and her walls are exceptionally high and the gates great. Her hall is called Stormrain, her dish Hunger, her knife Famine, the servant Lazy, serving-maid Sloven, her threshold where you enter Stumbling-block, her bed Sick-bed, her curtains Gleaming-bale. She is half black and half flesh-coloured – thus she is easily recognizable – and rather downcast and fierce-looking.'

*Hel kastaði hann í Niflheim ok gaf henni vald yfir níu heimum at hon skipti öllum vistum með þeim er til hennar váru sendir, en þat eru sótt dauðir menn ok ellidauðir. Hon á þar mikla bólstaði ok eru garðar hennar forkunnar hávir ok grindr stórar. Éljúðnir heitir salr hennar, Hungr diskur hennar, Sultr knífr hennar, Ganglati þrællinn, Ganglöt ambátt, Fallanda Forað þreskólur hennar er inn gengr, Kǫr sæing, Blíkjanda Ból ársali hennar. Hon er blá hálf en hálf með hǫrundar lit – því er hon auðkend – ok heldr gnúpleit ok grimlig.*⁶¹⁵

Snorri's description of Valhøll and valkyries has been widely influential in later attempts to reconstruct pre-Christian religion. Most significant for the current study is Snorri's picture of a lord (Óðinn), his followers (*einherjar*), and alcohol-serving female attendants (*valkyrjur*). This

⁶¹⁵ Faulkes, Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 27.

concept has parallels in other Germanic texts, where the lord's hall is depicted as a paradisaical haven for aristocratic warriors, who are served alcohol by women.⁶¹⁶

Óðinn is known for championing warriors and then betraying them to their deaths, so that they will join him in Valhøll, (the "Hall of the Slain" or the "Hall of the Chosen"), where they will be members of his warband. While Óðinn will send valkyries to interact with the doomed warriors, he is known to appear in battle himself on occasion, in order to personally betray his protégé to his death. Scenes where a warrior in the thick of battle suddenly realizes that his charioteer or fellow warrior is actually Óðinn, there to bring about his death, are a chilling reminder that the god's favour comes with a price. Given the valkyries' penchant to fall in love with and rescue the warrior whose death they have been sent to oversee, it is no wonder that Óðinn occasionally takes matters into his own hands. Gustav Neckel argued that Valhøll originated as the battlefield itself, where the fallen warriors, resurrected nightly as *einherjar*, would continue to fight and die until the world's end.⁶¹⁷ The notion that warriors who die in battle are doomed to stay where they fell and experience death repeatedly is not enticing, and an evolution of Valhøll over time from the battlefield itself to a comfortable lord's hall would serve to make dying in battle a more acceptable risk.

⁶¹⁶ For this theme in Anglo-Saxon literature, see Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), especially chapters 2 and 3, "Images of Communal Life" and "Hall and Feasting in *Beowulf*," respectively. Michael J. Enright's *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age* is a book not without methodological deficiencies (for a discussion of the problems in Enright's book, see the review by Alexander Callander Murray, in *Speculum* 74, [1999], 1055-56.), however, his investigation of the relationship between the lord's wife and the *comitatus* is useful for the present argument. Enright observes that "the queen's service was not [. . .] just a communal bonding rite which made the *comitatus* a band of brothers, although it did that too; its primary purpose was to establish the lordship of the individual first served and named and the subordinate status of those served afterwards." Michael J. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 10. Enright's discussion at this point focuses on Wealhpeow serving her husband and his retainers in *Beowulf*. I find it surprising that Enright omits any sustained consideration of Valhøll or valkyries, which would have supplemented his argument. The relationship between Óðinn, valkyries, and the *einherjar* parallels the social context that Enright sees operating in this scene in *Beowulf*, in that the valkyrie acts as a medium binding the lord to his followers.

⁶¹⁷ Gustav Neckel, *Walhall : Studien über germanischen Jenseitsglauben*, (Dortmund: Ruhfus, 1913), *passim*.

In many discussions of medieval Scandinavian views on the pre-Christian afterlife, Valhøll looms larger than any other abode of the dead, as the resting place for dead warriors. Hel, of course, garners some attention, but it is Óðinn's hall, with its shield-thatched roof and endless mead, that commandeers the majority of attention. For example, Diana Whaley focuses almost exclusively on Valhøll, although she does nod to the fact that those who were not members of the warrior elite must have had their own ideas about the afterlife which presumably did not involve endless training for Ragnarøk.⁶¹⁸ Whaley's emphasis on Valhøll makes sense, as she is interested in heroic death. However, while Valhøll may be the idealized afterlife for heroes in late pagan and early Christian literary sources, it may not have been so prominent in pre-Christian Scandinavian religion. There is ample evidence suggesting that other realms of the dead were also populated by heroes, and that Valhøll did not always have such a strict entrance requirement as death in battle. Adolf Schullerus points out that many who should not have technically arrived in Valhøll after death, according to Snorri's description, are nonetheless depicted drinking on Óðinn's benches.⁶¹⁹ This suggests that the authors of the texts describing Valhøll as the paradise for battle-dead may be more restrictive than general tradition, creating an exclusive vision of the afterlife in order to elevate the status of their patrons.

Abram argues that "in the tenth century poets began to stress the connections between warriors, death, and Odin [*sic*] in new and imaginative ways."⁶²⁰ He points out that *Eiríksmál* contains the earliest known mention of Ragnarøk,⁶²¹ a fact that invites questions as to what

⁶¹⁸ Diana Whaley, "Heroic Death in the Early Nordic World," in *Ritual Remembrance: Responses to Death in Human Societies*, ed. Jon Davies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 165-85.

⁶¹⁹ Adolf Schullerus, "Zur Kritik des altnordischen Valhøllglaubens," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 12 (1887), 221-82: 231.

⁶²⁰ Abram, "Myths," 98.

⁶²¹ Abram, "Myths," 98.

extent Christian millenarianism may have influenced its pagan neighbours (or neighbouring paganism). Abram is cautious in his assessment of the Valhøll myth's prevalence:

Eiríksmál and *Hákonarmál* reveal that at this period the idea of Valhalla as an Odinic 'paradise' was well developed. We do not know how widespread belief in Valhalla was, however. It is not mentioned very often in skaldic verse of this period or earlier, although 'going to Odin' is sometimes used as a metaphor for dying. Perhaps Valhalla was a literary fashion that suited the tastes and aspirations of rulers like Eiríkr and Hákon, rather than a religious belief that was common throughout society. The pictures that the poems paint of a high-status heroic afterlife, in which military service to the mythical lord Odin gives their royal subjects status and purpose, fits in well with the expectations and norms of an aristocracy where men were bound to their king in life as the king is to Odin after his death. Valhalla, then, is partly made in the image of the royal courts which produced these poems. [...] The early tenth-century 'fashion for Valhalla' is a good example of how a particular community produces myths that reflect its own cultural concerns.⁶²²

While Valhøll surely precedes *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, its earlier existence suggests a more inclusive afterlife, which was molded over time in the image of the aristocratic society that sponsored the skalds.

Though Sigmundr and his son/nephew Sinfjötli greet Eiríkr when he enters Valhøll in *Eiríksmál*, Abram points out that Sinfjötli "should not, by rights," end up in Valhøll, as he dies of poison in *Völsunga saga*.⁶²³ However, it would not be uncharacteristic if the man in the boat who meets Sigmundr after the poisoning and takes Sinfjötli's corpse away were Óðinn, and his acceptance of the body suggests that, if the figure is indeed Óðinn, Sinfjötli does go to Valhøll. Elsewhere in the saga, King Rerir dies of an illness, and "he intended to seek a home with Óðinn, and that seemed agreeable to many at that time."⁶²⁴ (*ætlaði at sækja heim Óðin, ok þótti þat mǫrgum fýsiligt í þann tíma.*)⁶²⁵ Whether these instances suggest that belief in Valhøll's stringent admission policy had weakened during the centuries separating *Eiríksmál* and *Völsunga*

⁶²² Abram, "Myths," 105-6.

⁶²³ Abram, "Representations," 87.

⁶²⁴ Finch, *Völsunga Saga*, 3.

saga, or, more likely, that Snorri's assertion of the distinction between types of deaths is unnecessarily precise, is uncertain. However, if Óðinn were thought to extend his patronage not only to aristocratic warriors but also to the upper classes in general, as his role as ancestor to many royal lines attests, then a pattern of Óðinn as patron of nobility evolving to become the patron of a small but powerful subset of the nobility, with strong influence of literary output, would make sense.

As much as poets' accounts of the joys awaiting those who died in battle would have exercised a powerful social function, royal or noble patrons would presumably not be delighted to learn that their ancestors who survived battle to die in bed of old age or sickness were excluded from aristocratic afterlife. As Abram points out, *Heimskringla* provides an out for this seeming discrepancy: Óðinn, here a mortal king, dies of an illness, but has himself marked by a spear on his deathbed.⁶²⁶ He claims that he will go to the home of the gods, and there welcome his friends.⁶²⁷

If aristocratic Scandinavian men imagined themselves dwelling in a paradise where they recreate the male social bonds of the *comitatus* and are served by beautiful female companions, what did Scandinavian women of the same social class imagine for themselves? Or, given our reliance on textual sources of unknown authorship, how did medieval authors portray a woman's idea of the afterlife? As I have argued above, for men it was their bonds with other men which are valorized in the literature, and textual depictions of a primarily male afterlife reflect this bias. But women's social status also revolved around their male relatives, and it seems strange that they would imagine their husbands and male kin inhabiting an entirely separate afterlife.

⁶²⁵ Finch, *Völsunga Saga*, 3.

⁶²⁶ Abram, "Representations," 102-3.

⁶²⁷ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla* 1, 22.

Gunnhild's commissioning of *Eiríksmál* notwithstanding, what evidence do we have of a female perspective?

In Ibn Fadlan's account of a Rus chieftain's funeral on the Volga, the slave woman who volunteers to marry the chieftain after his death and join him on the funeral pyre speaks of seeing her mother, father and kin in the otherworld, just before she is killed by the side of her posthumous husband.⁶²⁸ Her vision of the afterlife, then, is that she joins her spouse and her family after death; indeed, the possibility of high status as a chieftain's wife in the afterlife is presumably a large incentive in her decision to choose death at this time. In a society where a woman derived much of her status from her husband, her choice is extremely pragmatic. Prior to her death, she copulates twice with her husband's primary followers. From her perspective, this may have been perceived as a symbolic marriage, undertaken by his friends in the face of her husband's obvious incapacity. From their point of view, however, perhaps the men saw themselves as reconstituting their fellowship in the afterlife, through the body of the soon-to-be-executed woman. Ibn Fadlan is informed that occasionally a male slave volunteers to die on a dead chief's funeral pyre, although this is less common, and it would be fascinating to compare such a ritual with the one Ibn Fadlan witnesses. Unfortunately, no record of such a ritual survives, nor, indeed do any other examples of the ritual.⁶²⁹

Jens Peter Schjødt assumes that the afterlife envisioned by the practitioners of the funeral rites observed by Ibn Fadlan corresponded closely to Scandinavian, and particularly to Odinic, beliefs, noting that "[w]e must suspect that she is here talking as the wife of the dead chieftain, since it is not likely that the relatives of a slave were supposed to dwell in a land of the dead of

⁶²⁸ Władysław Duczko, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004), 137-154.

⁶²⁹ Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 137-154.

the Valhøll type.”⁶³⁰ To assume overlap between the Rus funeral and Scandinavian beliefs about the afterlife is reasonable; it is common in Norse scholarship to compare this ritual to the literary account of Baldr’s funeral, and the statement about the smoke from the pyre is reminiscent of cremations associated with Óðinn. However, if this account does reflect an earlier incarnation of the Valhøll-myth, one would not expect it to conform in all particulars to our much later, geographically distant version of Óðinn’s hall of the slain. Even so, the Valhøll familiar to us through the works of Snorri and the skalds would not be a likely place to encounter one’s mother, even the mother of a dead chief, so it seems probable that the afterlife envisioned by the sacrificed slave woman differed substantially from our received notions of Valhøll. Whether the family to whom she refers is hers by blood or posthumous marriage is unclear, but the possibility that she speaks of her blood kin cannot be dismissed on grounds of its incompatibility with a “Valhøll type” afterlife.

