

*WYRD*, WISDOM, AND WARRIORS: HEROIC SAPIENCE IN MEDIEVAL  
GERMANIC EPICS

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*WYRD, WISDOM, AND WARRIORS: HEROIC SAPIENCE IN MEDIEVAL  
GERMANIC EPICS*

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This dissertation examines the nature of wisdom in medieval Germanic epics, and how this wisdom characterizes epic heroes. Germanic heroes of legend and those destined to rule a people or kingdom were expected to be both wise and brave; but the notion of what constituted wisdom was different in each of the three main surviving Germanic languages and cultures of the Middle Ages: Old English, Old Norse, and Middle High German. This dissertation examines the major epics from each of these three linguistic/cultural groups: *Beowulf* in Old English, *Völsunga saga* in Old Norse, and the *Nibelungenlied* in Middle High German. A chapter on Old English and Old Norse sapiential poetry—and its relation to the epics under consideration—is also included. *Beowulf* demonstrates his wisdom through formal speeches, combative dialogues, provision and reception of counsel, and his proverbial knowledge; but the fundamental aspect of *Beowulf*'s wisdom is his resignation to fate. *Völsunga saga* emphasizes Sigurðr's quests for wisdom, presenting a more complex web of components comprising this wisdom: the ability to question, proverbial and mythological knowledge, the ability to answer or give counsel, and a gift of foresight or prophecy. As in *Beowulf*, however, the most important component remains resignation to fate. The Old English and Old Norse wisdom poems reflect the notions of wisdom presented in *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga*, but the higher power to which one must resign is expressly God, never *wyrd* or even death. The interplay of social spheres in

the *Nibelungenlied* influences the expression of heroic wisdom, of which the most important aspect seems the ability to negotiate the complexities of the courtly or mythological worlds. But Hagen, the central figure of wisdom, also demonstrates a fearlessness and resignation to fate and death unparalleled by any other character. While the *Nibelungenlied* presents different social structures and ideals to *Beowulf* or *Völsunga saga*—and therefore different perceptions of wisdom—the significance of resignation in characterizing heroic wisdom remains common to all of these texts.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Aaron Ralby grew up in Baltimore, MD, and attended University of Maryland, Baltimore County as an undergraduate. After receiving his B.A. *summa cum laude* (as valedictorian) in English and Modern Languages and Linguistics with a concentration in German in 2005, Aaron spent a year at the University of Cambridge, where he completed an M.Phil. in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at distinction level in July of 2006. He then made his way to Ithaca to begin his Ph.D. in Medieval Studies at Cornell University, concentrating in Old English literature under the direction of Thomas D. Hill. He also studied Middle High German literature with Arthur Groos and Germanic philology with Wayne Harbert. After passing his A-Exams in the summer of 2008, Aaron completed the Árni Magnússon Institute's summer course in modern Icelandic, then returned to Cambridge for the 2008-09 academic year. While in Cambridge, Aaron worked with Judy Quinn on Old Norse literature, particularly on two chapters of his doctoral dissertation. Aaron also played varsity lacrosse for Cambridge in 2009 and authored a children's book titled *Hammond Undercover: Knights and Warriors*, which was published in July 2009 by Langenscheidt. Aaron intends to continue his scholarship in comparative heroic traditions through postdoctoral study.

*To my mother, who embodies the wisdom of the warrior,*

*and*

*To all those who tread the path along the razor's edge.*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch . . . . .	iii.
Dedication . . . . .	iv.
Acknowledgments . . . . .	v.
Introduction . . . . .	1
1. <i>Wyrd</i> , Wisdom, and the Warrior: Defining Sapience in <i>Beowulf</i> .	18
2. <i>Hann var vitr maðr</i> : Sigurðr and Fate . . . . .	70
3. The Wisdom of Wisdom Poetry . . . . .	128
4. Wisdom in the <i>Nibelungenlied</i> ? . . . . .	189
Conclusion . . . . .	240
Appendices . . . . .	244
References . . . . .	257



## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation began as an exploration of the topos of *sapientia et fortitudo*—the widespread ancient notion that a hero must be both wise and strong—within medieval Germanic epics.<sup>1</sup> It has evolved, however, into an analysis of heroic wisdom and the association between wisdom and fate in medieval Germanic epics. What does it mean for a hero to be wise? What is the exact character of heroic sapience? I intend to address these questions as they pertain to the three main medieval Germanic languages: Old English, Old Norse, and Middle High German. Literature of the first two language groups—Old English and Old Norse—is often considered together because of close similarities in culture, despite a significant

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<sup>1</sup> In the late 1950s R. E. Kaske famously argued that the Greco-Roman and Biblical tradition of *sapientia et fortitudo* was no less present in the Old English poem *Beowulf*. See R. E. Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*,” *Studies in Philology* 55 (1958), 423–56. Kaske went on to explore how the same tradition was present in other Old English texts, such as *Judith*. See R. E. Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo* in the Old English *Judith*,” in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, eds. Larry Dean Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publishers, 1982), 13–29. But this depiction of the topos is somewhat problematic. Building on Curtius’s analysis of *sapientia et fortitudo* in Classical exempla, Kaske examines the theme as a Biblical topos; but an examination of the Biblical references Kaske cites reveals that the primary figure embodying both qualities is God Himself, and that the terms *sapientia* and *fortitudo* are only paired—without association with further qualities—four times in both the Old and New Testaments (Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*,” 424). Jeremiah 9:23, for example, gives an example of a wise man first, then a strong man, but does not explicitly represent such figures as the same person; furthermore, a rich man is added to the list, so *sapientia et fortitudo*, while occurring in proximity, do not occur as a unified pair of qualities. It is difficult to say that this represents a real theme. Two of the three explicit pairings of the words *sapientia* and *fortitudo* are in Job, both referring to God (Job 12:13 and 12:16). For example: *apud ipsum est sapientia et fortitudo ipse habet consilium et intellegentiam*, “With him is wisdom and fortitude, he has help and intelligence” (Job 12:13). The third pairing of *sapientia et fortitudo* is in Daniel 2:20, also referring explicitly to God. Other than God, figures who may perhaps exemplify the theme are kings, such as David and Solomon, even though they may not be described explicitly as possessing both *sapientia* and *fortitudo*. It may be that Jerome, a trained rhetorician, simply adopted the established verbal formula to reflect a similar concept in the Hebrew.

chronological gap. Old Norse and Middle High German, on the other hand, are more or less contemporary but are separated by a significant cultural gap. All three language groups share a common linguistic and cultural heritage. I intend to exploit this common heritage by analyzing the main epics preserved in each language, which are further connected by what is more or less the same traditional tale: that of Sigurðr the dragonslayer. This dissertation examines *Beowulf*, *Völsunga saga*, Old English and Old Norse wisdom poems, and the *Nibelungenlied*; it argues that despite cultural differences and differences in articulation, the highest ideal of heroic wisdom remains consistent throughout medieval Germanic epic and is defined by the hero's awareness of his own mortality and through his resignation to fate.

The decision to look at redactions of the Sigurðr legend is somewhat arbitrary. Choosing the same tale in several languages is not necessary, but provides some consistency in an otherwise broad study, even though the texts are tenuously connected by epic genre.<sup>2</sup> The Sigurðr legend furthermore helps establish a connection between Old English, Old Norse, and Middle High German literature. The inclusion of Middle High German may seem out of place because Middle High German courtly society differed so substantially from the traditional heroic Germanic society presented in *Beowulf* and the *Fornaldarsögur*. I have included a Middle High German text for a few important reasons. Little scholarship considers Old Norse literature alongside that of Middle High German, yet not only were the two contemporary, but there is also good evidence of mutual contact and influence.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wisdom itself seems a common concern in epic. As Jeremy Ingalls writes, "All epic poets share the same motive, an intent to narrate the routes to and within a transfiguration from knowledge to wisdom." Jeremy Ingalls, *The Epic Tradition and Related Essays* (Tucson: Capstone Editions, 1989), 15.

<sup>3</sup> The notable exceptions are Marianne E. Kalinke and Margaret Schlauch. See for example Marianne E. Kalinke, "The Foreign Language Requirement in Medieval Icelandic Romance," *Modern Language Review* 78 (1983), 850–61, and Margaret Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland* (Princeton, NJ; New York, NY, 1934).

Perhaps the best example of this is in the late medieval *Piðdreks saga af Bern*, an Old Norse text that includes the tale of Sigurðr the dragonslayer, but which is largely based on German traditions of the tale. Furthermore, a prose passage in the poetic *Edda* specifically mentions the alternate version of Sigurðr's death found in Germany. A significant number of connections exist between the literatures of Old Norse and Middle High German, but these have rarely been explored—particularly in English—in part because of the compartmentalization of disciplines.

There is enough material to write dissertations on any one of the texts considered in the present study, but the disadvantages of studying such a broad swath of material are outweighed by the advantages of the sharper relief gained by comparison and contrast. Through a comparison of the portrayal of wisdom in three heroic narratives as well as shorter wisdom poems, the commonalities and differences will shed light not only on the texts in question, but also on other examples within Old English, Old Norse, and Middle High German literature. Furthermore, such a broad comparative study helps eliminate the dangers of assuming the uniqueness of any particular detail. For example, the theme of *sapientia et fortitudo* may be considered Greco-Roman or Biblical, but is not limited—as can be seen from the Germanic examples—to Greek, Roman, or Biblical literature. The theme also finds prominent expression in East Asian literature as well, but this common expression cannot indicate mutual influence.<sup>4</sup> Old English, Old Norse, and Middle High German are closely related languages and relatively closely related cultures. Commonalities are to

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<sup>4</sup> Miyamoto Musashi, for example—the famed author of *A Book of Five Rings* (五輪書)—stresses the two-fold path of brush and sword, closely paralleling the later medieval and Renaissance notion of the pen and sword, as expressed in such influential works as Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. Studying literature and art is supposed to help the warrior attain good sense and wisdom, similar to the notion of *sapientia*. The accuracy of the parallel between the Western Classical tradition and Classical Japanese is unfortunately outside the scope of this dissertation; nonetheless, Japanese literature expresses the need for both internal and external cultivation.

be expected, but these commonalities may not be the result of shared cultural heritage, or shared influence from other cultures, such as the Latin tradition of the Church. Underlying themes in a general form may be widely represented, but modes of expression for each culture will be unique; the study that follows will focus on these modes of expression in regard to heroic wisdom.

