

Introduction to The Elder Edda

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Dedicated to J.R.R Tolkien

The Old Icelandic Poetic Tradition

Icelandic traditional poetry finds its origin in oral composition long before the art of writing was known or used in Scandinavia to record poetic texts. The poetry is traditional in the sense that it was transmitted by oral performance, and survived for centuries, passed from generation to generation, by oral transmission. There is no question of authorship, for the poet (*fornskáld*) was a performer rather than an originator. He recounted familiar material and his performance of a particular story differed from other performances in metrical and lexical interpretation. Two versions of the story of Atli's death (Attila the Hun) appear in the heroic poems of the Edda, one told economically, the other with an abundance of detail. Not until poetry was recorded in manuscript, most likely during the thirteenth century, was there a sense of a unique copy or of an 'authentic' version.

On the other hand, alongside eddaic, or traditional poetry, there existed a poetic tradition formal in character and individual in composition. This tradition is known as skaldic poetry, after the Icelandic word for poet - *skáld*. While the meter and diction of eddaic poetry are relatively simple, skaldic verse is composed in a variety of complex forms and employs a larger number of involved metaphors, or *Kenningar*.

Old Icelandic traditional poetry appears to have derived from the same common Germanic stock as Old High German, Old English, and Old Saxon poetry. It shares the same verse line, known generally as the long alliterative line. It

shares, apparently, the same lexical inventory, the same stereotyped diction. For example, the formula *firar í fólki* 'warriors among the folk', which appears in 'The Treachery of Asmund', occurs in the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* (*firco in folche*) and in the Old English riddles (*finum on folce*), although the forms in which these poems appear suggest that their dates of composition span half a millennium.

The similarity of meter and repetition of diction throughout the Germanic poetic traditions are evidences of the striking stability of traditional poetry, even before writing 'fixed' such forms.

The materials of the Germanic traditions are also comparable. The heroes of Icelandic heroic legends participate in the same events and belong to the same historical milieu as the heroes of Old High German and Old English heroic poetry. Old Icelandic poetry is unique, however, in the manner in which it treats traditional Germanic gods. There are only scant references and allusions to the Germanic pagan pantheon in Old English Chronicles and genealogies. Possibly the early arrival of Christianity in England

first with the converted Romans during the last years of the Empire's occupation, and then with the Celtic monasteries, and finally with the proselytizing Roman Catholic Church during the sixth century A.D. seems to have inhibited the continuation of whatever poetic tradition might have existed about the older gods. Both Old English and Old High German traditional poetry successfully adapted their techniques to the incorporation of Christian materials, while the Old Icelandic tradition seems never to have been able to incorporate the new materials, except in a few isolated later literary imitations of the traditional form. The reason for this difference in development lies undoubtedly with the late arrival of Christianity in Scandinavia (A.D. 1000), and the paucity of foreign clergy in Iceland before the fourteenth century. Traditional myths appear to have been very popular in Iceland for three centuries after the conversion, while comparable poetry was being forcibly suppressed on the Continent and in the British Isles. Further, poetry as entertainment was obviously tolerated and encouraged in Iceland at a time when arts in Christian Europe were directed toward revelation of Scripture and declaration of Church doctrine. Of course, the lack of a substantial number of foreign clergy in Iceland prevented the literate decay - or corruption - of the Icelandic language that would have resulted from competition with the more acceptable language of Christian culture - Latin. The vernacular remained a rich means of literary expression and developed to a greater extent than elsewhere in Europe, with the possible exception of England under the enlightened King Alfred. Into Icelandic were translated French romances and Latin Chronicles. The thirteenth-century Icclander could read in his own language the romances of *Le Chevalier au Lion*, the legends of Merlin and Arthur, and the history of Charlemagne.