Turning to more definitively Scandinavian sources, there is considerable evidence that women envisioned joining, or being joined by, their husbands or lovers in the afterlife. Brynhildr commits suicide to join Sigurðr, explicitly to be his wife in death; as Gro Steinsland phrases it, “The bitter Brynhildr, who did not obtain the one she loves in life, expects that love shall be consummated after death.”⁶³¹ Her journey to Hel is documented in the poem *Helreið Brynhildar*. A giantess berates her on her journey to Hel, saying “You shall not journey through my homestead buttressed with stone; it would befit you better to be at your weaving than to visit another woman’s man” (“*Skaltu í gognom ganga eigi/ grióti studda garða mína! / Betr semði*

⁶³⁰ Jens Peter Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion*, trans. Victor Hansen (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008), 140.

⁶³¹ “*Den bitre Brynhild, som ikke fikk den hun elsker i levende live, venter at kjærligheten skal fullbyrdes etter døden.*” Steinsland, *Eros*, 116.

þér borða at rekia,/ heldr enn vitia vers annarrar!),⁶³² suggesting that this poet, unlike that of *Hákonarmál*, envisioned Sigurðr in Hel. In the poem *Guðrúnarhvöt*, which documents the suicide of Sigurðr's actual widow, Guðrún, she says that he promised he would visit her from Hel,⁶³³ which again suggests that joining one's husband in the afterlife was imagined by the audience of these poems. Steinsland states that "(i)t is evident from these examples from heroic poetry that death was not a final barrier for love and passion between man and wife,"⁶³⁴ and in many of the accounts of female suicide in Scandinavian sources, the possibility of joining the beloved in the afterlife is part of the motivation for the suicide.

In *Snorra Edda*, Nanna, Baldr's wife, dies of grief and is placed on the funeral pyre beside her husband. When Hermóðr rides to the underworld to bargain with Hel for Baldr's return, Nanna gives him gifts to bring back to Frigg, including fabric and a ring.⁶³⁵ In *Gesta Danorum* Signe arranges to commit suicide simultaneously with her lover Hagbarth's execution. Hagbarth arranges for it to appear that he has been killed before the event actually occurs, and Hagbarth, seeing the flames that indicate she has carried out her part of the bargain, rejoices that he will be reunited with his lover after death:

Quick, fellows, seize me, swing me into the air!
It is sweet, my bride, to die after your
departure. There are the halls rosy with crackling
fire; now your love reveals its long
agreement, your firm vows are fulfilled, and you
shall be my consort in death as in life.
A single end for us both, one union after;
our first love cannot perish at random.
Happy am I, to be blest with such a companion,
and not go miserably to the nether gods

⁶³² von See, *Kommentar zu den Liedern* 6, 517.

⁶³³ "Minnztu, Sigurðr, hvat við mæltom,/ þá er við á beð bæði sátom,/ at þú myndir mín, móðugr, vitia,/ halr, ór helio, enn ec þín ór heimi." Neckel and Kuhn, *Edda*, 267.

⁶³⁴ "Av disse eksemplene fra heltektningen framgår det at døden ikke var det endelige stengsel for elskov og lidenskap mellom mann og kvinne." Steinsland, *Eros*, 116.

⁶³⁵ Faulkes, Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 46-7.

alone. Come, let this knot squeeze the middle of my throat!
 This final pain can bring me nothing
 but pleasure, for my beloved's restoration is certain,
 and death will soon bring its own delight.
 Each world has its joy; both will proclaim a mutual
 rest for our spirits, faith in love.⁶³⁶

*Ocius, o iuvenes, correptus in aera tollar!
 Dulce mihi, nupta, est post tua fata mori.
 Aspicio crepitus et tecta rubentia flammis,
 pollicitusque diu pacta revelat amor.
 En tua non dubiis completur pactio votis,
 cum vitae mihi sis interitusque comes.
 Unus erit finis, unus post funera nexus,
 nec passim poterit prima perire Venus.
 Felix, qui tanta merui consorte iuari
 nec male Tartareos solus adire deos.
 Ergo premant medias subiecta tenacula fauces!
 Nil, nisi quod libeat, poena suprema feret,
 cum restaurandae Veneris spes certa supersit
 et mors delicias mox habitura suas.
 Axis uterque iuvat: gemino celebrabitur orbe
 una animi requies, par in amore fides.*⁶³⁷

After these verses, Hagbarth boasts, "See, I willingly accept the decisive moment you offer, since not even among the shades does love let a partner disappear from its embrace."⁶³⁸ (*Ecce enim oblatum libens discrimen accipio, cum ne apud Manes quidem amor ipse participis sui complexum deperire patiatur*).⁶³⁹ With this romantic sentiment on his tongue, he is hanged. Although the poetry contains allusions to classical mythology as is typical of Saxo's style,⁶⁴⁰ it seems unlikely that Saxo is imposing an entirely foreign structure on earlier Scandinavian beliefs, rather than overlaying native ideas with a classical veneer. What is clear is that Saxo envisions these characters expecting to be reunited in death. Signe will accompany Hagbarth to

⁶³⁶Davidson and Fisher, *The History of the Danes*, 217.

⁶³⁷ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 236-7.

⁶³⁸ Davidson and Fisher, *The History of the Danes*, 217.

⁶³⁹ Holder, *Gesta Danorum*, 237.

⁶⁴⁰ For Saxo's use of classical models, see Karsten Friis-Jensen, ed., *Saxo Grammaticus: A Medieval Author between Norse and Latin Culture, Danish Medieval History and Saxo Grammaticus 2* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 1981).

the afterlife, and his reference to “*Tartareos . . . deos*” suggests that he envisions a subterranean afterlife, closer to Hel than to Valhøll.

Many of the female figures discussed above have eschewed their familial loyalties for matrimonial or romantic bonds. This is related to their desire to be reunited with the husband/lover in death: in life, they have already abandoned, or been cast out from, their kin. This contrasts starkly with the kin-group oriented notion of “dying into the hill,” where one joins the deceased of one’s lineage at death and exists in that community.⁶⁴¹ John McKinnell suggests that there is a transition from women cleaving most closely to their blood kin to feeling more loyalty towards their husbands as a result of Christianity’s increasing influence on Norse social values.⁶⁴² However, while this dynamic may be represented in some texts, the motif of women dying with their husbands is so prevalent over the span of Norse literature, and so common cross-culturally, that I find it difficult to attribute it to Christianity. Also, McKinnell seems to want to have it two ways: women siding with their husbands over their families are a result of Christian influence, but the suicide that so often accompanies this spousal solidarity is phased out as the Church’s hold grows. If women did not at times feel a stronger bond with their husbands than with their kin, one would not expect “traditionally minded” women after Christianization to feel guilt over not committing suttee. This conflict seems more likely to speak to the difficulties inherent in forming marriage alliances and creating new family entities. Women, as they would be transferred between families, would be an expected focus of texts exploring themes of conflict, but there are certainly many examples of men whose loyalties are divided between blood kin and ‘social’ kin. The fact that marriages and “blood brotherhood” are often established in order to head off violence between two parties suggests a parallel between

⁶⁴¹ For a discussion of life in the grave and kinship, see Steinsland, *Eros*, 98-100.

⁶⁴² John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 228.

the two institutions, which create fictions of kinship in order to replicate the social benefits of blood kinship. The conflicting loyalties that arise from such situations, while undoubtedly affected by cultural shifts such as the arrival of Christianity, are inherent to such practices, which are both a response to, and a source of, social friction.

Little Deaths: Death Deities and the Erotic

According to the poem *Grímnismál*, Óðinn is not the only deity who claims slain warriors on the battlefield: Freyja takes half.⁶⁴³ Judy Quinn observes that “if all women and all victims of accidents, illness and old age go to Hel and if half the slain warriors are in Freyja’s care, the association of death with the feminine is considerable.”⁶⁴⁴ While he lies mortally wounded, Balderus is visited by a vision of Proserpina, who promises they will embrace on the following day. Of course, we cannot know if Saxo was familiar with the figure of Hel, or if he were aware of the term only as a referent to the land of the dead. The use of Proserpina, rather than her husband Hades, suggests that he may have been aware of Hel the goddess. This erotic dream parallels the earlier dreams in which Balderus was tormented by phantoms in the shape of Nanna. The notion of embracing the death goddess may be related to the concept of valkyries as sexually desirable, Freyja as possessor of half the men slain in battle, and, if one takes stanza 7 of *Ynglingatal* at face value, Hel enjoying a slain man in the hall named *Glitnir*:

I do not doubt but that Glitnir’s goddess has Dyggvi’s corpse for pleasure;
the sister of the wolf and Narfi had to choose a king-man.
Loki’s daughter has taken the ruler of Yngvi’s people.⁶⁴⁵

*Kveðkat dul,
nema Dyggva hrør*

⁶⁴³ Neckel and Kuhn, *Edda*, 60.

⁶⁴⁴ Judy Quinn, “The Gendering of Death in Eddic Cosmology,” *Old Norse Religion in Long-term Perspectives: Origins, Changes and Interactions*, eds. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 54-57: 54.

⁶⁴⁵ Lee M. Hollander, ed. and trans., *Heimskringla: A History of the Kings of Norway* (Austin: Published for the American-Scandinavian Foundation by the University of Texas Press, 1967), 20.

*glitnis gnó
at gamni hefr,
því jódís
Ulfs ok Narfa
konungmann kjósa skyldi;
ok allvald Yngva þjóðar
Loka mæf of leikinn hefr.*⁶⁴⁶

Abram points out that there may be references to Hel in three kennings in this stanza. *Loka mæf* clearly refers to Hel as Loki's daughter, but *Glitnis gnó* and *jódís* pose more difficulties.⁶⁴⁷ Some scholars have taken these terms as indicative of the death goddess having an equine association. A proposed etymology for *jódís* suggests that it is a compound of *jór* (horse) and *dís*. *Glitnir* appears as a *heiti* for a horse in a *pula* of horse-*heiti*; however, this is the only occurrence of *Glitnir* as a name for a horse.⁶⁴⁸ *Glitnir* appears elsewhere as one of the halls of the gods. According to *Grímnismál* 15, *Glitnir* is roofed with silver and supported by gold pillars, and Forseti dwells there and "puts to sleep all quarrels." Snorri's description of the hall is modeled on that in the poem, and he adds the detail, otherwise unattested, that Forseti is the son of Baldr and Nanna.⁶⁴⁹

If one accepts Snorri's text as based on *Grímnismál*, it appears that there are two independent texts which may refer to *Glitnir* as a hall. In both cases the hall is inhabited by a deity. While Forseti has no direct link with Hel in extant sources, if Snorri is correct in assigning his parentage to Baldr and Nanna, then there may be a tenuous connection between Hel and Forseti, as Baldr and Nanna dwell there after death.

⁶⁴⁶ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla* 1, 33-4.

⁶⁴⁷ Christopher Abram, "Hel in Early Norse Poetry," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006), 1-29: 14.

⁶⁴⁸ Abram, "Hel in early Norse Poetry," 14. See also his discussion of the stanza in Abram, "Representations," 22-5, and Abram, *Myths*, 90.

⁶⁴⁹ Faulkes, Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 19-20, 26. Snorri states that the quarrels settled by Forseti are legal disputes, and that all who come to him with a dispute leave satisfied by his judgment. However, *Grímnismál* says nothing about people *leaving*, and the "putting to sleep of all quarrels" could conceivably be a euphemism for death, although I would not want to push this point too far.

Abram advises readers to keep in mind that when the poet “chooses to use kennings for Hel, they are all unambiguously based around the idea of a mythological figure, and a feminine one at that: she is a goddess, a sister, a daughter. She takes to herself the souls of the deceased; there is no mention of where she takes them. Indeed, nothing in this stanza indicates that Þjóðólfr conceived of Hel as a place at all.”⁶⁵⁰ Given the paucity of evidence assigning *Glitnir* to Forseti, I see little reason to assume that *Glitnir* could not, in some traditions, have been a name for Hel’s abode. The stanza describing *Glitnir* in *Grímnismál* immediately follows the description of Freyja’s hall, *Fólkvangr*, where Freyja seats her half of warriors slain in battle; perhaps the poet was prompted to place them sequentially because of some perceived association between the two halls. It may be significant that Hel “must choose (*kjósa*) a king-man;” use of the verb *kjósa* in the context of choosing a man for death aligns Hel with Freyja and the valkyries, other supernatural women who also choose the slain. The fact that *kjósa* is used in a stanza that also shows Hel as an erotic figure strengthens this parallel.