This raises the question whether the association between wisdom and strength is somehow archetypal, or whether it is a cultural topos. As an ideal figure, a hero should attain both inner and outer ideals: wisdom as the highest inner quality and strength as the highest physical quality a human being can possess. Figures who represent this ideal tend to make for good leaders but for bad stories, unless supported by a cast of characters who can create sufficient conflict to generate a decent narrative.<sup>5</sup> The theme of *sapientia et fortitudo* is not necessarily a Biblical theme—nor, indeed, is it limited to classical epic—but rather an archetype of leadership that finds varying expressions within each culture.<sup>6</sup> In Old English and Old Norse in particular, the theme manifests itself specifically in relation to royal characters destined to rule.<sup>7</sup> Despite the common topos of the “wise hero,” this dissertation seeks to identify more precisely what comprises the wisdom of the hero in each cultural context.

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<sup>5</sup> See Thomas D. Hill, “*Consilium et Auxilium* and the Lament for *Æschere*,” *Haskins Society Journal* 12 (2002), 78. Hill argues that *sapientia et fortitudo* is relatively rare and often associated with kingship.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius describes this as “an ideal norm, which we may describe as a combination of courage and wisdom.” Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 172. Curtius discusses how the full combination of wisdom and fortitude may not be necessary for all regular soldiers, but is certainly necessary for leaders (171).

<sup>7</sup> God, as the King of the Universe—both omniscient and omnipotent—obviously embodies the pinnacle of *sapientia et fortitudo*. Kaske notes that human wisdom and fortitude are essentially limited and temporary echoes of God’s boundless powers. See Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*,” 456.

Working within one field may lead us to see things that are not actually there. For example, many analogues in Old Norse to the *Beowulf* story have been posited for decades, but the publication of a Japanese analogue to *Beowulf* reminds us to question these analogues carefully.<sup>8</sup> The presence of a story preserved in classical Japanese that closely parallels *Beowulf* in terms of character and plot does not indicate any sort of mutual influence; rather, it illustrates the wide-ranging appeal of such stories across cultural, linguistic, and geographical boundaries.<sup>9</sup> Taking a broader view can help us determine whether commonalities are in fact the result of influence and contact, or possibly coincidental similarities that developed independently.<sup>10</sup>

What are perhaps more interesting than the similarities between cultures and traditions are the differences. *Sapientia* and *fortitudo* may be valued in Old English, Old Norse and Middle High German epics, but the conceptions of each quality in their respective contexts may differ substantially.<sup>11</sup> Compare for instance Beowulf's arrival

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<sup>8</sup> Michiko Ogura, "An Ogre's Arm: Japanese Analogues to *Beowulf*," in *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*, eds. Peter S. Baker and Nicholas Howe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 59–66.

<sup>9</sup> For much of the literature from Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Iceland we may speculate, but we may rarely declare connections with certainty. Many times, however, not only events, but also character names in Germanic literatures correspond, affording us greater certainty of common ancestry, derivation from the same source, or mutual influence. This is the case with figures such as Sigurðr; many of the names in *Deor*, *Widsið*, and *Waldere* in Old English are found as subjects of fuller narratives in Old Norse and Middle High German.

<sup>10</sup> Such a method is certainly not without precedent. The approach I take in this dissertation is similar to that of Georges Dumézil in several of his works, though particularly *The Stakes of the Warrior*, in which he compares the Old Norse Starkaðr to Herakles and Indra. Dumézil's objective is to discover underlying themes from Indo-European. See Georges Dumézil, *The Stakes of the Warrior*, trans. Jaan Puhvel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). My objectives, however, are not so lofty. We know the three cultures studied in this dissertation have a common heritage; I am not aiming to move backwards to a form of proto-wisdom, but rather to define wisdom in each literary context against the contexts of the others.

<sup>11</sup> The term *sapientia* encompasses wisdom, good taste, and practical common sense, while *fortitudo* is a combination of physical strength and bravery. I will occasionally

at Heorot and Siegfried's arrival in Worms. Both heroes possess recognizable strength and power, but Beowulf shows courtesy and humility before the foreign king, while Siegfried shows an overbearing arrogance and threatens to take all the Burgundian lands by force. It is true that the purpose of these two heroes' respective journeys is different, but that does not account for the radical difference in their behavior and demeanor were they to be acting in the same social and cultural context.

The contrast provided by studying related—or even disparate—literatures side by side enables us to see things that would otherwise remain hidden. When I spoke with Jens-Peter Schjødt after his talk at the Viking Society for Northern Research in March 2009 about the benefits of comparative research, he remarked that comparison was essential because it was the only way that we could really form categories. In order to organize the vast amount of material to study, we rely heavily on categories; comparison allows the formation of these categories, and it also helps us question their boundaries.

#### *Overview –*

Chapter 1 examines *Beowulf* to see what role wisdom plays in the narrative and how this wisdom can be defined. I will argue that wisdom is a blanket term used to describe a complex web of qualities: in order to be wise, the hero must be well-traveled, able to engage in both competitive and instructive dialogue, and possessed of indomitable bravery. Central to the argument concerning the relationship between heroism and wisdom is a consideration of the faculty which produces both bravery and

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use the collocation “wisdom and bravery” in place of *sapientia et fortitudo*, though I hope the reader will understand a wider semantic range than generally attributed to these two terms in modern English. “Wisdom” includes prudence and good sense, while “bravery” encompasses not simply the internal quality, but also the external strength necessary to enact such boldness.

thought: *mod.* As our modern English word “courage” suggests, bravery comes from the heart. But contrary to our modern conceptions of the intellect, Old English literature commonly attests the heart as the primary faculty of thought and verbalization as well. Bravery and heroic virtue are therefore inextricably linked to wisdom through the faculty of the heart. If the warrior possesses a strong heart, then the strength of this faculty should lend him both heroic prowess and wisdom.

Beowulf comports himself with dignity and honor, gives and receives counsel, and decisively defeats Unferð in competitive dialogue—qualities and actions that help establish him not merely as a great fighter, but also as a levelheaded and wise leader. Furthermore, Beowulf demonstrates his character by reconciling with Unferð and not bearing him the slightest grudge. The highest form of wisdom, however, does not necessarily involve the hero’s relationship with other characters or his position in society, but rather hinges on the hero’s relationship with death. Only the hero fully resigned to his fate, regardless of what that may be, can be considered truly wise. Cultivating bravery by rumination on death, the warrior likewise cultivates a special sort of heroic sapience. Though he trusts his own strength, Beowulf acknowledges before each fight that however he may act on his own part, he has no real control over the outcome of any encounter. His fate rests in God’s hands.

Scholars have long noted the large quantity of gnomic material in *Beowulf*, which has sometimes been considered a weakness in the poem, a strange and unnecessary distraction from the narrative, or some other obscure addition to what is otherwise an impressive composition and story. More recently, scholars have seen this gnomic material as integral to the text and not some series of anomalous digressions or interpolations.<sup>12</sup> I would like to take this argument a step further by

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<sup>12</sup> Among the first to argue for the integrity of these gnomic passages to the poem were Kemp Malone and Robert Burlin. See Kemp Malone, “Words of Wisdom in *Beowulf*,” in *Humaniora: Essays in Literature, Folklore and Bibliography, Honoring*

suggesting that as far as any heroic genre actually exists in Old English literature, gnomic or sapiential material is not simply a superfluous ornament, but rather a necessary ingredient for this literature. The wisdom poems in Old English likewise may form a genre in and of themselves, but may also be considered part of a larger tradition. This Anglo-Saxon tradition is unique, but has several obvious influences and sources. The influence of ecclesiastical material does not in any way require clear demarcation or distinction to be made between religious and secular literature, since all evidence suggests that both Anglo-Saxon society and literary practice adhered to a complex syncretism in which pre-Christian, secular, and Christian traditions combined into something wholly new. While we may recognize traces of influence from various traditions, it is impossible to extract one from another. In the same way, it is impossible to separate gnomic from heroic literature.

Chapter 2 will shift focus to *Völsunga saga*. Differences in narrative structure between *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga* afford different perspectives in analyzing the development of wisdom within a hero over time, especially since the saga presents Sigurðr's life from birth to death. Certain cultural differences between Anglo-Saxon and Old Icelandic societies result in differences in the constitution of heroic wisdom, but I will nonetheless argue that its fundamental source by and large takes the same form in *Völsunga saga* as in *Beowulf*: wisdom is defined by the hero's relationship with fate. A wise hero knows and understands fully that he is going to die, and therefore behaves humbly and with moderation despite whatever strength he or she possesses.

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*Archer Taylor on His Seventieth Birthday*, eds. Wayland Debs Hand, Archer Taylor and Gustave O. Arlt (Locust Valley, NY: J.J. Augustin, 1960), 180–94, and Robert B. Burlin, “Gnomic Indirection in *Beowulf*,” in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C. McGalliard*, eds. Lewis E. Nicholson, Dolores Warwick Frese and John C. Gerber (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 41–49.



In addition to the importance of fate, several other qualities comprise wisdom in *Völsunga saga*. As in *Beowulf*, the ability to engage in dialogue, both questioning and answering, and the ability to maneuver through the complexities of society, constitute important components of the hero's wisdom in the saga. The form and nature of dialogue, however, are different in *Völsunga saga* than in *Beowulf*. In *Beowulf*, figures of wisdom possess significant stores of proverbial knowledge; in *Völsunga saga*, heroes must know not only proverbs, but also a large store of mythological knowledge. One finds this requirement generally true of Old Norse literature. A contest of knowledge concerning mythological figures and events constitutes the typical Old Norse "wisdom dialogue" (as in the case of the poetic *Edda*, often between mythological figures themselves). In order to be considered wise, the Old Norse hero had to know lore. But this is not the only difference between portrayals of wisdom in Old English and Old Norse. *Völsunga saga*—as well as other Old Norse texts—suggests an intimate connection between wisdom and prophecy. In the saga, every wise figure possesses a prophetic gift and can see into the future. The importance of prophecy to the saga creates a narrative tenor markedly different from that of *Beowulf*.