Icelandic traditional poetry differs from the other Germanic traditions in several other respects as well. First, the poetry falls syntactically into stanzas, or strophes, while the rest of Germanic traditional verse, with very few exceptions, is stichic; that is, without strophic division and with a considerable amount of emjambment, which is absent in the Icelandic. Second, eddaic poetry uses dialogue to a larger extent than either Old English or Old High German poetry. There is, proportionally, little poetic narrative in the Old Icelandic corpus. However, in place of narrative description there are frequently prose narrative links at the head or the foot of poems and even interpolated between strophes. These suggest either degeneration of older poetic narrative passages or a late editor's attempt to make clear a dramatic situation obscured by the economy of the verse. One must remember, however, that the intended audience of the poetry was familiar with the poet's material. No traditional performer would dream of trying to be 'original' in selecting material. His audience expected the old 'true' stories, and not 'made-up' ones, but awaited the skald's personal inventions in dialogue. The mythological allusions which to the modern reader seem obscure and remote, must have been suggestive to the audience and readers of the thirteenth century. So the poetic performance could afford to be economical. It suggested rather than described the details of incidents.

Performance of traditional poems did not depend on dramatic suspense, since the audience was expected to know the outcome of the story anyway. The poet could, however, play on his audience's anticipation of the manner in which the inevitable was to come about. So, for example, in the heroic poems three different versions of the manner

of Sigurd's death are offered in three separate poems. The fact of Sigurd's death could not be altered, but one could vary the details of how death comes.

Traditional Icelandic poetry also contains a good deal of what may be called 'courtesy-book' materials; that is, instruction relating to domestic and heroic rituals of everyday life. The same sort of materials appear in the Old English poetic *Maxims*, and in the Finnish *Kalevala*. Such an interest is evidence of how close these poetic traditions were to the priestly tradition of moral instruction from which these aphoristic guides to a good life probably derive.

Prosody

A reader brought up on English poetry since Chaucer - or, for that matter, on Greek and Latin poetry - may at first have some difficulty in 'hearing' Icelandic verse, for he will find nothing he can recognize as a metrical foot, that is to say, a syllabic unit containing a fixed number of syllables with a fixed structure of either (as in English) stressed and unstressed syllables or (as in Greek and Latin) long and short syllables.

In English verse, lines are metrically equivalent only if they contain both the same kind of feet, and the same number of syllables. But in Icelandic verse, as in Anglo-Saxon, all lines are metrically equivalent which contain the same number of stressed syllables: the unstressed syllables preceding or succeeding these may vary between none and three (occasionally more).

The principal meters in Icelandic poetry are two: Epic Meter (*fornyrðislag*: 'old verse') and Chant Meter (*ljóðaháttur*).

EPIC METER

This is essentially the same as the meter of *Beowulf*. Each line contains four stresses and is divided by a strongly marked caesura into two half-lines with two stresses each. (In printing Icelandic verse, the convention has been to leave a gap between the two half-lines: in our translations we have printed the whole line as it is normally printed in an English poem.)

The two half-lines are linked by alliteration. The first stressed syllable of the second half-line must alliterate with either or both of the stressed syllables in the first: its second stressed syllable must not alliterate.

All vowels are considered to alliterate with each other. In the case of syllables beginning with s, sc (sk) can only alliterate with sc, sh with sh, and st with st etc.: similarly, voiced and unvoiced th can only alliterate with themselves.

In Icelandic poetry, unlike Anglo-Saxon, the lines are nearly always end-stopped without enjambment, and are grouped into strophes varying in length from two to six or seven lines, the commonest strophe having four.

Depárt! You shall not páss through

My táll gátes of tówennng stóne:

It befits a wife to wind yárn,
Nót to knów anóther's húsband.

CHANT METER

The unit is a couplet, the first of which is identical with the standard line of Epic Meter: the second contains three stresses instead of four (some hold that it only contains two), two of which must be linked by alliteration.

If you knów a fáithful friend you can trúst,

Gó óften to his hóuse:

Gráss and brámbles gráw quickly Upón an untródden tráck.

SPEECH METER AND INCANTATION METER

Though these are officially classified as separate meters, they are better thought of as variations on Epic Meter and Chant Meter respectively. There is no case of a poem written entirely in either, nor even of a long sustained passage within a poem.