There are several other places where *Ynglingatal* appears to refer to Hel, but only one of them offers much in the way of character development. In one stanza, the “sheltering (or covering) goddess (or woman) of the cairn” (*hallvarps hlífinauma*) is said to “take” (*tók*) a king.⁶⁵¹ Given the more explicit references to Hel elsewhere in the poem, it is probably safe to assume that the figure invoked here is also Hel. This indicates that Þjóðólfr associated Hel both with a splendid hall *and* with the grave. The verb *hlífa* has a range of meanings that could be inferred in this stanza: to cover, to shelter, to conceal. In light the stanza describing Hel as taking the king for her pleasure, one might read *hlífa* as having an erotic connotation, i.e., she covers the dead king with her body. One might also understand the *hlífinauma* as a kenning for the grave

⁶⁵⁰ Abram, “Hel in Norse Poetry,” 16.

⁶⁵¹ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla* 1, 76.

itself, covering the corpse. This raises the question, did Þjóðólfr conceptualize Hel as the goddess of the grave, or as the grave personified? Abram points out that the other references to Hel in the poem “are all unambiguously based around the idea of a mythological figure, and a feminine one at that: she is a goddess, a sister, a daughter. She takes to herself the souls of the deceased; there is no mention of where she takes them.”⁶⁵² Assuming that the *hlífinauma* is in fact Hel, then the former possibility is more likely, and it demonstrates that the poet, unlike many later interpreters of Scandinavian mythology, felt no need to reduce the goddess to a single aspect or role.

In contrast to the feminine associations of death, the explicitly and exclusively male fellowship of *Valhøll* is modeled on the *comitatus*, and reflects its preference for masculine bonds and rejection of female companionship. As pointed out earlier in this chapter, there is evidence to suggest that the binary of warriors/everyone else belongs to a particular set of texts created in the social milieu of the Scandinavian courts in the final decades of the first millennium. In this system Hel, both the inimical giantess ruling over the dead and her eponymous kingdom, is structurally opposed to Óðinn and *Valhøll*.

Óðinn is prominent in Norse mythological literature as head of the Norse pantheon and ruler of *Valhøll*. His multivalence is recognized and celebrated. He is the ruler of the *Æsir*, god of magic, runes, poetry, and death, among others. He freely travels the realms of the gods, men, and giants. *Valhøll* is his particular realm, but his influence extends far beyond patronage of living and dead warriors; he is also the god of poets and poetry. While scholars sometimes find themselves grappling with the numerous facets of the god’s character, few attempt to reduce him to a single function or sphere. For example, his function as ruler of the hall of the slain is never seen to conflict with his image as bestower of poetic inspiration. His affiliation with death and

⁶⁵² Abram, “Hel,” 17.

the dead is so well-established in the literature that it is never questioned; it is often explained and discussed, but never interrogated. Scholars do not ask why Óðinn is a death god, or suggest that this is incongruous with his other roles. This aspect of his godhood is seen to be as innate as his association with poetry and nobility.

Such acceptance does not extend to female supernatural figures who are also associated with death. Rather than incorporating all the information given about that deity into a cohesive whole, the tendency is essentialist, to strip away those features which conflict, or appear to conflict, with what is considered the core function of the goddess. Many critics have found Freyja's claim on the dead problematic, due to Freyja's strong association with sexuality. Love goddesses, apparently, should avoid soiling their hands with the gore of the battlefield. Diana Whaley considers the claiming of the slain by Freyja in *Grímnismál* to be "an odd choice, since she is a fertility deity," and notes that valkyries also choose from among the dead. This juxtaposition of death and fecund sexuality may seem foreign at first glance, but it is arguably no stranger that a fertility goddess should lay claim to the dead than that the deity of poetic inspiration should do so. Given Freyja's known rapacity one might even expect her to appear wherever there are great numbers of suddenly very eligible men. Celticists have struggled with the same essentializing approach to supernatural women in Irish texts; Jaqueline Borsje has emphasized that when discussing mythological figures, "we are dealing with coexisting, diverse images of the supernatural. We tend to emphasize one aspect, but often there are several sides to supernatural beings that are equally 'true.'⁶⁵³ In a note, Borsje suggests that this tendency "might be due to us being influenced by Classical categorisations, in which we find several gods and

⁶⁵³ Jaqueline Borsje, "The 'terror of the night' and the Morrígain: Shifting faces of the supernatural," in *Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica*, ed. Mícheál Ó Flaithearta, *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Studia Celtica Upsaliensia* 6 (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2007), 71-98, 72.

goddesses bound up with a single function. It should be noted, however, that this unifying system is often contradicted by, for instance, textual evidence, art and cultic details.”⁶⁵⁴

Abram discusses the supposed conundrum of the kenning “Freyr’s game” (*Freys leik*) for ‘battle’ in Stanza 6 of *Hrafnsmál* in connection with Freyja’s hall *Folkvangr* “battlefield” mentioned in *Grímnismál*, where we are also informed that Freyja takes half of the slain:

“Scholars have never been able to explain why Freyja, one of the Vanir fertility gods who is normally associated with love and sex, should be mentioned in the same breath as Odin [*sic*] in this description of a warrior afterlife. But it might help to make better sense of Stanza 6 of *Hrafnsmál* if we accept that fertility and death were somehow intertwined in pagan thought.”⁶⁵⁵

Abram goes on to mention sacrifices given to Eros by Spartans before entering battle as evidence for this semantic association. There is another Greek myth which may provide a closer comparison with the connection between Freyja and the dead. Persephone, queen of the Underworld and wife of Hades in Greek myth, is both a nature goddess, associated with the fertility of the harvest, a goddess who welcomes and rules over the dead, and the object of aggressive, violent sexual desire. From this classical perspective, reproduction, sexual and otherwise, is the necessary corollary of death.

The connection of the goddess Freyja with slain warriors is seen as unsettling, and Hel’s enjoyment of a dead king is considered highly incongruous with her rule of the kingdom of the dead. Criticism has tended to view Norse mythology as divided into assorted binaries,⁶⁵⁶ e.g. Æsir vs. Vanir, or Gods (Æsir and Vanir) vs. Giants (Jǫtnar). In the first of these, the Vanir are deities associated with fertility and sexuality, while the Æsir have stronger associations with

⁶⁵⁴ Borsje, “‘The Terror of the Night,’” 72.

⁶⁵⁵ Abram, *Myth*, 94.

⁶⁵⁶ Margaret Clunies Ross discusses the influence of structuralism and binarism on the study of Norse mythology in *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society, volume 1: The Myths* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), 79-84.

kingship and war, manifested in Þórr, Óðinn, and Týr. These oppositions are simplistic, of course. Freyr is both a warrior and a king, and Óðinn is promiscuous even by the standards of pagan deities. When the opposition shifts to that of Gods (Æsir and Vanir) and jǫtnar, the connections with fertility and sexuality are shifted from the Vanir onto the jǫtnar, as jǫtnar maidens are eagerly sought as wives and mistresses by the Æsir and the Vanir, and are often explicitly affiliated with the land;⁶⁵⁷ indeed, Þórr was fathered by Óðinn on the jǫtunn Jǫrð, whose name is cognate with “earth.” The chthonic associations of the Vanir are attributed to the jǫtnar as well, and Hel, Loki’s jǫtunn daughter, rules over the subterranean realm of the dead.

However, these assumed dichotomies, though occasionally useful to think with, obscure important parallels between these classes of beings. Óðinn, Freyja, and Hel, who are of the Æsir, Vanir, and Jǫtnar respectively, all rule realms of the dead. Óðinn and Freyja both have strong associations with sexuality, and Hel is occasionally described in erotic terms as well. The oddity of Hel being depicted with an erotic aspect, coupled with Freyja’s claim on half the battle dead, led Folke Ström to posit that Freyja and Hel are the same goddess:

*Wenn man sagen kann, dass Freyja in ihrer Walkürengestalt mit dem Walhall der gefallenen Kriegerscharen zusammengehört, ist es ebenso sicher, dass sie auch in dem Todesreiche der allgemeineren Glaubensvorstellung als Herrscherin in Hel oder als die personifizierte Hel zu Hause ist.*⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵⁷ Gro Steinsland sees these relationships as indicative of the king’s sacred marriage to his kingdom, and as having political power, rather than fertility, at their core. “*Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi: en analyse av hierogami-myten i Skírnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal og Hyndluljóð*” (Ph.D. diss, University of Oslo, 1989).

⁶⁵⁸ Folke Ström, *Loki. Ein Mythologisches Problem*, Götesborgs Universitets Årsskrift 62.8 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1956), 66. Jens Peter Schjødt considers the implications of Ström’s argument: “If Freyja is identical to Hel, [. . .], or if there is at least a semantic affinity between them, this means that we have an oppositional pair named Freyja versus Óðinn, that is, the Vanir’s most prominent (and only) female representative opposite the Æsir’s most prominent masculine representative. The question must naturally be how we are to explain Freyja’s dual role as ruler of Fólkvangr, on the one hand, and her affinity with Hel on the other. The only reasonable solution to the problem is that Fólkvangr did not come into her possession until *after* she had been sent forth from the Vanir as a hostage. Freyja has, therefore, as a true member of the Vanir, an affinity with Hel, whereas, as a hostage, she resides in a kingdom of the dead for warriors, which can scarcely be distinguished from Óðinn’s Valhøll, and the exchange of hostages is thus the answer the myth gives to this paradox.” *Initiation Between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion*, trans. by Victor Hansen (Odense: The University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008), 390. Fólkvangr and Valhøll do share many similarities, most prominently the “everlasting battle” topos. However, the everlasting battle associated with Freyja (and Hildr) is grim and horrific,

However, this identification is unnecessarily reductive: Norse mythology as it survives in the literature brings together material from a diverse number of cultic regions, and Hel's domain differs in significant ways from Freyja's. Hel's hall is never identified as a battlefield, either in name or description. When Hel and battle are mentioned together by Snorri, it is to differentiate Hel's sphere from that associated with the battle-dead, and while this distinction may reflect the beliefs of late heathendom, there is no evidence to suggest that Hel and battle were associated at an earlier period. Rather, the evidence suggests that there were a number of goddesses venerated by pagan Scandinavians whose sexuality was not seen as antithetical to their functioning as death deities.

In addition to Hel and Freyja, this connection between death and eroticism is also evident in depictions of the sea goddess Rán. In *Friðþjófs saga ins frækna*, the eponymous hero expects to die during a storm at sea, and likens death to going to bed with the sea-goddess Rán: "Now I shall step to Rán's grief-bed" (*Nú skal ek Ránar raunbeð troða*).⁶⁵⁹ In *Fóstbræðra saga*, it is said of men who almost drown at sea in a storm that: the daughters of the sea-goddess, Rán, tried to embrace them (*reyndu Ránar dætr drengina ok buðu þeim sín faðmlög*).⁶⁶⁰

Heðinn abducts Hildir, prompting her father to go to war to get her back. The two armies clash, and Hildir revives the fallen warriors, so that the fighting continues. Saxo includes a version of this story, where the cause for the war is Hilda's seduction prior to her betrothal that causes enmity between her father and her lover. *Sörla þáttr*, which contains a late and

fought between enemies cursed to fall again and again upon each others' weapons. In this it is utterly unlike the cheerful feasting depicted in Valhöll, where the einherjar are comrades training together to a common purpose. Neckel proposed that Fólkvangr, which literally means "battlefield," originally referred to the battlefield itself, and not to a hall designated as an afterlife. Neckel, *Walhall*, passim.

⁶⁵⁹ Guðni Jónsson, ed. *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna*, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda* 3 (Reykjavík: Bókautgáfan Forni, 1944), 85.

⁶⁶⁰ Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, eds. *Fóstbræðra saga*, in *Vestfirðinga Sögur*, Íslenszk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenszka fornritafélag, 1943), 135.