The ability of characters to foresee future events also changes their relationship with fate. Whereas Beowulf must resign himself to the uncertainty of his future and a myriad of possible outcomes to his actions, Sigurðr seems to know his entire fortune before any of the major events of his life have been narrated. Both heroes must resign themselves to their destinies: Beowulf in the abstract, and Sigurðr in the concrete. In both cases, the warrior must accept the difficulties of life and the inevitability of death. If *Völsunga saga* is any indication, knowing one's future beforehand does not make this acceptance any easier. The scarcity of examples in Old English makes generalization difficult, but prophecy and prophetic dreams are certainly common in

much Old Norse literature. Prophecy therefore appears to play an important role in the characterization of wisdom that it does not necessarily play in Old English literature.

Even though supernatural creatures are arguably more important to the narrative of *Beowulf* than they are to *Völsunga saga*, the prevalence of prophecy and its importance in establishing the wisdom of central figures adds a fantastic quality to the characters of *Völsunga saga*. Beowulf is a man of preternatural strength and martial prowess, said to have the strength of 30 men in each hand; despite this physical power, he is a man like any other, and is confined to the limitations of human knowledge and mortality. Sigurðr, however, is a descendent of Óðinn, stands more than 10 feet tall, rides a horse descended from the mythological Sleipnir, can understand the speech of birds, and sees into the future. Beowulf's lack of supernatural perception makes him seem perhaps more realistic than Sigurðr, but the fact remains that both are ultimately human, limited in power, and fated to die; they understand this, and are acutely aware of their own mortality. It is precisely this awareness that makes them both such prominent figures of wisdom despite what other differences may exist between the characters, or their respective narratives.

Chapter 3 examines the body of so-called “wisdom literature” in Old English and Old Norse to see how the portrayals of wisdom articulated in chapters one and two might find expression in more purely gnomic material, and also look at how this gnomic material might present a different view of wisdom from that portrayed in the epics. Anglo-Saxon literature shows significantly more influence from a Christian Latinate tradition than the oldest strata of Old Norse literature, and most if not all texts produced in Anglo-Saxon England would have been written down by clerics trained in religious settings. In a brief discussion of Anglo-Saxon syncretism, I will argue that Anglo-Saxon authors consciously cultivated ambiguity between Christian or pre-Christian Germanic traditions as a stylistic feature. In regard to such poems as

*Precepts*, with its almost certain monastic context, it is tempting to separate advice into categories based on the social strata to which such advice may have applied; but it is impossible to tell what if any literature was intended for a wholly religious or wholly secular audience, or if such distinctions existed in Anglo-Saxon England. The general nature of much Old English gnomic material makes it easily applicable to a wide array of social spheres. The advice given in *Precepts* could therefore apply to a secular hero as well as to clergy and monks. This is not to say that there are no differences between monastic sapience and heroic wisdom, but rather that there are a number of commonalities. The components and means of attaining wisdom in each social sphere may be different, creating a different image of a hero and his inner abilities, but certain elements overlap.

After a discussion of Anglo-Saxon syncretism, I will turn my attention to how Old English and Old Norse wisdom poems affirm or contradict the components of wisdom outlined in chapters one and two, exploring in turn each component found within the wisdom poems: proverbial and mythological knowledge, skill in formulating and answering riddles, dialogic proficiency in questioning and answering, the gift of prophecy, and finally resignation to fate. Beginning with the Old English examples, I will show how poems such as *The Fortunes of Men*, *The Gifts of Men*, and the two *Maxims* poems strongly reiterate the theme of man's limitations in power and knowledge, especially before the omniscience and omnipotence of God.

Old Norse wisdom poems share many features with those in Old English, but have a style and structure uniquely their own. The competitive dialogue is far more prominently attested in Old Norse, and the prevalence of mythological knowledge in wisdom dialogues creates a markedly different atmosphere. The closest analogue in Old English to such poems as *Vafþrúðnismál* is the series of *Solomon and Saturn* dialogues. Competitive in nature, these dialogues take on a similar form and structure

to those in Old Norse, but nonetheless syncretically blend Christian and other traditions. There are few examples in Old Norse of wisdom poems not in dialogic form. The notable exception is *Hávamál*; yet its seemingly composite structure makes it difficult to ascertain whether similar gnomic poems existed or were popular. *Hávamál* perhaps most closely resembles *Maxims I*, in part because both poems seem composite compositions or compilations of gnomic material into a single text. Despite the difficulties of presentation and structure, many of the same qualities and themes concerning wisdom in Old Norse narrative are no less present in gnomic material.

These poems in Old English and Old Norse also stress the importance of social tact or appropriate action, providing the kinds of proverbs and advice one might expect a hero such as Beowulf to know. Beowulf does, indeed, demonstrate his knowledge of similar *sententiae*. It is best to remain silent and observant, rather than to talk oneself into trouble. Saying the wrong thing or saying too much could be fatal. It is best to listen to one's advisors carefully and consider their words thoroughly before acting, lest one should otherwise act out of impulse and emotion, making decisions that might occasion regret. The wide range of topics covered in the "wisdom poems" indicates the complex web of social knowledge and experience required in establishing wisdom. This form of wisdom—as an ability to avoid various social dangers—naturally differs based on the different societies in question, and will play a prominent role in the next chapter on the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*.

Chapter 4 considers the Middle High German redaction of the Sigurðr legend found in the *Nibelungenlied*. Although the main narrative shares many similarities with the Old Norse *Völsunga saga*, the social context in which events play out is entirely different. The courtly setting of the epic creates expectations not present in the Old Norse version, and affords the author opportunities to exploit the importance of social obligation in ways strikingly dissimilar to those presented in *Völsunga saga*.

Most important for our purposes, however, is the way in which social complexities alter the role of the hero and the nature of heroic wisdom. Certain general elements—such as the giving and receiving of counsel—remain common to the Middle High German, Old English, and Old Norse heroic traditions, but proverbial knowledge and knowledge of mythological narrative or a mythological past are almost entirely absent from the *Nibelungenlied*. Furthermore, the *Nibelungenlied* does not emphasize the hero's resignation to death or even God as strongly as has been demonstrated in Old English and Old Norse, but this quality remains fundamental to heroic wisdom in the epic.

The *Nibelungenlied* presents two distinct social worlds: an older, mythological world rooted in a legendary Germanic past; and a newer, courtly world represented by the Burgundian court at Worms. The text does not present Siegfried as a figure of wisdom in the context of the social world of the Burgundian court. This argument rests on the notion that wisdom in the *Nibelungenlied* largely takes the form of a pragmatic ability to handle the complexities of courtly society. Siegfried appears at home in an older Germanic mythological world—and possesses mythological knowledge—but lacks the social know-how to be able to maneuver his way around the more modern courtly society. While he may possess certain elements of heroic wisdom within the mythological world, being able to function in this world with ease, his attempts to live in both worlds at the same time—applying his knowledge and principles from the archaic mythological world to “contemporary” courtly society—ultimately bring about a catastrophe. In the mythological world, physical prowess reigns supreme and both loyalty and love can be won by force. Siegfried seems to assume that this is also the case in courtly society, but this misconception leads to his betrayal and death.

The *Nibelungenlied* presents Siegfried as an impossibly strong warrior, but in no way stresses his wisdom or intellectual capability. Narrative differences between the *Nibelungenlied* and *Völsunga saga* highlight Sigurðr's wisdom and Siegfried's lack of mental acuity. Siegfried's unmatched strength and impenetrable skin make him almost impossible to kill. He revels in his own invulnerability, and does not demonstrate the same awareness of mortality as both Beowulf and Sigurðr. His death appears more the result of his overbearing pride than of fate. Physical excess therefore ultimately diminishes Siegfried's heroic appeal: his fearlessness in battle is not the result of meditation on death and acceptance of mortality, but rather the certainty of safety afforded by the combination of physical strength and impenetrable skin. With the exception of his struggle with Brunhild—and perhaps the wrestling match with Alberich—we never actually see Siegfried have difficulty defeating anyone.<sup>13</sup>

Siegfried's physical abilities keep him from contemplating possible negative outcomes to his encounters, and he therefore cannot benefit from such contemplation or cultivate the type of bravery achieved through constantly facing death. In both the Old English and Old Norse literary traditions, bravery and wisdom are intimately linked. While wisdom takes a different form in Middle High German, the hero nonetheless still finds definition through his relationship with death. Acceptance of mortality remains fundamental to heroic wisdom; Siegfried's impenetrability keeps him from both seeking and obtaining this form of wisdom, and ultimately lessens his heroic appeal.

The heroic appeal lacking in Siegfried finds expression in another source: Hagen, who emerges as the dominant heroic figure in the second half of the *Nibelungenlied*. Not only does he take control of the Burgundians as though he were the ruler, but he also demonstrates his own physical prowess and skill with the sword.

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<sup>13</sup> Both Brunhild and Alberich can be said to belong to the mythological world of which Siegfried is himself a part.

But most importantly, Hagen knows through his test of drowning the priest that he and all the Burgundians will die, and he therefore rides into certain death without fear or regard for his own life.<sup>14</sup> Almost all his actions are dedicated to the protection and enrichment of Gunther his king. Moreover, Hagen is also the epic's most prominent figure of wisdom. He has traveled widely and knows the customs of various lands, as well as prominent knights from many countries. In his defeat of Siegfried, Hagen uses his own cunning in combination with strength to defeat an almost superhuman adversary. The murder of Siegfried closely resembles Sigurðr's slaying of the dragon Fáfnir: when the impossibly strong enemy goes to drink, the slayer runs a blade through his heart. In the end, Hagen's wisdom, physical strength and skill, and fearlessness of death bestow the Burgundian knight a heroic appeal greater than that of his adversary. The collocation of Hagen's wisdom and resignation to fate is not coincidental.