In Speech Meter (málahátr), each half-line contains an extra stress, making six in all.

Líttle it ís to dený, lóng it ís to trável

In Incantation Meter (kviðuhátr), two couplets of Chant Meter are followed by a fifth line of three stresses, which is a verbal variation on the fourth line.

I know a tenth: if troublesome ghosts Ride the rafters aloft,

I can work it so they wander astray,

Unable to find their forms, Unable to find their homes.

QUANTITY

In Icelandic verse, vowel length plays a role, though by no means as important a one as in Greek and Latin. For example, if a line ends in a single stressed syllable (a masculine ending), this may be either short or long: but if it ends in a disyllable, the first of which is stressed (a feminine ending), the stressed syllable must be short. For example, Ever would be permissible: Evil would not.

Icelandic, like Greek and Latin, is an inflected language: modern English has lost nearly all its inflections. This means that, in modern English, vowels which are short in themselves are always becoming long by position, since, more often than not, they will be followed by more than one consonant. For example, in the line

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit

there is, if it is scanned quantitatively, Only one short syllable, dis.

Quantitative verse, as Robert Bridges has demonstrated, can be written in English, but only as a virtuoso feat. In our translations, therefore, we have ignored quantity. Also now and again, though actually very seldom, we have ignored the strong caesura between the two half-lines, when it seemed more natural to do so.

The Kenning

The kennings so common in Icelandic poetry are, like the epithets in Homer, metrical formulae but, unlike the latter, their meaning is not self-evident. Diomedes of the loud war-cry is a straightforward description, but no reader can guess that Grani's Road means the river Rhine, unless he already knows the Volsung legend in which Grani is the name of Sigurd's horse. The kenning may be exemplified by such usages as 'Meiti's plain' for the sea or 'Meiti's slopes' for the waves: Meiti was one of the sea-gods and thus stands in the same relationship to the sea as other gods stand to the land or the mountains. Other kennings are based on allusion to a mythological event: Odin was once hanged himself - see the 'Words of the High One' - he is therefore the 'gallow's load'; the Nibelung's treasure was submerged in the Rhine and all gold glitters, therefore gold can be called 'Rhine fire, or 'Rhine gravel'. In later verse the kennings become most complicated. For example, falconry caused 'hawk's land' to become a kenning for 'arm'. The wearing of arm-rings of gold caused 'gold' to be called 'arm-fire'. These were then combined so that 'hawk's land's flame' means 'gold', etc.

The Riddles and Charms

Poetic composition of riddles was principally an exercise of scholastic wit throughout the Middle Ages. Hundreds of Latin riddles in poetic form have survived. In general they are puzzles in which some object or phenomenon is described the reader or listener is expected to 'solve' the puzzle and state the object. Riddle-making was equally popular in the vernacular. In Old English, for example, almost a hundred survive.

The lack of a Latin-educated clergy in Iceland accounts for the non-existence of such a tradition there, but a similar type of riddle does appear in Old Icelandic poetry. In the *HeidreAs* saga, Odin disguises himself as Gestumblindi and challenges the king to guess his riddles, all of which are elaborate metaphors for common things. Since Odin knows the answers himself, the whole affair is a sport, a rather elaborate parlor game. But, when Gestumblindi tires of the sport he asks a question of Heidrek, the answer to which no one can know except Odin: 'What said Odin in the ear of Baldur before he was carried to the fire?' The same question ends his battle of wits with Vafthruthnir, and the loser of such a challenge has usually wagered his head. A sort of riddle occurs in the *Halfs* saga poem 'The Treachery of Asmund' in the dreams of Innstein. Half fails to guess the true portent of the dreams (or, more likely, is too bold to be prudent even though he suspects ill of his host), and is subsequently killed. The riddles of Gestumblindi and the dreams of Innstein are puzzles demanding a correct interpretation. They appeal to a process of thought rather than to an inventory of knowledge.