Christianized version of this tale, elides Hildr's sexuality and her power over life and death. Her abduction/seduction is no longer the cause of war, but the sacrifice of her mother by her lover. In this version Freyja is the reviver of the slain men, and she has previously seduced Heðinn, Hildr's lover, and casts a spell on him so that he will be continuously revived. The valkyrie is demoted. Judy Quinn argues that:

In the campaign to discredit the fantasy that valkyries or women with magic powers might resurrect men, or empower them to continue fighting after they had been declared dead, it was presumably not enough to demonise the power as belonging to the old religion and the crafty wiles of Óðinn and Freyja, and Hildr herself had to be 'converted' into a peace-loving daughter whose primary sense of duty was to her father (and mother) and whose head was not turned by the dashing warrior.⁶⁶¹

The power of the valkyrie is broken; she no longer commands dead men to rise and fight again, and her sexuality is rendered less inherent to her character and to the narrative. The connection between the valkyrie's relentless desire and the restless dead has been severed.

The variant depictions of the valkyrie, who may appear as a terrifying figure or a courtly love interest, as a supernatural figure or a mortal woman, have also caused some confusion. Scholars have attempted to accommodate these variations by arguing for different traditions, or radical shifts in their conception over time. Scholarship often distinguishes between two types of character attributed to the valkyries: the valkyrie may possess a noble, courtly demeanor, or be a bloodthirsty, merciless inciter of war. The so-called "valkyrie-bride" belongs to the former category, and is generally considered to be a later development, possibly influenced by Celtic tradition. Charles Donahue states that "the pleasant Scandinavian valkyrie who brought wine to the heroes in Valhalla was a late development. She had a common Germanic ancestress who was

⁶⁶¹ Judy Quinn, "The End of a Fantasy: *Sörla þáttur* and the Rewriting of the Revivification Myth," in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature 2*, eds. John McKinnell, David Ashurst and Donata Kick (Durham: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), 808-16: 815.

a more sinister being, the cause of men's death in battle [. . .].⁶⁶² Helen Damico describes “two distinct, antagonistic perceptions” of valkyries of Old Norse literature, where they appear either as “fierce, elemental beings” or as “benevolent guardians,” later referring to “their benevolent and malevolent aspects.”⁶⁶³ Damico follows Hilda Ellis Davidson in seeing this duality as possibly reflecting different views on the afterlife.⁶⁶⁴ Alaric Hall, referring to Patricia Lysaght's pioneering work on the Irish banshee, claims that “we have just enough continuity of evidence in Ireland from early medieval to modern times to trace how traditions of the *valkyrie*-like *badb* were combined into traditions of non-martial *síde*-women there; some similar development must probably be assumed for Scandinavia.”⁶⁶⁵

These arguments are problematic from a chronological standpoint. Old Norse Eddic poetry is difficult to date with any certainty, and in any case both kinds of valkyrie seem to appear fairly early on. Scholars who want to argue that the macabre valkyrie antedates the courtly one usually gesture towards the Old High German *First Merseburg Charm*, which references *idisi* who bind warriors in fetters and intervene in battle.⁶⁶⁶ The arguments for seeing the *idisi* of the charm and the Norse valkyries as related phenomena are strong. Nonetheless, assuming that the description of the *idisi* in this one text encompasses every aspect of these figures in ancient Germanic culture would be unwise; it may be all that can be known now, but it certainly was not all that was known then. Also, while some of the *idisi* bind the fetters, others

⁶⁶² Charles Donohue, “The Valkyries and the Irish War-Goddesses,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 56 (1941), 1-12: 5.

⁶⁶³ Helen Damico, “The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature,” in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, eds. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 176- 190: 176.

⁶⁶⁴ Damico “Valkyrie Reflex,” 176.

⁶⁶⁵ Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender, and Identity* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), 163.

⁶⁶⁶ Ivar Lindquist, *Galdrar – De gamal germanska trollsångernes stil undersökt i samband med en svensk runinskrift från folkvandringstiden* (Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1923). Patricia Giangrosso, “The Merseburg Charms,” in *Medieval Germany: An Encyclopedia*, ed. John M. Jeep (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2001), 112-13.

pick apart the chains, and this may reflect the duality of the valkyrie nature that Donahue and later scholars find so troublesome. Karen Bek Pedersen discusses Morten Warmind's view on valkyries, which draws a more nuanced, and thus more useful, distinction between 'types' of valkyries: Warmind "distinguishes between several kinds of *valkyrjur*, primarily between, on the one hand, the clearly supernatural ones who carry names related to warfare, and, on the other hand, the romantic or heroic *valkyrjur* who carry names of a different kind (Sigrún, Kára), which he also describes as shield-maidens. This distinction between ethereal, supernatural *valkyrjur* and more human shieldmaidens makes good sense."⁶⁶⁷ Of course, the fact the 'sig' element of Sigrún means 'battle,' and the 'hildir' element of Brynhildir also means 'battle,' complicates this distinction between names with or without martial connotations, and the connection between name and type is not so easily delineated.

Damico moves very casually from suggesting a relationship between the valkyries and the *dísir* to discussing valkyries as a subset of *dísir*: "Of course, not all *dísir* require sacrificial appeasement. There are those who function as brides and guardians of the hero and whose environment is the court as well as the battlefield. The valkyries Sigrún, Sváva, and Brynhildir exemplify these."⁶⁶⁸ Beyond the methodological problems inherent in this sort of category elision between valkyrie and *dísir*, Damico's analysis oversimplifies these figures. For example, Brynhildir is a far more complex figure; when she discovers that her fated marriage to Sigurðr

⁶⁶⁷ Karen Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology* (Dunedin: Dunedin Academy Press, 2011), 56. Morten Warmind's dissertation, "From Severed Heads to Valkyries: Studies in the Relationship between Celtic and Germanic Religions and Literatures," (Ph.D. diss, Københavns Universitet, 1977) is referenced by Bek-Pedersen, but came to my attention too late to be included in this discussion.

⁶⁶⁸ Damico, "Valkyrie Reflex," 177. For the most recent discussion of the relationship between *Nornir*, *Dísir*, and valkyries, see Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, 14-72. Bek-Pedersen summarizes her view on the use of these terms: "In scholarship, *dísir* has sometimes been regarded as an umbrella term for female supernatural beings of almost all kinds so that *nornir* and *valkyrjur* have been seen as subgroups of *dísir*. . . . To a certain extent such usage may be deemed correct, but many things speak against using any of the terms discussed here as an overarching description for all kinds of supernatural women, and doing so quickly becomes an artificial approach to the study of supernatural women in Old Norse tradition. It is inadvisable to say that *valkyrjur* are a type of *dísir*, and employing invented terms, such as *örlagadísir* for *nornir*, is not helpful either. The differences are too great – even if the dividing lines remains indistinct." *Norns*, 65.

was forestalled by trickery, she demands his death; when she is denied being the benevolent valkyrie bride, she carries out the malevolent role of the valkyrie, choosing a man to die. It is an inversion of the pattern seen elsewhere, where the valkyrie deselects the man fated to die and becomes his lover. However, even in this pattern the two aspects overlap, for surely the valkyrie who chooses life for her protégé dooms another to death in his stead. She not only chooses which man's life she values more, but also whose life she values less. To the man newly selected for death, she surely does not appear so benevolent, although there is ample evidence that the valkyries' erotic allure was not eliminated by choosing a man for death; Quinn observes that "there is the potential of erotic frisson" in valkyries' dealings, whether or not they accurately carry out Óðinn's commands.⁶⁶⁹ Quinn argues that the valkyries' relationship with the men they are sent to choose on Óðinn's behalf is often blatantly sexualized:

When Snorri took up this legend within a stanza of *Háttatal* he seems to have been rather more interested in the seductive nature of Hildr; that aspect of battle that drew the male psyche into danger and somehow made the allure erotic. To express the point that a warrior taking up the fight is by definition always in mortal danger, Snorri describes Heðinn's lover preparing a bed for most warriors. The mythological context creates an image of Hildr inciting warriors to fight by enticing them into her bed, even though it is in fact their death-bed. Snorri's line *Heðins mála býr hvílu* captures the sweetness the legend of Hildr must have offered fighting men – perhaps even in the thirteenth century – where death by gross wounding was somehow transfigured as an erotic surrendering to a female personification of battle. In an earlier age when such an idea had mythological force, it must have served to encourage men into the otherwise discouraging arena of mortal combat: dying of horrendous wounds might sometimes have seemed justified by particular social, dynastic or ethical circumstances, but when it did not, it must have helped to picture being routed and gored as collapsing into bed with a divine woman. At the same time, the virility so important to a warrior was reasserted at the moment of death, as martial defeat was parlayed into sexual conquest, fantastic though that might seem.⁶⁷⁰

⁶⁶⁹ Quinn, "The End of a Fantasy," 810.

⁶⁷⁰ Quinn, "The End of a Fantasy," 809-10.

While the idea that the earliest incarnation or precursor of the valkyrie was a terrifying, grotesque, savage figure appeals to other discourses about the civilizing of the barbaric Germanic tribes, the scarcity of early evidence for valkyries makes it difficult to evaluate the merits of this argument. However, the single gloss relating valkyries to Venus suggests that in the Anglo-Saxon tradition the valkyrie was not exclusively a grim battle-deity. Ellis Davidson observes that the gloss of *veneris* with *wælcyrre* “is both suggestive and puzzling, since it confirms the link between the Valkyries and Freyja which we have seen presented but unexplained in *Grímnismál*.”⁶⁷¹ This gloss is intriguing, but it is difficult to assess its true import, and the complete absence of Freyja outside of Scandinavian texts makes using the gloss to “confirm” a connection between the goddess and Valkyries problematic, and Ellis Davidson does not elaborate on what exactly the gloss confirms about the “link.” While the other glosses connect the Anglo-Saxon valkyries to the Greek Furies, it is not certain the glossator of Aldhelm’s *De laudibus virginittatis* would have been acquainted with war-like valkyries at all, although it does seem likely. Correctly interpreting this gloss depends on a number of unknown factors, including the glossator’s knowledge of the tradition of valkyries, the form of this tradition in Anglo-Saxon England, and the extent of his familiarity with the Venus of classical tradition.

In a description of a fantastical beast, the Old English translation of *The Wonders of the East* renders “having the eyes of gorgons” (*oculos habent gorgoneos*) as “having the eyes of valkyries” (*habbað [. . .] wælkyrian eagan*).⁶⁷² Elsewhere, the text explains the place-name “Gorgoneus:” “*þæt is, wælcyriginc*” (“that is, valkyrie-like”).⁶⁷³ The translation of gorgon with

⁶⁷¹ Hilda Ellis Davidson (as Hilda Roderick Ellis), *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 72. The gloss is found in Oxford, Bodleian MS. Digby 146, 73v/11, printed in A. S. Napier, *Old English Glosses* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 115, no. 4449.

⁶⁷² Text from Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 176, 187.

⁶⁷³ Orchard, *Pride*, 190-1.

valkyrie indicates that the translator saw a connection between the horrifying classical monsters capable of turning a man to stone with a look, and the valkyrie. The notion of the gorgons' calcifying gaze may suggest that valkyries' eyes were likewise considered noteworthy; alternatively, it may simply mean that the translator viewed valkyrie as a synonym for gorgon, because both were frightening supernatural females.⁶⁷⁴ Other direct evidence for valkyries in Anglo-Saxon England is scarce. Wulfstan includes them with witches, adulterers, murderers, liars, and criminals in his *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, which could indicate that he did not view them as supernatural figures, but as sinful mortals.⁶⁷⁵ However, Judith Jesch suggests that there may have been "a general Anglo-Scandinavian interest in valkyries of which Wulfstan disapproved, presumably because of their Odinic associations."⁶⁷⁶ Jesch's interpretation would situate Wulfstan's *wælcyrrie* securely in a supernatural context, albeit one that is Scandinavian, not

⁶⁷⁴ If the valkyries' eyes were thought to exert a particular effect, then perhaps there is a relationship between this and the Scandinavian notion of *gjalti*, borrowed from Irish *geilt*, a term that describes warriors who look into the sky during battle and go mad. In *Hávamál* st. 129 the following warning is given:

Do not look up in battle—
The sons of men become *geilt*—
lest spells be cast on you.
*Upp líta scalattu í orrosto-
gjalti glikir verða gumna synir—,
siðr þic um heilli halir.* (Neckel and Kuhn, *Edda*, 38.)