Often described as an epic, the *Nibelungenlied* shows a number of influences from romance literature, not merely in its presentation of courtly society: Siegfried's relationship with death is more like that of a romance hero. Mori describes the centrality of death to epic genre:

A sense of mortality is essential here, because an epic primarily concerns humankind with its glories and sufferings, and its sufferings as mortal being [sic] hinge on the extinction of life. Moreover, how one faces death with what one has achieved ultimately determines the meaning of an individual's life. What the central figure of an epic accomplishes with his limited span of life must be linked to the security of his people, because his attempt to overcome communal threats

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<sup>14</sup> Hagen's journey to certain death may be seen as an illustration of the Old English formula *wælst geceas* (he chose the slaughter-bed). See below, pg. 187.

magnifies his status and renders his name relevant to the collective memory of the people.<sup>15</sup>

Siegfried does die, and dies betrayed.<sup>16</sup> By constantly upping the odds, Siegfried tests fate, but often does so more for the gratification of his ego than out of service to his community. He himself does not demonstrate an awareness of his own mortality, or indeed a true concern for his own people. In this way, the *Nibelungenlied* toys with the generic considerations of traditional epic and contemporary romance. Siegfried, the mythological man, seems more like a romance hero, while Hagen, the courtly knight, assumes the role of epic hero. This heteroglossia imbues the *Nibelungenlied* with a degree of novelistic discourse not necessarily present in *Beowulf* or *Völsunga saga*.

Through examination of different texts and traditions it is possible to determine the nature of each hero's *sapientia* within the Germanic epic tradition. Comparison of these different traditions not only allows us to look for important commonalities, but also reveals sometimes surprising differences between what may seem to be remarkably similar cultures or cultures with at least a similar or shared heritage. Old English and Old Norse literature present heroic figures in different ways but both seem to agree that the highest form of heroic wisdom lies in resignation and acceptance of one's own mortality. The German tradition may not portray resignation as explicitly a form of wisdom, but the hero's ability to face death remains nonetheless an important component in establishing his wisdom and heroic appeal. Across medieval Germanic

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<sup>15</sup> Masaki Mori, *Epic Grandeur: Toward a Comparative Poetics of the Epic* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), x.

<sup>16</sup> Miller writes, "How to kill a hero? Even if he accepts death, his extraordinary prowess, his exceptional physical qualities and manifest perfections, must make this no easy task. When part of his genetic inheritance is divine or Otherworldly, mere men indeed may wonder. Nevertheless he must and will be killed. It is necessary to his essence..." Dean A. Miller, *The Epic Hero* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 122.



epic, resignation remains constant as the fundament of heroic wisdom; but the numerous other components that contribute to and comprise a hero's wisdom differ substantially in the details of expression. In the dissertation that follows, I plan to explore these topics to see exactly how we can understand and appreciate heroic wisdom in the different cultural contexts under consideration.

CHAPTER 1

In this chapter, I would like to turn to the role wisdom plays in Old English secular heroic literature. Anglo-Saxon sapiential literature—as Anglo-Saxon literature in general—was strongly syncretic in nature, and was not necessarily to be considered separate or distinct from the heroic and elegiac genres to which modern scholars often consider *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer* to belong. Instead, sapiential themes, which could themselves form the subject matter of literary production, were an integral, and indeed necessary, component of all Old English heroic literature as well. There are several aspects of wisdom in Old English literature, but ultimately the highest form of heroic wisdom in *Beowulf* manifests through the hero's resignation to and acceptance of both death and fate.

It has long been accepted that the Germanic hero had to possess some form of wisdom. R. E. Kaske has famously shown that *Beowulf* belongs to the Greco-Roman and Biblical tradition of *sapientia et fortitudo*, and that Beowulf as a hero possesses a keen intellect and wise mind in addition to extraordinary physical strength and prowess.<sup>17</sup> As a figure of both strength and learning, the hero is destined not merely to gain prominence through physical and intellectual contests, but also to rule. This same motif of *sapientia et fortitudo* appears in other Old English works, and likely held importance to Anglo-Saxon society in general.<sup>18</sup> As modern scholars, we tend to relegate the importance of learning to Christian monastic settings, and ignore the importance of education in secular life and positions of power in Anglo-Saxon England. This is in large part because we have so little evidence about secular

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<sup>17</sup> Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*,” 423–56.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo* in the Old English *Judith*,” 13–29, and Thomas D. Hill, “The Crowning of Alfred and the Topos of *Sapientia et Fortitudo* in Asser’s *Life of King Alfred*,” *Neophilologus* 86 (2002), 471–76.

education in Anglo-Saxon England and do not know how it functioned. This gap in our knowledge results in a tendency to look for monastic learning in apparently secular texts. That approach has, of course, legitimate foundations, since the only textual evidence from Anglo-Saxon England we have would have been produced in ecclesiastical scriptoria or by clerical scribes working for secular rulers. But we mustn't forget that other forms of education existed. King Alfred and his educational reform provide an exceptional model for secular learning; but Alfred only sees this reform as necessary because both spiritual and *worldly* learning have fallen off in recent years. Both had been flourishing amongst the kings and churchmen of the past.<sup>19</sup> In his letter to Wærferð, Alfred writes about the men who in his mind stand as pillars of forgotten learning:

Ælfred kyning hateð gretan Wærferð biscep his wordum luflice ond freondlice; ond ðe cyðan hate ðæt me com swiðe oft on gemynd, hwelce wiotan iu wæron giond Angelcynn, ægðer ge godcundra hada *ge worul[d]cundra*; ond hu gesæliglica tida ða wæron giond Angelcynn; ond hu ða kyningas ðe ðone onwald hæfdon ðæs folces [on ðam dagum] Gode ond his ærendwrecum hiersumedon; ond hie ægðer ge hiora sibbe ge hiora siodo ge hiora onweald innanbordes wel gehioldon, ond eac ut hiora eðel gerymdon; ond hu him ða speow ægðer *ge mid wige ge mid wisdom*e ond eac ða godcundan hadan...<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> According to Dumézil's trifunctional hypothesis, Indo-European Society was divided into three segments: priests, warriors, and workers. All three are necessary for society to function properly, so negligence of one group affects society as a whole. Dumézil argues that the traditional Germanic system combined sacral and martial functions in the sovereign. Óðinn himself exemplifies this; see Georges Dumézil, *Les dieux souverains des Indo-Européens*, (Gallimard: Paris, 1977), 189–90.

<sup>20</sup> Pope Gregory I, *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, ed. Henry Sweet (London: N. Trübner & co., 1958), 3. Emphasis mine.

King Alfred commands greetings to Wærferð bishop with loving and friendly words, and I command you to know that it comes often to my mind what wise men there formerly were among the Angles, either among religious orders *or worldly*, and what blessed times there were among the Angles, and how the kings who had control of the people in those days obeyed God and his ministers, and they protected well their peace, and morality, and power at home and extended their homeland abroad, and how they prospered *both in battle and in wisdom*, and also the religious orders...<sup>21</sup>

It is somewhat difficult to see how a decline in Latin learning could have caused the invasions of the Danes, except in so far as negligence in Christian learning could bring about God's vengeance. But Alfred here does not simply attribute the invasions to a lack of monastic learning: the combination of monastic learning and secular royal learning had made the kingdoms of England strong. Alfred begins his discussion of the decline in learning not with the churchmen, but with the kings who prospered both in "battle and in wisdom." What, then, comprised this secular royal wisdom? In this chapter, I will seek to answer this question by analyzing the noble and wise characters of *Beowulf*. Conduct and experience appear to constitute the beginning stages of wisdom, but knowledge of customs and weathering of winters could not bring a warrior to the highest heroic ideal of wisdom. Here, I will focus on the ways in which the hero's relationship with fate defines wisdom in *Beowulf*, and argue that Beowulf represents the ideal warrior precisely because he has resigned himself completely to his destiny, whatever that may be. This resignation ultimately manifests as the source of both Beowulf's wisdom and his physical strength.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

<sup>22</sup> Occasionally one finds throughout medieval literature instances of heroes who lack the intellectual acuity we would expect of a character like Beowulf. The motif of the

Before exploring the exact process or nature of secular royal wisdom, it may help to first establish what it is a good king does. According to Alfred's description of the wise kings of the past, a good king should hold peace at home, maintain some sort of ethical stance, and expand his kingdom.<sup>23</sup> The Cotton *Maxims* begin:

Cyning sceal rice healdan. (*Maxims II*, 1)<sup>24</sup>

A king shall control the kingdom.

A king must be a good warrior—and especially a good military leader—and he must also possess wisdom.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, to be a good military leader and strategist, one must

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dumb hero is not particularly prominent in Old English, but does appear in Old Norse, such as in the case of mythological narratives about Thor. In these instances, it is important to consider two questions: how much distance is there between the narrative and what may have been considered actual ideals; and how does the hero embrace and overcome his mental deficiencies? In regards to the first question, some of the mythological narratives present figures so otherworldly it is difficult to view them as representatives or models of actual ideals held by members of medieval Scandinavian society. In regards to the second question, one finds examples of supposedly feebleminded heroes such as Án the Bowbender who nonetheless are aware of their slowness of mind and overcome it through simple adherence to basic principles, lending them a shrewdness that in fact allows them to manipulate their supposedly more intelligent adversaries. It is important to remember that the presence of the theme of *sapientia et fortitudo* in Old English and Old Norse literature does not mean that the theme will be expressed in every narrative or heroic context. In fact, the collocation of the two qualities is rare, suggesting the value of the combination of both physical and mental ideals. Some figures, like Njáll, are wise, but not physically powerful, even if they are brave. It is impossible to generalize about these corpora to state that every narrative adheres to strict and identical ideological principles. This dissertation aims to focus on the employment of themes concerning heroic wisdom in a few key texts from Old English, Old Norse, and Middle High German; the wisdom of the “dumb hero” will have to be discussed in more detail elsewhere.

<sup>23</sup> This policy of aggressive warfare for territory acquisition complicates the moral or ethical position of Anglo-Saxon kings. It furthermore ensures the continuation of warfare regardless of the king's abilities as a ruler and capabilities of ensuring peace within his realm.

<sup>24</sup> All quotations of Old English poetry are taken from ASPR. Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 220.

have a keen mind as well as a fair amount of training and practice. Alfred, therefore, explicitly states that a good king must have both *sapientia* and *fortitudo*. According to Alfred's description, it would seem that secular royal wisdom is largely based on knowing rules of conduct and behavior, as well as ability to govern and rule. But Alfred's preface is not a treatise on wisdom, nor does it provide examples of model kings—Gregory's text itself covers those topics, focusing on methods of proper government.<sup>26</sup> We must, therefore, turn elsewhere for a better understanding of how heroic wisdom can be obtained, and what exactly constitutes the sapience of a good king in Anglo-Saxon literature.