The riddles in the mythological poems of the Edda are of a different character and appear to serve a different function. The questions Thor poses of Alvis, and Alvis' subsequent replies, make up a textbook of poetic diction for common things in each world. The

purpose of the inquisition, outside of the immediate dramatic situation in which Thor guards a goddess by keeping a dwarf at bay, is mnemonic. The poetic structure preserves, and makes memorable, poetic synonyms for important vocabulary items. Such emphasis on the mot juste for a thing, according to the speaker is an example of Germanic name-magic, associated with the primitive belief that knowledge of the proper name for a thing gives the knower the ability to evoke the object, or its power. There is a saga incident in which several Icelanders, floundering in a small boat at sea, want to pray for deliverance from their peril, but they have to seek someone who knows the name of God. Once he is found, they are saved.

'The Lay of Vafthrudnir' is also mnemonic, but an exposition of myth rather than a lexicon. The riddles, or questions, in the poem, however, are pertinent to the dramatic situation as well. Challenging an opponent with riddles is a means whereby Odin can coerce giants and the dead to reveal more of their wisdom than they would wish to, especially if they knew who their inquisitor was. Odin must disguise himself so that the challenge will be accepted. Odin searches for knowledge of the fate of the gods, so his questioning leads toward revelation of the future, though it begins with asking for exposition of the past. Proper questioning that is, ritual questioning functions like a charm. It compels response unless the questioned person does not know the answer, in which case the inquisition ends. This is, in a sense, Odin's security, for he can end the challenge at any point by asking the unanswerable question.

Riddles also suggest the Nordic fascination with the apparent relationship between the structure of language and the structure of the cosmos. For the Scandinavians the wisest man he who knows most of the structure of the cosmos is also the most skilful poet. It is, hence, appropriate that the god who is compelled to search out the facts of the cosmogonic scheme is the god of poetry. Before Odin, the giants possessed the mead of poetry, and the giants still have knowledge unknown to the gods. They can, for example, remember a time when the gods did not yet exist, and they must, therefore, have been present at the birth of language. Knowing the name of something and knowing the events of the past imply some control over the future. There is in the Nordic mind a subtle relationship, and a necessary one, between an event and the language with which it is described or anticipated. Questions and answers, then, seek to put into a harmonious relationship man's thought and the facts of the world about him which he cannot fully comprehend or control.

Charms, as T. S. Eliot so nicely puts it in *The Music of Poetry*, 'are very practical formulae designed to produce definite results, such as getting a cow out of a bog'. Charms derive from priestly incantations which solicited gods and forces of nature to fulfil their roles in turning the wheel of seasons. By the time priestly incantation transformed into poetry, and poetry found a means of being recorded in manuscript, charms had developed into ritual accompaniment for the warrior on the battlefield as well as domestic tool in the home. Charms render weapons more efficient and a hero's courage more resolute. Charms are the healer's accompaniment in the fabrication and application of remedies for wounds and disease.

The Old Icelandic word for charm is *galdr*, associated with the verb *gala* 'to sing, to chant'. They are extant in Old High German (*galtar*) and Old English (*galdor*), but

references to charms are more plentiful in the literature of Iceland and Finland, where magic continued to influence domestic life and thought for centuries after the arrival of the Christian Church. Charms in Ireland and Wales seem to have degenerated into curses and insults after the arrival of Christianity and there are comparable curses and insults in the flying episodes of Old Icelandic heroic poetry, where exchange of words between antagonists before a battle seems to have lost its character of evoking divine assistance in favour of heaping imprecations.

Charms exist intact in Icelandic only in runes - the pre-Christian Germanic form of writing. Runes ('mysteries, secrets') are magic signs whose individual shape, or staff (English stave), represents an incantation - that is, a charm itself. Runes are not a practical form of writing, but priestly inscription for divination or sortilege. Odin learns effective charms in the form of runes in 'The Words of the High One', and each rune (there are normally sixteen runes in the Scandinavian runic 'alphabet') is associated intrinsically with a particular charm. Odin's first charm, for example, is a 'Help' charm, and Help-charms may be associated with the N-rune, which represents the word *Nauðr* 'Need'. If one scratched this rune (n) on a fingernail, it should evoke aid for a particular distress. N-rune charms seem to have been used especially for delayed child-birth.