Ynglinga Saga attributes to Óðinn the power to turn men *at gjalti*; this is fitting, given his association with madness. The growth of feathers, which features prominently in Irish sources and appears in the twelfth-century Norse *Speculum Regale*, may also suggest a connection with Óðinn and Freyja; Freyja possesses a *valshamr* ("falcon skin" or "falcon shape") that enables the wearer to fly, and Óðinn dons an *arnarhamr* (lit.: "eagle skin" or "eagle shape") to escape when he steals the mead of poetry. See Neckel and Kuhn, *Edda*, 111; Anthony Faulkes, ed., Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál* 1, (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), 2, 4-5. Both deities claim battlefield dead, Óðinn determines, sometimes with the help of a valkyrie, which men will die in battle, and Freyja herself has valkyrie-like associations. The ability to drive men mad would complement the ability to determine who would be victorious and who would die in battle, and the former could even have been believed to aid in accomplishing the latter. It is not impossible that the valkyries may also have possessed this ability in some variants, or acted as Óðinn's battlefield proxies. Perhaps the translator of *The Wonders of the East* believed that valkyries paralysed their chosen victims, and perhaps this was seen as a function of their gaze. For a discussion of *geilt* in Irish, Welsh, and Norse literature, see Nora K. Chadwick, "Geilt," in *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 5 (1942), 106-153.

⁶⁷⁵ Dorothy Whitelock, ed. *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* (London: Methuen, 1939), 50.

⁶⁷⁶ Judith Jesch, "Scandinavians and 'Cultural Paganism,'" in *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching*, ed. Paul Cavill (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 55-68: 67.

Anglo-Saxon, and thus would shed little light on earlier uses of the term in Anglo-Saxon England.

Like Old Norse-Icelandic literature, Old and Middle Irish literature features supernatural women whose spheres of influence encompass both death and the erotic. Celticists have been more accepting of this combination, appraising the evidence using methods that can be, and on occasion have been, productively applied to Scandinavian material. In particular the Morrígain and the other war goddesses have drawn comparisons with valkyries. As long ago as 1870, C. Lottner proposed that contact between Celtic and Germanic groups on the continent had resulted in these similarities.⁶⁷⁷

I am not concerned here with establishing a common origin for the Germanic and Celtic supernatural figures associated with death; such an argument is well beyond the scope of this dissertation, and has been investigated elsewhere, with inconclusive, though suggestive, results.⁶⁷⁸ I will merely point out that numerous scholars have been in favor of a connection between valkyries and the Irish war-goddesses. Rather, it is the split nature of these parallel figures, their intriguing duality, that Angelique Gulermovich Epstein argues that

Overall, at least, the correspondences between the Morrígan [*sic*] and the Valkyries go beyond what one would expect from parallel typology. The two traditions differ, but their details exhibit similarities unnoted in previous investigations. Taken together, they allow the investigator to piece together elements not clear in any one tradition alone, in particular the related roles of the goddess in the death of the hero, and as psychopomp. These two classes of divine females provide strong evidence for a Northern Indo-European tradition of battle goddesses, evidence reinforced and complicated by the interplay of the Celtic and Germanic traditions throughout their history.⁶⁷⁹

⁶⁷⁷ C. Lottner, *Revue Celtique* I (1870), 55-7, appendix to W. M. Hennessy's "The Ancient Irish Goddesses of War," *Revue Celtique* I (1870), 32-55.

⁶⁷⁸ Most recently, Matthias Egeler has worked to situate the Germanic and Celtic figures within the wider European context. See Matthias Egeler, "Death, Wings, and Divine Devouring: Possible Mediterranean Affinities of Irish Battlefield Demons and Norse Valkyries," *Studia Celtica Fennica* 5 (2008), 5-26, and *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen: Gedanken zur religionsgeschichtlichen Anbindung Nordwesteuropas an den mediterranen Raum* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011).

⁶⁷⁹ Angelique Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: the Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1998), 304-5.

Epstein points out that theories attributing the valkyrie's courtly side to Celtic influence are problematic: "the source material shows both flavours of valkyries coexisting. Scholars who have traced the 'noble warrior maiden' to Celtic influence would be shocked to learn just how savage the Morrígain is."⁶⁸⁰ While these scholars probably had in mind the fairy lover who courts the hero in so many *lais* and romances, the Morrígain is the Celtic figure who, typologically, bears the closest resemblance to the valkyrie.

Reconciling the Morrígain's warlike ferocity and her at times nurturing or sexual relationship with the warrior Cú Chulainn requires a rethinking of her function. Máire Herbert argues that "whatever her *alter* ego, the evidence so far indicates that war *per se* is not the sole aspect of the role of the goddess. She has significant associations with the earth and with the cattle-resources of a pastoral people."⁶⁸¹ Herbert's observation that the Morrígain should not be considered solely a war goddess, but also a fertility goddess, matches the thematic associations between these functions in other deities. Rather than being seen as antithetical, death (represented here by war) and fertility seem to be viewed as complementary. Thus we have Freyja, goddess of sexual pleasure and member of the Vanic fertility deities, not only acting as a patron for a young protege/lover in *Hyndluljóð*, but also choosing amongst slain on the battlefield, and indeed, she is accused of leading her lover to his death; for a mortal, loving a goddess who chooses the slain is always a dangerous proposition. A connection between chthonic deities and those related to fertility is not an unlikely development, given that the earth both takes the dead who are buried, and yields crops.⁶⁸²

⁶⁸⁰ Epstein, "War-Goddess," 283.

⁶⁸¹ Máire Herbert, "Transmutations of an Irish Goddess," in *The Concept of the Goddess*, eds. Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (London: Routledge, 1996), 141-151: 145.

⁶⁸² Compare Persephone in Greek mythology.

In the split nature of the Morrígain and valkyrie, Epstein sees a representation of the duality of war. Commenting on the scene in *Njáls saga* where valkyries are portrayed weaving with entrails, weapons, and severed heads, Epstein observes that “while the grisly savagery of this scene has seemed, to some scholars, to contradict the ‘nobler’ aspects of the Valkyries, it is fully in keeping with our understanding of the Morrígan. Why *not* the Valkyries as well? Indeed, does not the ‘primitive’ aspect of the Valkyries merely call forth the bloody reality of war, necessary counterpart to the glory that the ‘poetic’ aspect seems to embody?”⁶⁸³

Patricia Lysaght argues persuasively that the *banshee* (literally: “woman of the *síd*”) is closely connected with, and in some cases may derive from, tutelary goddesses of the land attached to particular families. Furthermore, these figures can be associated with the famous Irish sovereignty goddesses, who were envisioned as the supernatural spouses of chiefs and kings. Lysaght suggests that the sovereignty goddess, who would have espoused successive rulers, mourns each one’s death. Lysaght observes that “certain core elements seem to indicate that the supernatural death-messenger of folk tradition can be related – in cultural terms – to various goddess-figures who play such an important and prominent role in early Irish mythology,”⁶⁸⁴ and sets out to consider the connections between the folkloric banshee and her alleged predecessors. Though banshee is the common term for the figure in English usage, other names are in use throughout Ireland. The term *badb* appears, along with banshee, in south-east Ireland, and the figure is also known as the *bean chaointe* (“keening woman”).⁶⁸⁵ *Badb*, of course, is also the name given to an early Irish goddess associated with the battlefield.

⁶⁸³ Epstein, “War-Goddess,” 288.

⁶⁸⁴ Lysaght, “Aspects of the Earth-Goddess in the Traditions of the Banshee in Ireland,” in *The Concept of the Goddess*, eds. Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (London: Routledge, 1996), 152-165: 153.

⁶⁸⁵ Lysaght, “Aspects,” 154.

The death-messenger is linked to particular families, those which have, or are believed to have, noble antecedents. Nor does she attend the deaths of all members of such families, rather, she favors males, sometimes showing a marked preference for the more elite men of the family. The families she follows are believed to be her descendants, and “she would seem to be concerned with the fortunes of the family, and thus also with the ownership and fertility of land.”⁶⁸⁶ Ultimately, Lysaght argues convincingly that “the connection of the death-messenger with families and the ancestral home is undoubtedly an echo of a persistent theme in Irish tradition—that of sovereignty—the mythic union between the goddess of the land and its proper sovereign.”⁶⁸⁷

The death-messenger’s lament or *keen* is typically described as sorrowful, but in the regions where the death-messenger manifests as the *badhbh*, her *keen* is less sympathetic and more aggressive, showing “a more fierce and frightening side to her character, [. . .] suggestive of the realms of wild animals or dangerous and hostile supernatural beings;”⁶⁸⁸ her dual nature “calls to mind certain characteristics of goddess-figures of early Irish mythology.”⁶⁸⁹ Another quality shared by the death-messenger and the sovereignty goddess is that the figure may appear as a young, tall and beautiful woman, or small, aged, and unattractive.⁶⁹⁰ Lysaght strengthens her argument that the death-messenger derives from sovereignty goddesses by pointing to several who are depicted either warning a doomed ruler of his impending death, or weeping for his passing. Like the death-messenger, the sovereignty goddess does not always appear with a sympathetic aspect; she also appears “as a death-goddess who is instrumental in the downfall and death of the unjust king whose reign has ceased to be productive, and who thus can no longer be

⁶⁸⁶ Lysaght, “Aspects,” 154.

⁶⁸⁷ Lysaght, “Aspects,” 155.

⁶⁸⁸ Lysaght, “Aspects,” 155.

⁶⁸⁹ Lysaght, “Aspects,” 155.

⁶⁹⁰ Lysaght, “Aspects,” 156.

her mystical spouse.”⁶⁹¹ I discussed the death of the sorceress *Sín* in Chapter 3, who destroyed her royal lover and then keened him before dying of grief. Her narrative almost certainly incorporates elements from this constellation of beliefs.⁶⁹²

If the *bean sí* figure grew out of sovereignty or tutelary goddesses, as Lysaght argues, and the Morrígain’s battle-field incarnation is a function of her sovereignty, then arguing for the sublimation of the war-like figure into the courtly is unnecessary. It is possible, even likely, that in the earliest literature, both aspects existed in the same figure. Like the standard Irish sovereignty goddess, who appears both as a horrific hag and a lovely woman, corresponding to the state of the realm, the *bean sí* and the Morrígain likewise shift between beautiful and terrible aspects. Máire Bhreathnach argues convincingly that the sovereignty goddess who establishes the king’s rule at the beginning of his reign also has a hand in ending it when the king ceases to be a viable ruler.⁶⁹³

Death (and) the Maiden

In the final portion of this chapter, I will further explore the connection between death deities and the erotic. Whether the connotations of the connection between death and eroticism are presented as positive or negative within a given text depends upon the rhetorical purpose to which it is put: where the feminine erotic is being used to reinforce male bonds, it is presented positively; however, when it is presented as disruptive, it takes on a macabre, horrific aspect. It is not a matter of this aspect being present or absent, but of the ideological framework in which it is

⁶⁹¹ Lysaght, “Aspects,” 160.

⁶⁹² Space does not permit a thorough explanation of this enigmatic figure. Scholars waver between reading her as a destructive sovereignty goddess claiming a king whose reign should end, or as a mortal woman seeking revenge for the killing of her kin. Máire Herbert, “The Death of Muirchertach Mac Erca: A Twelfth-Century Tale,” in *Celts and Vikings: Proceedings of the Fourth Symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica*, ed. by F. Josephson (Göteborg: Göteborgs Universitet, 1997), 27-39; Mark Williams, “ ‘Lady Vengeance’: A Reading of *Sín* in *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca*,” *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 62 (2011), 1-32; Máire Bhreathnach, “The Sovereignty Goddess as Goddess of Death?” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 39 (1982), 243- 260.

⁶⁹³ Bhreathnach, “Sovereignty Goddess,” *passim*.

deployed. A comparison of two gravemound encounters between a woman and her dead lover from Irish and Norse poems will show how these formerly desirable women take on macabre attributes of female death deities. While this demonstrates a connection between mortal women's desirability and the danger posed to men by that desirability, it is also related to the pervasive tendency to eroticize death deities.