The process of obtaining wisdom is manifold and can only be completed over a long period of time. Indeed, age appears to be one of the necessary components of heroic wisdom. As the Wanderer relates:

Swa þes middangeard  
ealra dogra gehwam      dreoseþ ond fealleð,  
forþon ne mæg weorþan wis      wer, ær he age  
wintra dæl in woruldrice.      Wita sceal gepyldig,  
ne sceal no to hatheort      ne to hrædwyrde,  
ne to wac wiga      ne to wanhydig,  
ne to forht ne to fægen,      ne to feohgifre  
ne næfre gielpes to georn,      ær he geare cunne. (*Wanderer*, 62–9)

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<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in the Old Norse *Konungs skuggsjá*, a king is expected not only to possess wisdom, but to be the wisest figure of society. See *Konungs skuggsjá: Speculum Regale*, ed. Magnús Már Lárusson (Reykjavik: H.F. Leiftur, 1900), 145–46.

<sup>26</sup> Though Alfred's translation was primarily intended for bishops, it is not difficult to see how Gregory's text could easily be applied to secular rulers. See for example E. G. Stanley, "King Alfred's Prefaces," *Review of English Studies: A Quarterly Journal of English Literature and the English Language* 39 (1988), 349–64, and Paul Anthony Booth, "King Alfred Versus Beowulf: The Re-Education of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 79, no. 3 (1997), 41–66.

So this middle earth declines and falls each day. Therefore a man may not become wise before he has a portion of winters in the realm of the world. The wise man should be patient, should not be too hot-hearted, nor too quick of speech, nor too soft in war, nor too reckless, nor too afraid, nor too glad, nor too greedy, nor ever too eager for boasting before he has known years.

Experience, specifically the experience of enduring hardship, gives a warrior perspective on his life and its meaning. We see here some guidelines for how a warrior should conduct himself, as well. These guidelines, however, are anything but specific, all of them emphasizing the need to avoid excess. Yet how much is too much is left ambiguous. The ambiguity suggests that the moderation advocated here can only be achieved by practice over many years, a measure not unlike the Middle High German notion of *mâze*. Ultimately, however, moderation will stem from an experiential knowledge of ephemerality. As Thomas D. Hill writes about the above passage:

As far as the social and historical context of these stoic ideals is concerned, it is obvious that a warrior cannot let himself become too attached to comfort and well-being if he is to maintain his status as a warrior. As any reader of the sagas can attest, the stoic ideals of the Germanic heroic ethos can readily be assimilated by women and others who are not expected to fight themselves. Even in our own culture we can speak of someone being “soft,” and we admire the self-discipline of the serious athlete or professional military person.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas D. Hill, “The Unchanging Hero: A Stoic Maxim in the *Wanderer* and Its Contexts,” *Studies in Philology* 101 (2004), 249.

A warrior—not unlike a monk—must detach himself from worldly objects and seek to rid himself of his attachment to his own life. Realization of the necessity of this process generally only comes through years of experience of loss and gain in which a warrior truly grasps the temporality of the world. Beowulf is remarkable in part because of the wisdom he possesses at so young an age. The best heroes—like good saints—are often presented as possessing some form of sapience or mental acuity early in life that bespeaks an experience beyond their years.<sup>28</sup> While wisdom in the Germanic secular world undoubtedly takes on a different character from the wisdom expected of and represented by saintly figures, wisdom itself is nearly as important in establishing a hero as it is in making a saint.<sup>29</sup> This early disposition, however, does not preclude further developments in the hero. Beowulf is remarkably wise for so young an age, but he still stands to benefit from the experience of Hrothgar's age and reap the fruits of his own experiences as he turns into the aged king we see in the last third of the poem.

While Beowulf is still a young man, he is so only comparatively. In contrast to the beardless youths who are the heroes of the *Tain Bo Cualigne*, *Fafnismál*, or *Parzival*, Beowulf is a mature man.<sup>30</sup> I would like to suggest that the life of the Germanic warrior was seen as falling into three main periods: youth, maturity, and old age. There is also the time of childhood before a warrior is able to physically assist his lord through armed service. Youth can be characterized as a time of young

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<sup>28</sup> This is expressed through the motif of the *puer senex*. See below, note 34.

<sup>29</sup> The saintly hero Andreas, though primarily a figure of wisdom channeling the Word of God, is also described in heroic terms as a warrior and thane, demonstrating the blurred boundary between secular and religious notions of heroism, but also indicating the prevalence of wisdom—regardless of category—in establishing the hero. For the text of the Old English poem *Andreas*, see George Phillip Krapp, ed., *The Vercelli Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932).

<sup>30</sup> Though not specifically identified as a member of either the *dugoð* or *geogoð*, Beowulf is old enough to lead a troop and to deputize younger warriors under his direction.



adulthood when the retainer serves as a full member of the king's court, but is not yet old and wise enough to give counsel, and remains somewhat in the role of the pupil, listening rather than speaking. Maturity represents an early stage of wisdom; in this period a man is still physically active as a military agent, but during which he has shown enough experience to offer sound counsel to his lord. Then finally, there is the time of old age, during which a warrior's physical prowess diminishes, and his worth moves entirely into the realm of wisdom.<sup>31</sup> By degrees, the warrior's contribution to society shifts from *auxilium* to *consilium*, including an intermediary period in which the warrior is able to provide both.

There appears to be linguistic evidence to support these designations. Beowulf, it would seem, has recently entered the period of maturity.<sup>32</sup> Having passed out of the period of his youth, he is old enough to command his own troop and lead an expedition. When Beowulf first comes forth to speak in the poem and greet the coast guard in Denmark, he is introduced as the oldest, *yldesta* (258), of his troop. Little more than a hundred lines later, Wulfgar describes Beowulf to king Hrothgar:

Her syndon geferede,      feorran cumene  
ofer geofenes begang      Geata leode;  
þone yldestan      oretmecgas  
Beowulf nemnað.<sup>33</sup> (*Beowulf*, 361-64)

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<sup>31</sup> This categorization of age is not unlike that Duby describes as having existed in 12<sup>th</sup> century France. See Duby's chapter "Youth in Aristocratic Society," in *The Chivalrous Society*, trans. Cynthia Postan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 112.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the classification of age in *Beowulf*, see J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 123–34. Burrow remarks that *Beowulf* appears to demonstrate a vernacular schema of age division, essentially untouched by Latin influence (124).

<sup>33</sup> All text of *Beowulf* is taken from the ASPR edition, Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *Beowulf and Judith*, ASPR (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953).

Here people of Geats have traveled, coming far over the ocean's  
expanse. Warriors call the oldest Beowulf.

As the oldest of his troop, Beowulf is unequivocally the leader, and possesses the greatest degree of wisdom. He himself addresses both the coast guard and Wulfgar with carefully crafted words, showing nothing of the proud boasting we see later that night in the hall, but instead respecting the customs and power of the foreign nation to which he and his men have come. When Wulfgar relates the presence of the Geatish warriors to King Hrothgar, he describes Beowulf as the *aldor* of the troop (369).

Beowulf is still a young man, but his feats at Heorot are not praiseworthy because of the hero's young age. Instead, Beowulf has already accomplished a great deal, and he himself refers to an earlier period of his life:

Wit þæt gecwædon      cnihtwesende  
ond gebeotedon      (wæron begen þa git  
on geogoðfeore)      þæt wit on garsecg ut  
aldrum neðdon,      ond þæt geæfndon swa. (*Beowulf*, 535–8)

We two agreed to that and pledged as boys—we were both still in the period of youth—that we would venture with our lives out on the ocean, and we did just that.

When Beowulf was *cnihtwesende* he was certainly old enough and mature enough to perform heroic feats, but Beowulf characterizes the swimming match with Breca almost as a foolhardy adventure of his youth, opposed to Beowulf's current state of maturity. This in turn suggests that Beowulf's decision to fight Grendel is not rash, but rather measured and well thought through. The question remains how the period during which a young warrior is a *cniht* relates to the common designation for young warriors of *geogoð*. Since Beowulf refers to this period in his life as the *geogoðfeore*,

I would suggest that Beowulf has arguably passed into the realm of *dugod*, and is therefore of an age where he is eligible to give as well as receive counsel.<sup>34</sup>

The word *cnihtwesende* appears only one other time in the poem, somewhat earlier. Hrothgar recounts having met Beowulf many years before, when Beowulf was still a boy:

Hroðgar maðelode,      helm Scyldinga:  
“Ic hine cuðe      cnihtwesende.” (*Beowulf*, 371–2)

Hrothgar spoke, the protector of the Scyldings, “I knew him when he was a boy.”

The implication is that several years have passed since Hrothgar last saw Beowulf. Furthermore, if Beowulf had to learn through songs of travelers that Grendel was attacking Heorot, it would seem that Hrothgar must have met Beowulf before Grendel began attacking his hall some 12 years earlier. Yet if Beowulf was already a *cniht*, a young warrior in training, then it would seem he must be in his early twenties at the very least. It is impossible to tell for sure, however, how old Beowulf is when he goes to fight Grendel, and therefore also impossible to be certain as to his age when the dragon attacks his kingdom when he is old. Nonetheless, Beowulf must have been but a boy when he first met Hrothgar, but is unequivocally a mature and fully grown man when he goes to offer the Danish king his counsel.

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<sup>34</sup> Beowulf’s counsel to Hrothgar could be an example of good counsel coming unexpectedly from someone too young to give advice, as one sometimes finds in literature from across the globe. In the medieval *Alexander Romance*, for example, a precocious Alexander demonstrates his wisdom in dialogue with Aristotle when still just a boy. But I do not think this is the case of premature wisdom here; it is remarkable that Beowulf gives such good counsel and has such a strong understanding of how the world works for someone of his age, but it is not surprising that he engages in the action of giving counsel. He is not depicted as a youth, but a young man who shows maturity beyond his years. See Richard Stoneman, ed. and trans., *The Greek Alexander Romance* (New York: Penguin, 1991).

The term *cnihtwesende* is reminiscent of another age designator within the poem: *umborwesende*, used to describe the infantile state of Scyld Scefing when he was sent out alone over the waves:

Nalæs hi hine læssan      lacum teodan,  
þeodgestreonum,      þon þa dydon  
þe hine æt frumsceafte      forð onsendon  
ænne ofer yðe      umborwesende. (*Beowulf*, 43–6)

They did not fail to provide him with gifts, with treasures, any less than those did who at the beginning sent him forth alone over the waves, an infant.