For Odin, it appears, achieving knowledge of charms consists merely in learning runes, rather than in learning the incantations associated with each rune. Incantations are still extant in Old English and Old High German but they no longer exist in Old Icelandic poetry. Runic inscriptions, however, survive in great numbers in Scandinavia, usually as inscriptions on stone grave-markers (there are over two thousand in Sweden alone). These are evidence of a traditional association between runic charms and an intent to protect the dead. The Christian Church officially disapproved of the use of runes because of their suggestion of pagan religious practices. Runes were outlawed for some time in Iceland and their practitioners were punished as witches. Some grave-markers have both Roman and runic letters, as if the inscriber was assuring success by appealing to both pagan and Christian powers.

The function of runic charms in Old Icelandic poetry varies. Some charms, probably older than the others in origin, directly solicit forces of nature. Charms for delayed birth, for example, demand nature to fulfil itself. Odin's ninth charm calms waves and winds so that seamen may return safely to shore. His second charm, for healers, seeks to improve the body's resistance to infection and pain. These may be classified as domestic charms, and their lineal descendants seem to be popular medicinal recipes.

Odin also knows charms for the battlefield, such as those which protect against the weapons of others. Odin's third charm blunts his enemies' weapons, and his fourth gives him power to escape fetters. His seventh protects his companions from the fires of opponents (burning others within a hall or house was considered the worst of heroic behavior, and is the cruel culmination of the feuds involving the family of Njal in *Njals saga*. Asmund fires the hall in which his guests sleep in 'The Treachery of Asmund'). Such charms are often anti-charms, for swords, if made of iron, were already considered charmed.

Besides these beneficial charms, Odin knows another kind of magic, *seid* 'sorcery, magic', which is used to bring misfortune upon another. His tenth charm, which keeps spirits from their proper resting place, is an example. His sixteenth charm, a form of love-magic to deceive a desirable girl, is undoubtedly a form of *seid* as well.

Evocation of the dead involves still another kind of magic, known as *ergi*, 'unnaturalness, filth'. This power can be used to transform oneself (and Odin is a notorious shape-changer) or to bring about unnatural behavior in another, such as cowardice or homosexuality. Odin's twelfth charm, reviving the dead which hang from the gallows, seems to be *ergi* (a filth-rune). Skirnir, in 'Skirnir's Ride', threatens Gerd with *ergi* if she will not submit herself to Frey. Though other threats have failed, this one frightens her into submission, for she knows that *ergi* can transform her so that she will ever be loathsome to men, or so that her lust for men will be unnatural.

The Nordic Pantheon

Snorri Sturlason, Icelandic poet and historian at the turn of the twelfth century, offers an euhemeristic explanation for the origin of the northern gods in his *Ynglingasaga*: 'Far to the east of the river Don in Asia was a land called Asaland or Asaheim, whose chief city was called Asgard. In that city was a chief called Odin. It was a great center for sacrifice. Twelve priests of the temple, as the custom went, directed the sacrifices and judged between men. They were called gods (*díar* an Irish loan-word) or lords (*drótnar*); everyone paid them service and veneration'. Snorri goes on to say that Odin was so wise in counsel and so skilful in magic that people began to call his name in times of trouble, and after his death they worshipped him as a god. In his *Gylfaginning*, an exposition of traditional Icelandic myths, Snorri states that there are twelve divine gods, and then goes on to list thirteen: Odin, Thor, Baldur, Njörd, Frey, Tyr, Bragi, Heimdal, Höd (or Hödur), Vidar, Váli, Ull, and Forseti. Odin had two brothers, Vili and Vé, who qualify as gods, and there is also Aegir, god of the sea. There are many goddesses, but the only ones who play important roles in surviving myths are Freya, daughter of Njörd and sister of Frey; Frigg, Odin's wife whose name and function suggest that she was originally the same goddess as Freya; and Idun, Bragi's wife and guardian of the magic apples which restore youth to the gods. Snorri adds that many also count Loki among the gods, for he is friend and companion of Thor and foster brother to Odin, though both of his parents were giants. Both Odin and Thor had at least one giant parent as well. Loki is distinguished from the rest of the gods historically by not having any cult or place-names in Scandinavia attributable to him - and for good reason. He is a malicious shape and sex changer who had not only begotten monsters such as Fenris-wolf and the Midgard Serpent, but had borne Odin's eight-footed horse Sleipnir. It is Loki, according to most versions of the myth, who instigated the murder of Baldur by persuading Baldur's blind brother Höd to cast a mistletoe dart at him. For this deed the other gods caught Loki, bound him to a rock and caused venom to drip on his face. There he is to stay until Ragnarök, or destruction~of~the-gods. There is an apparent analogy here to the myth of Prometheus, even to the extent that Loki's name suggests 'fire' (*logi*). 'The Song of the Sybil' and 'Loki's Flyting' allude to these events.