An early Irish *fian* text, *Reicne Fothaid Canainne*, concerns the result of a rivalry between the Connacht *ríghfénnid* Fothad Canainne, and Ailill Flann Bec, *ríghfénnid* of Munster.⁶⁹⁴ The surviving text consists of a prose introduction in Middle Irish, and an Old Irish poem, the latter variously dated to the late ninth/early tenth and eight centuries, respectively, by Kuno Meyer. Beginning with the information that there was strife and raiding between the two *fiana*, the text states that “Fothad’s shape was more marvelous than that of Ailill, but Ailill’s wife was more marvelous and delightful than Fothad’s wife.”⁶⁹⁵ (*Ba hamru delb Fothaid ol báí Oilill, acht ba hamru ben Oilella 7 ba haille oldas ben Fothaid*).⁶⁹⁶ (Tellingly of the text’s priorities, neither woman is named.) Obviously, this disparity is a problem, and Fothad dispatches a messenger to woo Ailill’s wife. She agrees to go with Fothad, provided that he give her a wooing-gift.⁶⁹⁷ “even a bushel of gold and a bushel of silver and a bushel of white bronze.”⁶⁹⁸ (*.i. miach óir 7 miach finddruine 7 miach credumai*).⁶⁹⁹ The messenger relays this requirement to Fothad, and it is agreed that she shall have her bride-price, but the method of

⁶⁹⁴ Kuno Meyer, ed. and trans., “*Reicne Fothaid Canainne*,” in *Fianaigecht: Being a Collection of Hitherto Inedited Irish Poems and Tales Relating to Finn and his Fiana, with an English Translation*, ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1910), 1-17.

⁶⁹⁵ Meyer, *Reicne*, 7.

⁶⁹⁶ Meyer, *Reicne*, 6.

⁶⁹⁷ Meyer translates *tindsra* as “bride-price,” however, the DIL offers several other possible translations, among them “price paid to a woman for a temporary union” and it is unclear whether Fothad is actually marrying Ailill’s wife, or contracting a short-term arrangement with her. In light of this ambiguity in *RFC*, I have replaced Meyer’s “bride-price” with the more semantically neutral “wooing-gift.” ⁶⁹⁷ Quin, ed., *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, s.v. *tindsra*.

⁶⁹⁸ Meyer, *Reicne*, 7.

⁶⁹⁹ Meyer, *Reicne*, 6.

gathering this wealth is strange: “He said that each man of Fothad’s household had six rivets in his spear, vis. two rivets of gold and two rivets of silver and two rivets of white bronze; and they would take three rivets out of every spear and leave three rivets in every spear, and thus three bushels would be filled with them, even a bushel of gold, and a bushel of silver, and a bushel of bronze.”⁷⁰⁰ (*Ispert som badur sé semmanda a sleig cech fir do muntir Fothaid .i. da seim oir 7 da seim airgid 7 da seim finddruine 7 nogédais tri semanda as cech sleig 7 fuicbidis tri semannnda in cech sleig 7 dolínfaidis tri meich dib .i. miach óir 7 miach airgid 7 miach crédumai*).⁷⁰¹ The text is unclear on whether or not the woman herself demanded payment in rivets; Kuno Meyer believes that something may be left out of the text at this point, and his translation reads “The woman asked [. . .] she would take it in whatever form it was offered (?)” Whether she asks for the rivets or Fothad (or his messenger) decides on this approach is not clear from the text, although it is the emphatic masculine and neuter 3 singular particle *som* which is used.⁷⁰²

The bride-price is paid, and Fothad carries off the wife of Ailill. Her husband pursues them with his warriors, and that night there is a battle between the two *fiana*. Fothad dies in battle and is beheaded, and the prose introduction relates that Ailill’s wife carries his head to his grave, where the head sings the poem to her. Although the prose does not mention it, in the poem Fothad claims that he and Ailill killed each other in the battle. Jaqueline Borsje has argued that

⁷⁰⁰ Meyer, *Reicne*, 7.

⁷⁰¹ Meyer, *Reicne*, 6.

⁷⁰² Nagy appears to interpret the rivets as the woman’s request: “the price she demands for agreeing to consort with Fothad instead of, or as well as, Ailill very graphically runs counter to the male relationships that have helped to make Fothad a successful and famous *fénid*. [. . .] Such a loss will significantly reduce the splendor of his comrades’ appearance, not to mention the durability of their spears in battle.” Nagy, *Conversing*, 300. I am not sure from Nagy’s phrasing whether he is attributing the choice of rivets to Ailill’s wife; by “the price she demands” he could be referring either to the metals or to the rivets themselves. However, the text does not make this transparent, and the decision to give her the rivets from the spears may indicate poor judgment on Fothad’s part, and a disregard of his responsibilities to the male world of the *fian*.

there is “overlap” between the supernatural figures of the poem,⁷⁰³ and I will argue that there is also a sustained overlap between the supernatural figures and Fothad’s lover.

The poem opens with Fothad commanding his lover to be silent: “Hush, woman! Do not speak to me!/ My thoughts are not with thee./ My thoughts are still/ in the encounter at Féic.”⁷⁰⁴

(*A ben, náchamaicille! ní friot atá mo menmo: atá mo menma colléic isind imairiuc oc Féic.*)⁷⁰⁵

In the third stanza, he proclaims that “It is blindness for anyone making a tryst/ to set aside the tryst with death:/ the tryst that was made at Clárach/ has been kept by me in pale death.”⁷⁰⁶

(*Dochta do neoch dáles dáil fácbas dáil n-éco fri láimh; in dál dálto co Clárach tuärnect im robánadh.*)⁷⁰⁷ Stanzas five and six continue in this vein: “Tis not I alone who in the fullness of desires/ have gone astray to meet a woman--/ no reproach to thee, though it was for thy sake--/ wretched is our last meeting!/ I have come from afar to the tryst with thee; there was horror upon my noble companion./ If we had known it would be thus, it had been easy not to persist.”⁷⁰⁸ (*Ní mé m'aonor im-múr thol docóid fordal i ndáil ban, ní ar aithbiur cid ditt ágh, is duáigh ar ndedhendál. Do céin doroächt do dáil, báí gráin for mo choicne máir, ma dofesmais bid amne, bá assa ní tairistæ.*)⁷⁰⁹

The poet establishes a distinct contrast between the masculine and feminine spheres, with the living world of men juxtaposed with that of women and of death; Nagy suggests that “as Fothad’s poem makes clear, his final thoughts centered on the contrast between an active, heroic past informed by life among fellow fénnidi and a present shaped, so the head claims, by a

⁷⁰³ Borsje, “The ‘terror of the night,’” 92.

⁷⁰⁴ Meyer, *Reicne*, 11.

⁷⁰⁵ Meyer, *Reicne*, 10.

⁷⁰⁶ Meyer, *Reicne*, 11.

⁷⁰⁷ Meyer, *Reicne*, 10.

⁷⁰⁸ Meyer, *Reicne*, 11.

⁷⁰⁹ Meyer, *Reicne*, 10.

conflict over a woman and marked by a living death.”⁷¹⁰ Nagy points out that “the poem exudes Fothad’s hostility toward the woman,”⁷¹¹ and he observes that “Fothad would prefer to be alone, he explains, because his mind is still in the battle in which he fell. He even warns that talking with a dead man is dangerous. Arguably, talking with a woman, which can lead to situations such as the one that deprived Fothad of a body, can be equally, if not even more, dangerous, as the pointed references to the sinister war goddess the Morrígain, ‘she who has stirred up,’ make clear.”⁷¹² The connection between the Morrígain and Ailill’s wife can be pushed further: Ailill’s wife is wandering a battle-field at night, carrying a severed head, and thus there is a gruesome combination of the erotic, in her elopement, and the macabre. The Morrígan has strong associations both with death in battle and with fertility and sexuality. The once masculine domain of the battlefield has been occupied by women. The archetype of women searching among the slain on the battlefield for their men in order that they might be prepared for burial resonates here, and in the prose preface Ailill’s wife is indeed carrying Fothad’s head to the grave so that it may be reunited with his body.

After listing and describing the spoils he is imparting to Ailill’s widow, Fothad states: “There are around us here and there/ many spoils whose luck is famous;/ horrible are the huge entrails/ which the Morrígain washes. She has come to us from the edge of a pillar (?),/ ‘tis she who has egged us on;/ many are the spoils she washes,/ horrible the hateful laugh she laughs./ She has flung her mane over her back.”⁷¹³ (*Atáat immunn san chan, / mór fodb asa fordercc bol, / dreman inathor dīmar, / nodusnigh an Mórríoghan. / Donárlaith do bil óige, /*

⁷¹⁰ Nagy, *Conversing*, 300.

⁷¹¹ Nagy, *Conversing*, 301.

⁷¹² Nagy, *Conversing*, 301.

⁷¹³ Meyer, *Reicne*, 17.

isí cotanasóide, / is mór do fodboibh nigius, / dremhan an caisgen tibhes)⁷¹⁴ By immediately shifting from the spoils his lover will receive to the spoils, i.e., entrails, in possession of the Morrígain, Fothad draws a clear parallel between the woman and the goddess. The Morrígain, in fact, is the only female figure given a name in the text, allowing her presence to loom over the poem. When Fothad mentions that she laughs and has “flung her mane over her back,”⁷¹⁵ (*Rolá a moing dar a hais*)⁷¹⁶ perhaps one should imagine a horrific parody of flirtatious laughter and tossing hair. That Fothad has kept his tryst “in pale death” is doubly significant, for not only does he tarry with his living lover, but he is also now intimately acquainted with the Morrígain.

The pairing of Fothad’s tryst with Ailill’s wife and his tryst with death in the initial stanzas of the poem links succumbing to the woman’s allure and death in battle. The poem presents relationships between men and women as disruptive not only to the social order, but also to the boundaries between life and death. The connection between desire and death is reinforced throughout the poem. It makes a great deal of sense that one would encounter a narrative of this sort in a Fenian context. The *fian*, while its members are often married or have female lovers, is primarily a male institution.

In one of the final stanzas of the poem, Fothad tells his companion:

It is the dusky ousel that laughs
a greeting to all the faithful:
My speech, my shape are spectral –
hush, woman, do not speak to me!⁷¹⁷

*Is é in lon teimhen tibius
imc[h]omarc cáich bes hires,
Síabra mo c[h]obra, mo gné,
a ben, náchamaicillé!*⁷¹⁸

⁷¹⁴ Meyer, *Reicne*, 16.

⁷¹⁵ Meyer, *Reicne*, 17.

⁷¹⁶ Meyer, *Reicne*, 16.

⁷¹⁷ Meyer, *Reicne*, 17.

⁷¹⁸ Meyer, *Reicne*, 16.

Borsje states that she initially took *lon* as referring to a demon, and observes that “(a) dangerous demon, laughing at dead people would supply a nice parallel with the terrifying Morrígain, laughing at living people. The lines even rhyme together.”⁷¹⁹ Borsje decides against this reading, due to the infrequency of *lon* as a reference to a demon, and to the fact that *lon* meaning ‘demon’ always occurs in the compound *lon craís*. Borsje takes *lon* in the poem as a “biological” blackbird:

Blackbirds start to sing half an hour before sunrise, which is earlier than other birds. Its song is, therefore, the messenger of the start of the day. Immediately after its mention, Fothad says this his speech and face are spectral, and – as we all know – when the day begins, phantoms must vanish. The song of the blackbird is melodious and melancholic, but does not resemble laughter. We should, therefore, see the laughter in the poem symbolically, and it could help to combine this laughter with that of the Morrígain. People doomed to go to hell will fear the sound of the blackbird . . . The laughter of the Morrígain is both paralleled by and contrasted with the laughter of the dark blackbird.⁷²⁰

Lon is the Irish term for the blackbird, and Maria Tymoczko notes that *lon* glosses *merula*, ‘blackbird,’ in the Carlsruhe glosses.⁷²¹ Tymoczko argues that the *lon* is also used more generally, “as a higher-order classifier,” and “has other heroic associations, for it like *bran* and *badb* is used as a man’s name and as a term to refer to chieftains . . . Such heroic associations for the term are anomalous if its semantic field is limited to *Turdus merula*; the paradox is resolved if the term in some contexts can refer to a wider range of black birds, to the Corvidae in particular.”⁷²² In Modern Irish *cearc luin*, “female blackbird,” has “negative and ‘ravenous’ associations (which) are much more appropriate for the Corvidae than for the Turdidae, and

⁷¹⁹ Borsje, “Terror of the Night,” 91.