The term *umborwesende* is used one other time in *Beowulf* to describe Hrothulf:

wene ic þæt he mid gode      gyldan wille  
uncran eaferan,      gif he þæt eal gemon,  
hwæt wit to willan      ond to worðmyndum  
umborwesendum ær      arna gefremedon. (*Beowulf*, 1184–7)

I expect that he will repay our children with good, if he remembers all that the two of us did before to please and honor him with favors as a child.

How long the period of infancy extends is difficult to tell, but to my knowledge there are no other designations for age groupings between that of infancy and youth.

Furthermore, the distinctions between “youth” and “maturity” appear to be significantly blurred, as I will discuss below. What is important for the current study, however, remains that Beowulf, while still a young man, has reached a certain level of

maturity and has seen enough winters to be considered someone possessing not only physical strength, but the wisdom to give counsel as well.

The poem nonetheless strangely emphasizes both Beowulf's youth and Beowulf's age. Upon arrival at the court of Denmark, Beowulf is described as the oldest of his troop;<sup>35</sup> but after Beowulf has slain both Grendel and his mother, Hrothgar praises him for being so young and yet still wise:

Hroðgar mæpelode      him on ondsware:  
“þe þa wordcwydas      wigtig drihten  
on sefan sende;      ne hyrde ic snotorlicor  
on swa geongum feore      guman þingian.  
þu eart mægenes strang      ond on mode frod,  
wis wordcwida. (*Beowulf*, 1840–5)<sup>36</sup>

Hrothgar spoke answering him: “The Wise Lord sent those words to you in your heart; I have never heard anyone of such a young age speak more wisely. You are strong of might, and experienced in mind, wise in your words!”

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<sup>35</sup> There sometimes exists slippage between terminology regarding positions of leadership and positions of age. Since those who are older are generally more experienced, they are often the ones to become leaders, as evidenced by such Latin terms as *Senator*, from *senex*, meaning “old man.”

<sup>36</sup> These words of Hrothgar strongly parallel those of Andreas after he has been successfully ferried to Mermedonia:

“Næfre ic sælidan      selran mette,  
macræftigran,      þæs ðe me þynceð,  
rowend rofran,      rædsnotterran,  
wordes wisran.” (*Andreas* 471–4)

“Never before have I met a better sailor, as it seems to me, a more powerful rower, braver, more skilled in counsel, wiser of word.”

Both represent an example of the *puer senex* topos of a youth wise beyond his years. See Thomas D. Hill, “Two Notes on Patristic Allusion in *Andreas*,” *Anglia: Zeitschrift Fur Englische Philologie* 84 (1966), 161–62.

Beowulf has everything a warrior could want. He is strong of might, wise in mind, and wise in words. What is perhaps most interesting about Hrothgar's statement is the use of the word *frod*, a word intimately associated with old age, and sometimes standing just for age worthy of veneration with only a hint of the component of wisdom.<sup>37</sup> Beowulf, then, has the body and strength of a young man with a heart and mind of an old and experienced retainer. Hrothgar goes on to say that if Hygelac dies and Beowulf is still alive, the Geats would find it hard to choose a better king than Beowulf:

Wen ic talige,  
 gif þæt gegangeð,      þæt þe gar nymeð,  
 hild heorugrimme,      Hreþles eaferan,  
 adl oþðe iren      ealdor ðinne,  
 folces hyrde,      ond þu þin feorh hafast,  
 þæt þe Sægeatas      selran næbben  
 to geceosenne      cyning ænigne,  
 hordweard hæleþa,      gyf þu healdan wylt  
 maga rice. (*Beowulf*, 1845–53)

I would venture to claim, if that happens, that a spear take him, blood-grim battle take the child of Hrethel, disease or iron dispatch your lord, the leader of the people, and you still have your life, that the Sea-Geats would not have any better king to choose, a hoard guardian of men, if you would want to protect the kingdom of men.

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<sup>37</sup> See the *Dictionary of Old English*, The Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, <http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/>, Definition 2.

Beowulf possesses the strength to lead his people in war, but he also possesses the wisdom to rule a kingdom well and with moderation—the kind of wisdom Alfred writes of in his letter to Wærferð concerning his educational reform.<sup>38</sup> When given, *ræd* or counsel had to be taken into account and consideration by the recipient; as a wise and even minded warrior, Beowulf demonstrates the disposition necessary in carefully considering the courses of action and advice put forward by his trusted retainers. Though the king rules, he can only rule well with the aid and advice of his counselors.

When Beowulf is truly old at the end of the poem, he refers to the period during which he slew Grendel as his youth. Even though Beowulf refers to an earlier period of his life when recounting the swimming match with Breca, by the time he has ruled his kingdom for 50 winters, the fight with Grendel seems long ago, when Beowulf was comparatively young. Before fighting the dragon, Beowulf relates many adventures from his youth:

Biowulf mapelade,      bearn Ecgðeowes:  
 ‘Fela ic on giogoðe      guðræsa genæs,  
 orleghwila;      ic þæt eall gemon.  
 Ic wæs syfanwintre,      þa mec sinca baldor,  
 freawine folca,      æt minum fæder genam.’<sup>39</sup> (*Beowulf*, 2425–9)

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<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Hygelac does not appear as wise as Hrothgar or Beowulf. His raid on the Frisians is described as the result of pride: *for wlenco wean ahsode* (“summoned woes on account of pride,” *Beowulf*, 1206).

<sup>39</sup> Beowulf was presumably taken from his father to be educated and instructed as part of the Germanic system of fostering.

Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow: “In youth I endured many battles, times of war; I remember all that. I was seven winters when the lord of treasure, the Lord of the people took me from my father.”

Age therefore functions relatively rather than absolutely: there are no set age designations on the basis of fixed numbers of years, but rather each period of the hero’s life is defined by certain attributes of conduct and by juxtaposition to the other periods. King Hygelac, for instance, is near Beowulf in age, so has clearly attained some level of physical and intellectual maturity, but he is still young as a king. He is described as *geogne gudcynning* (1969), and his wife, Hygd, is described as *swyðe geong* (1926), but although she is very young, she is well accomplished and wise in her speech. An abnormal amount of wisdom enhances and distinguishes the characters who are still in their physical prime, indicating foresight and an understanding that physical and worldly well-being are only temporal.

In the early stages of youth, a hero should be silent and listen to the counsel of older and wiser warriors. A young retainer must go through a training period and the show obedience before assuming command. When Beowulf comes to Denmark, however, not only is he the oldest of his troop, but he is also old enough to give counsel to one far older than he: Hrothgar. What is perhaps most notable about his speech to the coast guard is how Beowulf characterizes his mission:

‘Ic þæs Hroðgar mæg  
þurh rumne sefan      ræd gelæran,  
hu he frod ond god      feond oferswyðeþ,  
gyf him edwendan      æfre scolde  
bealuwa bisigu,      bot eft cuman,  
ond þa cearwylmas      colran wurðap;  
oððe a syþðan      earfoðþrage,



þreanyd þolað,      þenden þær wunað  
on heahstede      husa selest.’ (*Beowulf*, 277-285)

I may teach Hrothgar counsel for that through an open heart, how he,  
wise and good, may overcome the fiend, if a reversal, a remedy for the  
baleful affliction should ever come to him, and the seethings of sorrow  
grow cooler; or ever afterwards suffer sad need in a time of misery,  
while there stands on the high place the best of houses.

Beowulf comes to fight Grendel; but in his words he offers his counsel—not an explicit fighting ability—to the Danish king. In the end, this counsel amounts to a request for permission to fight Grendel alone, but the fact remains that the remedy Beowulf offers is initially one of words, words that eventually take shape in Beowulf’s own action. After Beowulf’s carefully constructed and formalized speech, the coast guard replies with what is perhaps the most famous maxim from the poem:

æghwæþres sceal  
scearp scyldwiga      gescad witan,  
worda ond worca,      se þe wel þenceð. (*Beowulf*, 286-88)

A sharp shield warrior should know to distinguish between both words  
and works, he who thinks well.

The exact meaning and translation of this maxim in context has been argued in many ways. Stanley B. Greenfield summarizes some of these arguments, and puts forth his own interpretation.<sup>40</sup> Greenfield demonstrates two opposing interpretations, with

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<sup>40</sup> Stanley B. Greenfield, “Of Words and Deeds: The Coastguard’s Maxim Once More,” in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, eds. Larry Dean Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), 45–51.

Kaske arguing that the maxim is directed at Beowulf, illustrating the coast guard's perception of Beowulf's *sapientia* and *fortitudo*, and Shippey arguing that the maxim is directed at the coast guard himself and his decision to distinguish between words and actions.<sup>41</sup> Greenfield finally offers his own interpretation on the basis of his verse translation of these lines:

Discerning

Guardians of their land must learn to judge

Empty words from words embracing deeds.<sup>42</sup>

When reading this discussion, we cannot assign a specific meaning or application to the maxim at all. Instead, the complexity of this maxim—as is often the case with proverbs and sayings—is rooted in the ambiguity of its applicability. It refers to both Beowulf and the coast guard, but in different senses, and the fact that it cannot be pinned down on one or the other character indicates that the maxim is supposed to be spoken such that it hangs in the air above and between discursive partners, hovering over and influencing both sides of the conversation. The simpler and more general the maxim is, the more difficult its function and meaning are to define within a specific discursive context, making them richer material for contemplation.

One of the things that makes the maxim so interesting in this context is precisely the fact that Beowulf claims to be coming to Denmark to offer Hrothgar a present of wise words, without specifying any intention of action. This stands somewhat in contrast to what we know about Beowulf, because when first introduced

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<sup>41</sup> Kaske later clarified his explanation of the maxim, stating that Greenfield misunderstood his argument. See R. E. Kaske, "The Coastwarden's Maxim in *Beowulf*: A Clarification," *Notes and Queries* 31 (1984), 16–18. Kaske writes, "The maxim is a gnomic generalization about human conduct, applied by the coastwarden—with, I suspect, a certain wry note of self-correction—to himself" (18).