Odin is the foremost of the gods. He is known by many names, among which are All-Father, High One, Father of the Slain, and the Hooded One. The latter appellation refers

to his many disguises in his journeys throughout the worlds to learn of the fates of the gods. He is the god of poetry, and god of the dead. Odin achieved wisdom for the gods by acquiring the lore of runes during a ritual self-sacrifice, hanging for nine days and nights. From the giants he stole the mead of poetry. Both of these events are alluded to in 'The Words of the High One'. Because of his self-sacrifice, Odin is known also as the god of the hanged, or of the gallows. His twelfth runic charm has the power, for example, to revive the dead on the gallows so that he may speak with them. He is the god of the battle-dead as well, and hence is master of the Valkyries (Choosers of the Slain) who bring to Valhalla heroes Odin has designated to die on the battlefield. 'The Lay of Erik' describes the preparation of Valhalla in anticipation of the arrival of Erik Blood-Axe and the other chieftains killed with him at the battle of Stainmore in 954. Odin can also summon the dead from their graves and compel them to utter their wisdom. The Sybil in 'Baldur's Dreams' is such an example, forced by charms to arise from her grave. Odin is also *galdrsfaðir* 'Father-of-Charms', and his powers include *seid*, or black magic, which brings misfortune to its object. Odin is deceptive and an oath-breaker it is said that his breaking of oaths sworn to the giants brings about the wars leading to the gods' final destruction. Therefore, Odin was popular among certain viking chieftains whose truces and solemn oaths were never meant to be held. Appropriately Odin is frequently associated with beasts of battle - the raven and the wolf.

Thor is the mightiest of the gods and the only god about whom no evil can be said. He is the only one of the gods able to withstand and repel Loki. Loki's only taunt against Thor is to remind him of an incident during Thor's journey to the east when he was deceived by a giant of prodigious magical powers. The taunt is hollow, however, for Thor had acquitted himself so well during that trip that the race of giants feared for their lives. Thor is the protector of the gods against all their enemies, specifically dwarves, elves, giants, trolls, and the Midgard-Serpent. At Ragnarök he battles the Midgard-Serpent to the death. He is killer of the giants Geirrod, Hungnir, Thrym, and Hymir; and, in an ironic inversion of roles, he defeats the dwarf Alvis in a battle of wits.

Njörd and Frey are not properly Aesir (divine gods) at all, but Vamr, who had come to Asgard as hostages after a war between the Aesir and the Vanir over the question of which of the two races should demand worship. The Aesir rendered as hostages in return Mimir and Haenir. Njörd is the male counterpart of the Germanic goddess Nerthus, mentioned by Tacitus as the object of fertility rites on an island in the north. His role in the Nordic pantheon is not entirely distinct from that of his son Frey, whom, it is said, was begotten by Njörd on his own sister. Frey is one of the three principal gods of the pantheon (with Odin and Thor) in the religious cults of Scandinavia as well as in the poetry, for all of the mythological poems we possess feature one of these three gods. Frey is a fertility god. His idol at Uppsala was described as having a huge phallus. He seems to have been especially popular in certain valleys and plains of Iceland which were thought to be particularly propitious. The single myth about him that survives in the traditional poetry 'Skirnir's Ride', may easily be interpreted as an allegory of the impregnation of the earth with fertile grain. He is associated with the bear, and his name is apparently the source of the Old English appellation for Lord (Christ and God), Frea.