⁷²⁰ Borsje, “Terror of the Night,” 91-2.

⁷²¹ Maria Tymoczko, “The Semantic Fields of Early Irish Terms for Black Birds,” in *Celtic Language, Celtic Culture: A Festschrift for Eric Hamp*, eds. A. T. E. Matonis and Daniel F. Melia (Van Nuys, CA: Ford & Baile, 1990), 151-171: 157.

⁷²² Tymoczko, “Semantic Fields,” 157.

indicate again an overlap in the semantic fields of the world *lon* and terms for the Corvidae.”⁷²³

The use of the semantically flexible *lon* in this stanza suggests interesting interpretive possibilities. While *lon* here may be operating in its simplest form, as a term for blackbird, the fact that its range can extend to include war-like, savage aspects suggests that the poet may have had these in mind, given the macabre aspects that are so prominent in the text.

The *lon* laughs, *tibius*, mirroring the action of the Morrígain who laughs (*tibhes*) earlier in the poem. These are the only two uses of the verb *tibid* in the poem, and the Morrígain’s horrible laughter as she gloats over the slaughter is recalled by the *lon*’s laughter. *Lon*, then, may be used here because its meaning slips between the benign and the malignant. While the *lon*’s laughter may be read as a songbird greeting joyously greeting the sunrise, oblivious to the surrounding devastation of battle, it could easily recall the savage joy of a raven surveying a field of corpses. Given the poet’s tendencies to elide the divisions between the lover and the battle-goddess and to play with layers of meaning, such a reading fits the logic of the poem.

The Morrígain’s strong association with carrion birds, specifically corvids, is well-known, and while she is not explicitly described as a bird in the poem, that Fothaid states that she has “come to us from the edge of a pillar” (*Donárlaith do bil óige*) strongly hints at this aspect of her nature. In the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, the Morrígain is described as perching on a pillar-stone (*coirthe*) in the form of a bird.⁷²⁴ A slightly weaker parallel comes from the account of Cú Chulainn’s death in the Book of Leinster. The hero, mortally wounded, ties himself to a pillar so that he can die standing. Watchers realize that Cú Chulainn is dead when birds alight on his shoulder (*Conid iarsin dolluid indennach foragualaind*), prompting Erc mac Corpri to observe

⁷²³ Tymoczko, “Semantic Fields,” 158.

⁷²⁴ Cecile O’Rahilly, ed. and trans. *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976), 30.

“(t)hat pillar is not wont to be under birds” (*Nirbognáth incorthe út foenaib*).⁷²⁵ Erc uses the general term for a bird, *én*, but the text specifies that it is the scald-crow, *ennach*, which has perched on the dead warrior. Given the Morrígain’s prominence in this text, it is nearly certain that it is she in bird-form who sits on Cú Chulainn’s shoulder. The association between the Morrígain in bird-shape and pillars found in the Ulster material strongly suggests that the author of *Reicne Fothaid Canainne* is invoking the same topos when she is described as coming from a pillar; perhaps she was envisioned waiting on the pillar during the battle, observing the slaughter.

Fothad is poised between different states: life and death, and the homosocial world of the *fian* and a sexual relationship with a woman. Another liminal element is introduced near the end of the poem, where Fothaid speaks of the pagan Irish death deity, Donn, and the Christian God:

My riddled body must part from thee awhile, My soul to be tortured by the black demon.
Save (for) the worship of Heaven’s King, Love of this world is folly.⁷²⁶

*Scarfid frit céin mo chorp toll,
M’anum do píenad la donn* [sic. Meyer, alternatively *Donn*],
*Serc bethu cé is miri,
ingi adradh Rígh nimhi.*⁷²⁷

The invocation of the Christian God here is incongruous, as this text is set centuries before the coming of Christianity to Ireland. Here a competing discourse intrudes on the integrity of the narrative. Donn could refer either to a demon, the Christian devil, or the native death deity; Kuno Meyer originally took it as referring to a “black demon,” but later preferred to take *donn* as a reference to Donn, the pre-Christian deity.⁷²⁸ The poet may be making a distinction between pagan and Christian belief systems; Donn (or donn) takes on a particularly malevolent aspect here, one that is largely absent in other texts.

⁷²⁵ Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., “Cuchulainn’s Death, abridged from the Book of Leinster,” *Revue Celtique* 3 (1877), 175-85: 181-82.

⁷²⁶ Meyer, *Reicne*, 17.

⁷²⁷ Meyer, *Reicne*, 16.

⁷²⁸ Meyer, “Irische Totengott,” 542.

Reicne Fothaid Canainne contrasts with the Norse material to be investigated in several ways. First of all, the man is killed as a result of his desire for a woman. However, while I will argue that Sigrún is represented as the feminine source of danger in the poem, (even though conventional wisdom might suggest that the living woman in a grave with a corpse is the one at risk), *Reicne Fothaid Canainne* displaces any supernatural threat from Fothad or his lover onto female terrors flitting about the battlefield. While their relationship causes his death, he avoids blaming her, and repeatedly warns her that she is in danger from the supernatural beings in the vicinity, and from speaking with a dead man. Yet, his tryst with Ailill's wife *becomes* his tryst with death, and women, both mortal and supernatural, threaten the male world of the *fian*. The poem enacts the anxiety and difficulty of drawing borders between the living and the dead. As in the Helgi poem, the trysting place and the gravemound overlap, and both pairs of lovers spend the night together in the grave.

I have discussed the final meeting between the doomed lovers Sigrún and Helgi in Chapter 3, and Sigrún's death from grief is particularly interesting in comparison with the women considered earlier in this chapter, who die with the belief that they will join their lovers in death. Sigrún's status as a valkyrie, and thus as a supernatural woman associated with dead warriors, renders this circumstance especially tragic, as under other conditions she might have claimed Helgi in death. However, her rebellion against, and consequent opposition to, Óðinn renders this impossible. The scene in the grave suggests the glories of Valhøll, in that a lovely valkyrie serves drink to the dead warrior and then embraces him, but this is not a world of light and joy, like Óðinn's hall, or even like the gravemounds glimpsed in sagas, where the dead feast joyously. Helgi is poised between two worlds: a female-ruled, subterranean realm of decay, isolation and gruesomely enacted sexuality, and the convivial atmosphere of feasting with his

companions and his lord. Staying with Sigrún in the grave is presented as unnatural and horrific, a disruption of the social order caused by her excessive and intrusive desire. This episode of the poem, I suggest, encapsulates the conflict between a social order that primarily values marriage, and one that elevates homosocial bonds between male warriors. These two valuesystems are represented by the appropriate afterlives: the communal, familial life in the gravemound, and the warrior's paradise of Valhøll. Furthermore, I propose that the poet may have in mind more specifically the realm of Hel, with its ghoulish mistress of the same name suggested by Sigrún's role in the legend. Óðinn's handmaid becomes a representative, or almost a substitute, for his enemy, the female giantess who is the goddess of the grave. By lying with Helgi in the grave, Sigrún becomes a *hallvarps hlifinauma*. This poem dramatizes the conflict between the feminine and masculine aspects of death, with the former portrayed in an exceedingly negative fashion. A parallel could also be drawn between Óðinn casting Hel out of Ásgarðr and into Niflheim, and Sigrún's exile from Valhøll.

Anthropologists who study death in other cultural contexts have some ideas that may be useful here. Bloch and Parry have carried out extensive investigations into the ritual and symbolic world of the Bara of Madagascar. Their analysis of this group's funeral rites offer a fascinating cross-cultural parallel to some of the thematic issues we see in the Hel/Valhøll dichotomy, and more broadly in the masculine/feminine death dichotomy. Upon death, two sex-segregated huts are set aside, and the corpse is secluded in the women's hut for three nights and two days. After this period the men take the corpse away from the women's hut by force, and the young men carry the coffin at a run to the ancestral tomb, hindered along the way by young women. They analyse the symbolism of this behavior: "All this suggests a ritual drama in which women are given the role of an unacceptable obscene sexuality, in which they deliberately

endeavor to implicate men, which takes place at night and which must be broken through during the day [. . .] in order to attain proper rebirth into the world of the ancestors. In other words, it is the necessary defeat of women, sexuality and biology which is enacted, rather than their indispensable part in the recreation of life.”⁷²⁹

This ritual parallels the scene between Helgi and Sigrún nicely. Sigrún, and perhaps her handmaid, are the grieving women who attempt to prevent the corpse, Helgi, from being reborn in the homosocial afterlife of Valhøll, corresponding to the Bara’s “world of the ancestors.” In this schema Helgi’s escort of warriors would be equivalent to the men who abduct the corpse and conduct it to the tomb. Sigrún’s desire to sleep in her dead husband’s embrace, as well as her deviant (from Óðinn’s perspective, at least) and family-destroying deployment of her valkyrie charms, aligns her with the Bara women who engage in an “unacceptable obscene sexuality” during the funeral rites. The tension between the masculine world of warriors and the night world of death and female sexuality is also present in *Reicne Fothaid Canainne*, where these two systems are shown in conflict.

Bloch and Parry later assert that “the symbolism of the mortuary rites of the Bara and Lugbara identifies women with sexuality, and sexuality with death. Victory over death—its conversion into rebirth—is symbolically achieved by a victory over female sexuality and the world of women, who are made to bear the ultimate responsibility for the negative aspects of death. In line with this, the sexuality of women is often associated with the putrescence of the

⁷²⁹ Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, “Introduction: Death and the Regeneration of Life,” in *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, eds. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 1-44: 21.

corpse”⁷³⁰ They go on to argue that in these cultures, human fertility and natural fertility are opposed.⁷³¹

In the Merina culture of Madagascar, one of the “self-deprecating practices” which characterize mourning “consists in almost revelling in . . . pollution.” “One manifestation of the self-deprecating of mourning is a willing taking on of this pollution. For example, the close mourners are expected to throw themselves onto the corpse before burial as an extreme form of self-devaluation.”⁷³² Similar to the examples of a medieval concept of dangerous wet death and dry death given in the previous chapter, the Merina associate the decomposing, “wet” corpse with extreme pollution, and it is women who clean the corpses and also it is also primarily women who “ritually take on pollution by throwing themselves on the corpse.”⁷³³

In areas of contemporary China the decaying corpse is seen as a source of pollution, and men avoid touching the body so as not to be polluted. Married women handle the corpse and prepare it for burial, and will rub their hair on the coffin out of respect for the dead, and through this act absorb some of the pollution from the dead man. Sigrún’s desire to share a bed with Helgi’s corpse, fearlessly taking his gory body into her embrace, may be thematically related to this notion of women and pollution. Guðrún throwing herself on Sigurðr’s corpse may also reflect some of these ideas. There appears to be a persistent cross-cultural notion that the flesh of

⁷³⁰ Bloch and Parry, “Introduction,” 22.

⁷³¹ It must be noted that other scholars differ vastly in their interpretation of Bara culture. In their introduction to the second edition of *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington argue that Bloch and Parry have misunderstood the semantic relationship of women and life. Where Bloch and Parry see an equation between men and life, and between women and death, in Bara culture, Metcalf and Huntington suggest that “in the Bara view, life depends on a balance between male and female aspects,” saying of Bloch and Parry’s paradigm “this piece of sophistry requires us to see childbirth as unrelated to ‘life.’” Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 7. Interestingly, Joseph Harris has argued that ritual rebirth into the warrior band functioned to substitute the actual birth mother with a man, thus removing a female connection from the warrior. Harris, “Love and Death.”

⁷³² Maurice Bloch, “Death, Women, and Power,” in *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, eds . Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 211-230: 215.