<sup>42</sup> Greenfield, "Of Words and Deeds: The Coastguard's Maxim Once More," 51.

and deciding to set out on the dangerous journey to aid King Hrothgar, the poet stresses Beowulf's strength of body rather than mind:

se wæs moncynnes      mægenes strengest  
on þæm dæge      þysses lifes,  
æþele ond eacen.      Het him yðlidan  
godne gegyrwan,      cwæð, he guðcýning  
ofer swanrade      secean wolde,  
mærne þeoden,      þa him wæs manna þearf. (*Beowulf*, 196—201)

He was the strongest in might of mankind in the days of this life, noble and great. He commanded a good ship to be made ready for himself; he said that he would seek the war king over the swan's road, the famous prince who was in need of men.

It is quite obvious that Beowulf intends to fight Grendel, so his use of euphemisms with the coast guard could be seen as a form of humility, the young hero not wishing to divulge the exact nature of this "counsel" to anyone before divulging it to the king himself. When Beowulf comes before Hrothgar, he is not at all elusive in his presentation of the *ræd*:

þa me þæt gelærdon      leode mine  
þa selestan,      snotere ceorlas,  
þeoden Hroðgar,      þæt ic þe sohte,  
forþan hie mægenes cræft      minne cuþon,  
selfe ofersawon,      ða ic of searwum cwom,  
fah from feondum,      þær ic fife geband,  
yðde eotena cyn      ond on yðum slog  
niceras nihtes,      nearoþearfe dreah,

wræc Wedera nið      (wean ahsodon),  
 forgrand gramum,      ond nu wið Grendel sceal,  
 wið þam aglæcan,      ana gehegan  
 ðing wið þyrse. (*Beowulf*, 415–26)

Then my people counseled me, the best, wise men, Prince Hrothgar, that I should seek you, because they knew my power of might; they themselves looked on when I came from battle, stained from fiends, where I bound five, destroyed a race of giants, and on the waves slew water monsters at night, suffered severe distress, avenged the affliction of the Weders—they had asked for woes—utterly destroyed the hostile ones; and now with Grendel, with the monster I shall alone have a match with the giant.<sup>43</sup>

By declaring that his actions are prompted by the counsels of wise men, *snotere ceorlas*, Beowulf shifts agency away from himself, emphasizing a quality of tempered obedience. Such obedience is everywhere stressed as a necessary initial step toward becoming not only a great warrior, but also a wise man. Before a hero is allowed to answer questions, he must first be able to ask them and listen to their answers. This sentiment is reflected throughout both the Old English and Old Norse sapiential poems, and the pragmatic effects of such counsel can be seen in heroic narrative.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The phrase *ðing gehegan* is somewhat difficult to translate, as a *ðing* brings up connotations of counsel and legal discussion; but in this context, it is pretty obvious that Beowulf will not have a legal argument with Grendel. Instead, this phrase further exemplifies the notion of Beowulf's military action as his advice. For discussion of this phrase, see E. G. Stanley, "Two Old English Poetic Phrases Insufficiently Understood for Literary Criticism: Þing Gehegan and Senoþ Gehegan," in *Old English Poetry: Essays on Style*, ed. Daniel G. Calder (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 67–90.

<sup>44</sup> These topics are to be covered in chapter 3 of the dissertation.

The *ræd* that Beowulf offers is to take on Grendel himself in single combat. He prefaces the request to do so by stating some of his more impressive credentials as a warrior and slayer of monsters. Yet again, Beowulf shifts agency away from himself by relating the story of his monster slaying from the point of view of the *snotere ceorlas* who counseled him to come to Denmark to fight Grendel. The poet emphasizes words and the necessity of dialogue in the passages preceding the meeting between Beowulf and Hrothgar, but once they begin speaking, the emphasis of their speech is entirely on physical deeds. It would seem, then, that wisdom within the mind cannot be separated from the actions of the body.

*Strength of Heart, Strength of Mind, Strength of Limb –*

The word *mod* in Old English refers to a nebulous concept encompassing heart, mind, spirit, thought, and courage.<sup>45</sup> As a mental faculty, it is the seat of thought, and although it is tempting to locate *mod* in the head with the brain, both *mod* and thought are often explicitly located within the breast:

Hyge sceal gehealden,      hond gewealden,  
 seo sceal in eagan,      snyttro in breostum,  
 þær bið þæs monnes      modgeþoncas. (*Maxims I*, 121–3)

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<sup>45</sup> Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, ed. Toller, Thomas Northcote, (Oxford: The Clarendon press, 1882), 1302. For a list of occurrences of the word *mod* and other words of wisdom in *Beowulf*, see Appendix A. Our understanding of the semantic bounds of words denoting wisdom in Old English is fairly limited. For example, *frod* can mean both “wise” and “old.” Does *frod* then connote the wisdom of experience? At the same time, *wis* comes from Gothic *woida*, etymologically related to the verb “to see.” Is this the wisdom of experience in Old English? How is *wis* different from *frod* if at all? A semantic study of these and other wisdom words in Old English and Old Norse is outside the scope of the present dissertation, but will be the focus of future research.

Thought shall restrain, the hand control, sight shall be in the eyes,  
wisdom in the breast, where man's thoughts of mind are located.

*Maxims I* to my knowledge provides the only explicit location of *mod*, but there is abundant evidence throughout Old English literature to indicate that processes of thought and contemplation were considered to take place within the heart, rather than the head. This notion is true not only within Old English literature, but more generally in much Latin learning of the Middle Ages as well.<sup>46</sup> In *The Book of Memory*, Mary Carruthers discusses the importance of the heart in medieval conceptions of memory:

Aristotle, and the medical tradition in which he wrote, supposed that two organs were involved in the production of memories: the heart, which received all externally-derived impressions, and the brain, to which this information was relayed and where it was stored.... To the brain was attributed sensitivity, motion, and neurological functioning and to the heart warmth and 'vital spirit'... But, even though the physiology of consciousness was known to occur entirely in the brain, the metaphoric use of 'heart' for memory persisted. 'Memory' as

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<sup>46</sup> Hill has noted parallels between this passage from *Maxims I* and Isidore, for example. See Thomas D. Hill, "Notes on the Old English *Maxims I* and *II*," *Notes and Queries* 17 (1970), 445. Exceptions to this view of the heart as a cognitive faculty do exist, such as in the Old English *Adrian and Ritheus* dialogue: "Saga me hwær byð mannes mod. / Ic þe secge, on þam heafde and gæð ut þurh þone muð." James E. Cross and Thomas D. Hill, *The Prose Solomon and Saturn and Adrian and Ritheus* (Toronto: University Press of Toronto, 1982), 38. "Tell me where man's mind is. / I say to you, in the head and it goes out through the mouth." Cross and Hill translate *mod* here as "intellect." This question and answer is a translation of the Latin "Ubi est memoria? In sensu. Ubi est sensus? In cerebro. Cui non datur sensus, non datur et cerebrum," from the *Collectanea Bedae* quoted in *Ibid.*, 147. "Where is memory? In the senses. Where are the senses? In the head, for when the senses are not given anything, the head is also not given anything." Cross and Hill explain that both interpretations of the location of the "mind" were current during the medieval period in which *Adrian and Ritheus* was written, mentioning Ælfric's discussion of the intellect's location in the head within scripture. In Old English literature, however, the location of the *mod* in the breast is far more common than in the head.

‘heart’ was included in the common Latin verb *recordari*, meaning ‘to recollect’ ... The Latin verb evolved into the Italian *ricordarsi*, and clearly influenced the early use in English of ‘heart’ for ‘memory.’”<sup>47</sup>

While the notion of the heart as a mental faculty existed in the Latin tradition, all evidence suggests that this notion was also native to Germanic culture, especially since Germanic words for thought and mind are associated with the heart and the breast. The first chapter of Antonina Harbus’s book *The Life of the Mind in Old English Poetry* deals with the vocabulary used to designate the “mind;” great numbers of words describe the mind in Old English, but the task of defining boundaries to such words is not an easy one, and Harbus highlights the slippage and overlap between many Old English terms.<sup>48</sup> There also appear to be conflicting parallel traditions of interpretation of the mind in Anglo-Saxon England. Malcolm Godden, for instance, distinguishes between a Classical Latinate tradition employed by Alcuin, Alfred, and Ælfric based on Platonic and Augustinian models of the soul and intellect, and a native tradition of the mind as both the cognitive and emotional faculties apparently located in the chest.<sup>49</sup> As warrior culture would have been more closely tied to this latter, native tradition, it has greater significance to the present study, though one must always admit that influence of traditions was constantly crossing in both directions. Nonetheless, the words for mind in Anglo-Saxon poetry seem to agree in one respect: *mod*, *breost*, *heorte*, *hreþer*, and *ferhð* all refer to mental and spiritual actions or faculties that take place within the chest.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 48–49.

<sup>48</sup> Antonina Harbus, *The Life of the Mind in Old English Poetry* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2002), 23–59.

<sup>49</sup> Malcolm Godden, “Anglo-Saxons on the Mind,” in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. R. M. Liuzza (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 284–314.

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of the mind as an enclosed space see Britt Mize, “The Representation of the Mind as an Enclosure in Old English Poetry,” *Anglo-Saxon*

The conception of the breast as the location of experience appears frequently in Old English poetry. The construction *rune gehealden*, for example, is often associated with the breast, and refers to both keeping secrets and providing counsel. Eric Jager has shown that speech in both *Beowulf* and the Old English *Genesis* is an action which takes its source in the breast or chest.<sup>51</sup> Jager describes how the *breost* is where both locutionary and alimentary actions take place in *Genesis*, so the ingestion of the Tempter’s words foreshadows the ingestion of the Apple, both of which taste sweet, but are in reality bitter. Satan’s messenger likewise promises Adam a spaciousness of heart if he eats the Apple:

De weorð on þinum breostum rum,  
wæstm þy wlitegra. (*Genesis*, 519–20)

To you will be spaciousness in your breast, your form more beautiful. The concept of *rum* in the *breost* is reminiscent of a term that occurs elsewhere: *rumheort*. Though the compound *rumheort* is usually glossed as “generous,” it would seem that *rum* in this context has a much wider meaning and may refer to some form of wisdom or perception.<sup>52</sup> It is possible that the OE *rumheort* described a spirit or

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*England* 35 (2006), 57–90. Mize focuses on the implications of the metaphor of the mind as an enclosure that can be tightly shut, but does not digress into discussing the location of that enclosure, although many of the examples used include compounds of *breost-* and *heort-*.