One other god deserves special notice. He is Baldur, the slain god, known as the purest of the gods. His death is the first catastrophe in a series of events which resolve in the destruction of the gods. Baldur, however, we are told in 'The Song of Sybil', will rise again. His death and resurrection are inevitably associated with the death and resurrection of Christ, but there is no real reason to assume direct borrowing from Christianity in the myth, for Baldur, like Adonis, is a typical sacrificial god whose myth grows out of an artful mimicry of the cyclical regeneration of the earth.

The semi-deity Völund, identified explicitly as Lord of the Elves, does not seem to have any particular elfish characteristics himself. He is the archetypal smith, like the Finnish Ilmarinen and the Greek Hephaestus. Many Germanic heroes, including Beowulf, carry swords said to be forged by Völund (English Weland or Wayland). His adventures on Nidud's island, and his apparent escape by means of hand-wrought wings, are reminiscent of the myth of Daedalus. Icelanders themselves had long ago made this comparison, for the Icelandic word for labyrinth is völn-darhús (Völund's house).

Goddesses generally play a very minor role in the poetry, though in the heroic poems women such as Brunhild and Gudrun play very central roles. Freya is prominent in 'The Lay of Thrym'. She is demanded by Thrym as ransom for Thor's hammer, without which the gods cannot be defended. Freya indignantly refuses to sacrifice her reputation by accompanying Loki to Jötunheim (Land of the Giants), and Thor himself must masquerade as the goddess. Freya is Njörd's daughter and known as a goddess of fertility, equivalent in the Nordic pantheon to Venus. She too is one of the Vanes, who, it seems, were all fertility gods.

Cosmology

In 'The Song of the Sybil' it is said that in the beginning there was nothing but a 'yawning gap'. The Sybil herself, however, says that she knows of nine worlds, and Vafthrudnir the giant claims that he has seen nine worlds. The poetry refers to the gods' construction of Midgard, and the raising of the temple in Asgard. The term Midgard (Middle World) implies to Snorri a tricentric structure of the universe with Asgard in the center, Midgard about it, and Utgard (Outer World) as the third ring. Utgard, we must assume further, contains Jötunheim (Land of the Giants), Alfheim (Land of the Elves), Svartalfheim (Land of the Dark Elves), and perhaps Vanaheim (Land of the Vanes). Somewhere below this structure is Nifiheim, the realm of the goddess Hel. The ninth world may be that of the dwarves, but its proper name and its specific location are uncertain. Asgard, the world of the gods, and Midgard, the world of man, are protected from Utgard by a large body of water in which swims the Midgard-Serpent, so huge that he encircles all Midgard and clasps his tail in his mouth. Asgard and Midgard are connected to each other by a bridge Bifröst (Rainbow) which is said to span the water. It is across this bridge that the enemies of the gods will fare at Ragnarök. The world-ash Yggdrasil has one of its three roots embedded in Asgard, the second in Utgard, and the third in Nifiheim. Under the first root is the spring of Urd (Future, or Fate; Old English Wyrd, Shakespeare's weird as in the weird sisters of Macbeth), under the second is the well of Mimir, Odin's source of wisdom, and under the third is the spring Hvergelmir, source of all rivers. The dragon Nidhögg (Deep-Biter) gnaws at the deepest root, and above four dwarves (North, South,

East and West) support the sky. Two wolves pursue the sun and moon, and will catch and swallow them at Ragnarök.