⁷³³ Bloch, “Death, Women, and Power,” 215.

the corpse, until it has fully decayed, links the soul to the earth. (I considered this notion as it touches on revenants and *draugar* in the previous chapter.) The two Old English *Soul and Body* poems dwell at length on the grotesquely rotting body in the grave, consumed by worms, to which the soul is constrained to return. This is obviously a Christian interpretation of this theme, but it reflects the same horror of the body as it transitions between life and ‘complete’ death. It is Helgi’s decaying body which links him to the mortal world and to the grave, and this state is caused by his connection with female sexuality. The motif of keening women drinking the blood of the dead also links women with the pollution of the death.⁷³⁴ Aillil’s wife carries the severed head of her lover into the grave, and the Morrígain, with her laughter and tossing hair, delights in the polluting gore of death as she washes the garments of the slain. Both Fothad and Helgi must avoid being entrapped by feminine forces in the nocturnal world of the grave. Fothad escapes either to the kingdom of Heaven or to the House of Donn, a literal ‘community of the ancestors.’ Helgi must return to Valhøll.

Though Óðinn and Freyja are typically depicted taking sexual partners from among the living, in stanza 6 of *Hyndluljóð*, Freyja is accused by the jötunn Hyndla, from whom Freyja seeks knowledge of her mortal lover’s royal lineage, of luring Óttarr on the “way of the slain” (*valsinni*).⁷³⁵ While this is a darker version of Freyja than that normally privileged by the literature, she does rule over *Fólkvangr*, literally “Battle-plain,” and claim half of the slain. In his discussion of this poem, John McKinnell suggests that the goddess and giantess are acting out a mythological pattern in which two supernatural women, or a perhaps a goddess and her alter ego, vie for a man’s devotion: Freyja and Hyndla are “rivals for Óttarr’s favour,” and McKinnell

⁷³⁴ I thank Danielle Cudmore for this observation. For a discussion of blood-drinking and keening, see Salvador Ryan, “Popular Religion in Gaelic Ireland, 1445 – 1645,” 2 volumes (Ph.D. diss., National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2002), 2: 172-9.

⁷³⁵ Klaus von See, Beatrice La Farge, Eve Picard, Katja Schulz, eds. *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda* 3 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2000), 710.

observes that “the idea that Óttarr is desired by the ‘dark sister’ as well as by Freyja is reminiscent of the sexual pleasure Hel derives from some of the Ynglingar in *Ynglingatal*. Hyndla is not explicitly dead or a death goddess, but she lies sleeping in a cave, wishes to go back to sleep, and tries to contrive Óttarr’s death with poisoned beer.”⁷³⁶ McKinnell concludes that “Hyndla’s attack with fire and her attempt to force Freyja to collude in the murder of Óttarr finally unmask her as the attempted death-bringer. Her motive may be to gain Óttarr for herself by contriving that he dies (but not in battle), or at least to deny him to Freyja if she cannot have him herself.”⁷³⁷ If this is the case, the poem depicts an honorary member of the Æsir and a Jötunn both trying to claim a man as a sexual partner, perhaps by means of his death. This scenario would offer interesting parallels to Sigrún, who at different times represents the figures of the goddess and McKinnell’s “dark sister.” HHII and *Hyndluljóð* may be drawing from the same cluster of motifs.⁷³⁸

The development of specialized afterlives for different groups, along with diverse strategies for promoting social standing and cohesion, leads to competition between ideologies. Homosocial warrior groups align themselves with a vision of the afterlife that is likewise masculine and exclusionary; female figures are introduced in this world either to internally reinforce bonds between men, by acting as social conduit between lord and follower, or as hostile, external forces that threaten the cohesion of the group, and thus reinforce it from without. The role these female figures play in this context is generally a sexual one; the availability of

⁷³⁶ McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 88.

⁷³⁷ McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 89.

⁷³⁸ McKinnell does note Sigrún’s relationship with Helgi in passing in the same chapter, categorizing it under the “goddess and her lover” paradigm, but does not discuss the dark aspect of their meeting in the gravemound, or Sigrún’s chthonic associations in that scene: “here it is enough to conclude that her origins are probably related to the goddesses I have considered earlier in this chapter.” 94. However, McKinnell later suggests that “the characterization of Sigrún as a valkyrie is probably antiquarian romanticism.” In the poem, he notes, “she is a living woman, and is grief-stricken at his death (whereas a valkyrie would have welcomed him joyfully into Valhøll.)” 219. I think her absence from Valhøll, and perhaps her mortality, can be explained in the text by her rebellion against Óðinn. Brynhildr also displeases Óðinn, dies, and journeys to Hel rather than to Valhøll.

their erotic favours is presented as part of the appeal of the comitatus-type afterlife, while their ability to sexually lure men away from the warband is a threat that must be nullified. The gruesome depiction of Hel in *Snorra Edda* reflects this outlook; as the division between Valhøll and Hel becomes increasingly important, even as a Christian literary motif, the appeal of Hel as ruler of a fair hall who embraces dead kings must be subverted, so that Hel no longer poses an attractive threat to the homosocial world of Valhøll.

In conclusion, while Irish and Norse ideas about the afterlife and the otherworld had obvious differences, the evolution of similar developments can be traced in each culture. Primarily, both Scandinavian and Irish texts depict an afterlife that welcomes all comers. Alongside this afterlife developed the idea of an aristocratic afterlife/otherworld for male heroes, who are often summoned there by seductive supernatural women, to feast and drink in an exalted company for eternity, or at least until the world ends.

Conclusion

Throughout my dissertation, I have argued that modern notions of gendered mourning have obscured the complex and varied relationship between grief and gender in medieval texts. An impetus to reclaim women's voices in medieval texts, itself a valuable aim, has in many ways reinforced the desire to gender the mourning voice as female, as many female-voiced texts are elegies. My research shows that male mourning has been understudied in the medieval literature of Britain, Scandinavia, and Ireland, and establishes the praxis for male weeping and lament in the textual traditions of these regions.

The manner in which gender of the bereaved intersects with the array of possible responses to loss, including grief, anger, mourning, and vengeance, is complex, and needs further study. What seems clear is that the emotions of grief manifest differently, and result in different action, depending upon the ability of the griever to achieve revenge within his or her own cultural milieu. The emotions of those who are excluded from taking vengeance must express themselves via words or tears or end in death, either from grief or by their own hand. The vengeance-wreaking body of the male warrior is permitted, at times encouraged, to express its sorrow and anger with violence, but there still may be a physical reaction in the bereaved, the flesh horrifically distorted.

The issue is more complicated still, and ought not to be seen as a simple dichotomy of actor and acted-upon. Lament does not function as merely passive acceptance of loss, but can act as a powerful counterpoint to the "heroic" ethos, criticizing its excesses. Laments often express rage, at the deceased, either for abandoning the griever by dying, or for wrongs performed against the griever that could not be voiced while the dead person lived; at those whose actions caused the death, or at society at large. It is probably no coincidence that the martial Brynhildr

takes to her bed in a semblance of male suicide, like Egill Skallagrímsson, King Regnerus, and numerous other bereaved men, only to be roused to action, here vengeance, by intercessory words. She stands in sharp contrast to Guðrún, who, as I have demonstrated, develops agency only later in her life, agency which will transform her not only into the familiar figure of the whetting woman of saga tradition, but also into an accomplisher of vengeance in her own right.

I demonstrate that gender plays a stronger role in determining who is mourned, and who mourns, in Scandinavian sources than in Irish, and hints at intriguing differences between the manner in which bonds of fosterage were interpreted in Scandinavian and Irish texts. In Irish sources, the fosterage bond is strong enough to cause death from grief or suicide at the death of a foster-child or foster-parent. While Scandinavian texts show strong connections between foster-kin, suicide and death from grief are actions reserved for women at the deaths of husbands or male blood relatives, fathers at the deaths of sons, and warriors at the deaths of kings. You might mourn or avenge a foster-brother or foster-son, but you do not die for him.

I argue that the “hydraulic model” of emotions operates along gendered lines in Norse texts, and is shaped by societal gender roles that allow men’s emotion to be expressed as physical aggression and bodily swelling, at least when the man is physically robust. Women’s bodies, however, were imagined as physically weaker. Their grief does not expend its energy outward, but turns it against the body of the griever. The pressure must be released via tears or speech, or the heart will burst. Again, Irish sources seem to show less of a gendered difference when employing the hydraulic model; broken hearts occur in men and women. The expression of rage as grotesque swelling is exclusively applied to men in Irish texts, but it is confined to battle-rage, not grief. This may reflect differences in the ways these traditions conceptualized the connection between grief and anger; in the Scandinavian texts the swelling that attends grief is

also linked to revenge, even if that revenge is unattainable. Egill's swelling from grief at his sons' deaths is related to his emotional turmoil at being unable to taken revenge upon the sea, or to father a son to replace the ones he has lost. Like many of the women studied, he must remedy the physical discomforts of grief with words expressing his loss.

The prominence of all-male social institutions in the literary tradition inevitably leads to the promotion of their interests and perspectives, at the expense of other points of view. This is clear not only in the emphasis on grief for men, and the related condemnation of grief for women, but also manifests itself in depictions of the supernatural. The literature most connected to the institution of the warband views female influence with suspicion, associating the ravages of death and decay with feminine influences. The unblemished corpse of his wife holds King Haraldr in thrall, until its beauty is revealed to be false, concealing corruption. Sigrún is transformed from beautiful guardian of the hero's life in battle, to ghoulish disruptor of his peace in death. It is the wife's duty to die with her husband, not to intrude upon his existence after death with her unrelenting grief, reinforcing his bonds with the living woman.

While my final chapter focuses on the relationship between sexualized supernatural women, heroes, and death, much might also be said about the connections between male death deities and the erotic. Óðinn is also a seducer *par excellence*, although he resorts to rape when his blandishments are unsuccessful at wooing a woman into bed. While Freyr might be expected to be the male deity most associated with sexuality in Norse tradition, given his sister's proclivities, aside from his relationship with Gerðr there is very little evidence of such an association.

The Welsh figure Gwynn ap Nudd, who figures in later Welsh literature as the king of Annwn, the Welsh equivalent of the Irish otherworld, is portrayed in the poem *Ymddidan*

Gwyddno Garanhir y Gwynn ap Nudd in a manner that has suggested to many that he is a psychopomp. After naming himself and his horse to Gwyddno, Gwynn titles himself the “*gortech*” of Creuddilad merch Llud. Rowland translates *gortech* as “lover,” however, *gortech*, also spelled *gorthrech*, has violent connotations, and can be translated as “oppression” or “coercion.” Bearing in mind that *Culhwch ac Olwen* relates the outcome of Gwynn’s abduction of the same woman before her wedding to another man, ‘abductor’ or ‘rapist,’ might be better translations for *gortech*. In this case we have again a deity who hunts men on the battlefield, abducts (or rapes) women, and rules over a supernatural court. In Greek mythology, Hades also carries off his bride from the land of the living, to rule by his side over the dead, and I referred to the *lai* of King Orfeo in the previous chapter as an example of a mortal woman being abducted by an otherworldly king who has strong associations with death, or at least with the semblance of death. The Elf Knight of ballad traditions lures away a mortal woman, ostensibly to be his lover, but with the intent of murdering her, as he has done to numerous women before her. The Elf Knight also fits the pattern of supernatural abductor, sex/rape, and death, and the figure of the vampire in modern popular culture is an almost parodic example of this paradigm.

Tangential to the primary aim of exploring the relationship between grief, gender, and mourning in medieval Britain, Scandinavia, and Ireland, the thesis demonstrates the value of comparative research between adjacent literary cultures. While carrying out this type of study is time-consuming, it offers insight, demonstrating what features or patterns are unique to a particular national literary tradition, which features are shared.

While one can never completely remove one’s own biases in scholarly research, by reading the texts of one literary tradition in parallel with texts from a roughly contemporary tradition and similar cultural background, it is possible to mitigate some of the issues that arise

from attempts to analyze texts within a vacuum, which inescapably end up evaluating them against modern cultural norms. In this way it is possible to arrive at a better understanding of what elements are distinctive within the era and geographical region, and what features, no matter how alien to modern sensibilities, were typical of their time and place.

There are limits inherent in this kind of analysis. Often the evidence is simply absent, and no comparison can be made, save, perhaps, that a feature appears to have been less significant to those producing the cultural documents that have survived. Whether, for example, the motif of death from grief is so sparsely attested in medieval Wales as compared to Ireland or Iceland because societal factors rendered it less relevant as a literary topos, or because any texts that strongly featured this motif are no longer extant, is difficult to determine. Nonetheless, juxtaposing literature from similar cultural backgrounds permits a more penetrating analysis.

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