Utgard must be a completely mountainous and cold region. Frost giants, mountain giants and rock elves live there. Jötunheim must be northward from Asgard, since the north is traditionally the land of death and the land of man's enemies. The trolls, presumably, live in the east or northeast, for Thor is frequently described as being 'in the east, fighting trolls'. Hel is also somewhat to the north as well as downward, since Snorri's Gylfaginning tells how Hérmod rode after Baldur to Hel, 'deep and to the north'. To the south lies Muspellheim (the Realm of Fire). It is difficult to say how much the Icelandic concept of Hel was influenced by the mountainous and volcanic character of Iceland, but the dimension of depth is suggested elsewhere in poetic descriptions. In 'The Lay of Grimnir' Odin looks out over the world from his throne, or high seat, Hlidskjálf (Hall of Many Doors). Frey sees down into Jötunheim from Hlidskjálf in 'Skirnir's Ride'. Whether Odin or any occupant of Hlidskjálf can see over the world just because the seat is high, or because Odin's home has certain magic properties is uncertain. As we are told that the occupant of Hlidskjálf can 'see out over all the worlds', we have placed Asgard on the edge of the universe, rather than in the center (where Snorri seems to place it, cf. pp.164 and 172).

The dramatic situation in each of the mythological poems involves a movement between worlds, and often suggests descents from one plane to another. In 'The Song of the Sybil' Odin has journeyed downward to Nifheim to charm the Sybil into speech. 'The Lay of Vafthruthnir' is a quest into Jötunheim not only to test the giant's wit, but to learn of the impending fate of the gods. 'The Lay of Grimnir' is ostensibly a quest to test human virtue, but it turns into an exposition of Odin's wit, as well as a revelation of his pseudonyms. 'Skirnir's Ride' is Frey's quest for a bride in Jötunheim, and Thor quests for a giant kettle in 'The Lay of Hymir' in which to brew beer for the gods' feast. 'The Lay of Thrym' is a quest to recover from Jötunheim Thor's hammer. 'Baldur's Dreams' is another of Odin's quests to learn of the fate of the gods. 'Brunhild's Hel-Ride' tells of Brunhild's journey from Midgard to Hel as the Valkyrie seeks to follow her slain lover Sigurd (in Hel rather than in Valhalla because he was slain in bed rather than on the battlefield).

Descent into a lower world in order to acquire secrets of life and death denied living beings is a mythological archetype. Odin parallels heroes of many traditions in this respect - Gilgamesh, Ulysses, Aeneas, and Sir Guyon are but a few. Odin wins his battle of wits in such confrontations with knowers of truth, but generally fails to grasp the significance of the answers he extracts. Not until he questions the Sybil does he receive the full and explicit statement of the gods' fate.

The mythological poems of Icelandic tradition are typo-logically related to Nordic heroic legends in poetry. The former constitute a kind of mythological explication of the condition of universal life, and the latter illustrate struggles of men within these conditions. What happens in Asgard foreshadows what will come to pass in Midgard. As the gods struggle to prevent a destruction they know is inescapable, so heroes are implicitly urged to face inevitable fate without succumbing to despair. As the race of gods anticipates resurrection, so the heroes anticipate enduring fame. The typo-logical association between poems of gods and poems of heroes lends them similar structures.

The lays of Thrym and Völund illustrate this general correspondence. Each hero, Völund and Thor, is robbed of his most valued possession, without which each feels powerless. To regain his hammer, Thor must allow himself to be disguised as a woman; Völund, before he can regain his sword, is hamstrung. Each must journey to another world before recovering his loss, and, in each instance, recovery takes place during a kind of mock wedding. Völund weds Bodvild (whom he calls his 'bride') by assaulting her. Thor's wedding feast ends with his slaughter of the giants. Both tales echo earlier myths of regeneration.

Despite the frequent journeys of gods to Jötunheim and to Midgard, there is very little mingling of the affairs of mortals with the affairs of gods. For the most part, gods are conspicuously absent in the heroic poems, and mortals are absent from the poems about gods (except for references to men in the prose accompanying the poems). Giants never appear in Midgard, and when dwarves appear they seem to refer more to stunted humans than to the enemies of gods. Although Valhalla is an important concept in heroic life, there are no poems, other than the contrived 'Lay of Erik', that mention the presence of mortals in Asgard.