<sup>51</sup> Eric Jager, “Speech and the Chest in Old English Poetry: Orality or Pectorality?” *Speculum* 65 (1990), 845–59, and Eric Jager, “The Word in the ‘Breost’: Interiority and the Fall in *Genesis B*,” *Neophilologus* 75 (1991), 279–90. In another article, Jager writes: “The interior effects of the false teaching thus foreshadow, as a kind of figura, the interior effects of the forbidden fruit. By taking in and assimilating the Tempter’s word, the humans figuratively swallow the apple itself.” Eric Jager, “Tempter as Rhetoric Teacher: The Fall of Language in the Old English *Genesis B*,” *Neophilologus* 72 (1988), 444.

<sup>52</sup> The gloss of “generous” parallels the Latin word “magnanimous,” deriving from *magna* and *anima*, literally “large of spirit.”



state of being more complex than a gloss of generosity would suggest, much in the same way that *caritas* is more complex than our modern “charity.” A definition of “generosity” seems to fit with the term’s use in *Maxims I* line 86, describing the proper conduct for a woman: she must hold secrets and be generous.<sup>53</sup> But even here, the definition need not be limited to generosity. The word *rumheort* only appears three times in Old English poetry outside of *Maxims I*. It is used twice in *Beowulf* (1799 and 2110), both as appellations not clearly connected to any act of generosity, and once in *The Lord’s Prayer II* (63) as an appellation in praise of God, but not necessarily referring specifically to His generosity. If a state of *rum* in the *heort* is one of the most significant qualities a noble woman was expected to possess, then Eve’s desire for such *rum* can be seen not so much as pride, but an eagerness to fulfill her social duties to the best of her ability.<sup>54</sup> The Tempter uses the word *rum* once again when speaking to Eve:

Gif þu þeah minum wilt,  
wif willende,      wordum hyran,  
þu meahst his þonne rume      ræd geþencan.  
Gehyge on þinum breostum      þæt þu inc bam twam meahst  
wite bewarigan,      swa ic þe wisie.  
æt þisses ofetes! (*Genesis*, 559–64)

But if you would, willing wife, obey my words, you might openly [or perhaps wisely] consider his counsel. Think in your breast that you two

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<sup>53</sup> The line is: *rune healdan, rumheort beon*.

<sup>54</sup> Finnegan argues that Eve’s guilt is not pride, but a patristic notion of “vincible ignorance.” See Robert Emmett Finnegan, “Eve and ‘Vincible Ignorance’ in *Genesis B*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 18 (1976), 329–39.

both might protect yourselves from torment as I show you. Eat of this fruit!

The messenger of Satan does not offer Eve an experience of generosity, but of divine perception and wisdom. The word *rum* here is used in connection with the heart or breast to indicate a form of wisdom. When Eve speaks to Adam, she describes her experience in the following terms:

*Gehyran mæg ic rume*

and swa wide geseon      on woruld ealle  
ofer þas sidan gesceaft (*Genesis*, 673–5)

I can hear spaciously and see so widely in all the world over this broad creation.

Once again the word *rum* is used to express an increased awareness and perhaps even intelligence, rather than just generosity. Through the ingestion of the Apple, Eve gains an intense sensation of being able to see far wider and with greater clarity than ever before, an experience of perception grounded in the breast.

It is evident that the faculty of thought and wisdom is placed within the same physical location in the body as the faculty of fortitude and heroic strength. Eve may not be a hero in the conventional sense, but she is nonetheless capable of heroic wisdom through the faculty of the heart. Jane Chance has argued that Eve functions as a peace-weaver, and her good intentions in counseling Adam to eat the apple stem from her social duty to reconcile him with their Lord God, and that her *wacran hige* is a cultivated softness, not a weakness.<sup>55</sup> More recently, Thomas D. Hill has noted the importance to *Genesis B* of woman as counselor in Anglo-Saxon society:

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<sup>55</sup> Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 156.

In Germanic heroic narrative one of the characteristic roles for a woman was to serve as an advisor to her husband, as Wealhtheow does in *Beowulf*... Eve is in a sense fulfilling a quite traditional role in counseling her husband. It is simply that Eve is unlike the traditional Germanic heroine in that the advice she offers happens to be wrong.<sup>56</sup>

Fred Robinson, agreeing with Jane Chance and taking her argument a step further, demonstrates that *wac* is not in fact the root of our modern *weak*, but rather a word denoting softness or infirmity, especially cowardice when paired with the heart.<sup>57</sup> The wisdom of the heart is most immediately expressed through speech, particularly in the giving of counsel. Giving counsel and possessing a kind of physical bravery are two defining features for a warrior; while legendary female figures may demonstrate martial bravery and wisdom, Eve does not demonstrate either since, on account of her *wacran hige*, she both caves to the Tempter's words and gives—albeit unknowingly—bad counsel to Adam. If we accept Robinson's reading, Eve, though perhaps fulfilling social responsibility, is nonetheless doomed to fail on account of her lack of steadfastness in heart. Both the wisdom of counsel and the fortitude of courage are located within the heart. Heart, mind, and heroic daring all thus stem from the same source within the *mod*.

The notion that inner wisdom and outer performance are inextricable can be supported by evidence in many Old English works, including *Beowulf*. Immediately after defeating Grendel, Beowulf, who has at this point only demonstrated his mental fortitude through his skill of fighting, and the wisdom of eloquent speech, receives the

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas D. Hill, "Pilate's Visionary Wife and the Innocence of Eve: An Old Saxon Source for the Old English *Genesis B*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 101 (2002), 183.

<sup>57</sup> Fred C. Robinson, "Eve's 'Weaker' Mind in *Genesis B*, Line 590," in *The Editing of Old English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 124–27.

description *snotor and swyðferhð* (826), wise and strong-minded. Until this point in the narrative, Beowulf's physical strength has been foregrounded. He is twice referred to as the strongest man alive in his day (196 and 789); meeting Grendel head on, force against force, Beowulf proves the stronger of the two. If Beowulf can be primarily characterized by his physical strength, from where does his wisdom come? I would like to suggest that both physical prowess and sagacity stem from the same source, namely the *mod*, physically represented by the heart within the breast, but also carrying the sense of mental faculties.

In his study on fate and fortune in *Beowulf*, Anthony Gilbert suggests an association between mental and physical strength:

The hero in his premature rejoicing at the defeat of Grendel is described as *snotor and swyð-ferhð*, "wise and strong-minded" (l. 826). These are not, at first sight, the qualities we associate with the violent struggle we have just witnessed. But the poet is surely once again concerned with the larger Germanic context of thought. Beowulf is "wise" because he has shown resource and cunning in deception, and by surprising Grendel with a sudden move; equally, he is "strong-minded" because he endures the horror of the wrestling-match, and never relaxes his grip on the monster. His strength of mind is expressed in his physical powers. It is, in effect, a materialist demonstration of the heroic will in action, where by the hero resolves fate into good fortune for himself.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Anthony J. Gilbert, "The Ambiguity of Fate and Narrative Form in some Germanic Poetry," *Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992), 5.

While Gilbert sees Beowulf's physical strength as the "express[ion]" of his strength of mind, John C. Pope sees Beowulf's strength in old age as a result of his will. Pope writes:

Even in his younger days his extraordinary physical strength had been inseparable from the energizing force of an equally extraordinary will. Now, in his old age, it may seem that the will, though slower to assert itself than before, has ultimately surpassed expectation. His astonishing hardihood no longer appears so much a miraculous gift from above as it does a direct product of that indomitable will. It is in helping to produce this impression that, as I believe, Beowulf's old age has been put to its most dramatically significant use.<sup>59</sup>

While I would agree with Gilbert that there is a connection between mental and physical strength, and while I would agree with Pope about the role of Beowulf's willpower in the final fight—as well as about the dramatic function of his old age—I am here suggesting that physical strength is the direct result of mental fortitude and cultivation.

If only the most courageous warriors can possess true physical prowess, and if courage and wisdom are held within the same mental faculty, then it stands to reason that as a warrior cultivates his own courage, he simultaneously cultivates a form of heroic wisdom. In the *flyting* with Unferth, Beowulf wins not because he is able to outwit his opponent, or because he has a larger store of insults or mythological knowledge; rather, his deeds become words, his bravery wisdom. Antonina Harbus describes the contest: "Unferð's failure is one of courage, not of strength, a psychological, not necessarily a physical, deficiency. Beowulf has perceptively

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<sup>59</sup> John C. Pope, "Beowulf's Old Age," in *Philological Essays: Studies in Old and Middle English Language and Literature in Honour of Herbert Dean Meritt*, ed. James L. Rosier (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 64.

noticed and boldly stated that Unferð's mental fortitude is less than he pretends it is. Similarly, Unferð lacks the mental power to beat Beowulf at this game."<sup>60</sup> Because mental and physical fortitude are inextricably linked to the faculty of the *mod*, Beowulf's heroic feats fighting sea monsters during the swimming match with Breca add to his heroic experience and translate into wisdom. Through the expression of words, his deeds and his experience manifest as an authoritative mental power, to which Unferð can only respond with humbled silence.

This connection between physical feats, mental fortitude, and wisdom is evident not only in *Beowulf*, but also in the representation of personal military prowess in other Old English—and indeed Old Norse—poems, as well as other sources relating to the conception, location, and identification of the mind. The importance of the heart and *mod* in the cultivation of physical strength can be easily seen by drawing analogies to an event of Old Norse mythology: the narrative concerning Thor's battle with Hrungnir in *Snorra Edda*. To assist the giant Hrungnir, the other giants make a massive creature out of clay, but when they go looking for a heart to give it life, the only heart big enough they can find belongs to a mare. Despite the clay giant's massive physical size and apparently proportional strength, he fails in a most ignominious manner to perform any sort of defense in battle:

Þá gerðu jötnar mann á Grjóttúnagörðum af leiri, ok var hann níu rasta hár en þriggja breiðr undir hönd, en ekki fengu þeir hjarta svá mikit at honum sómði fyrr en þeir tóku ór meri nökkvorri, ok varð honum þat eigi stöðugt þá er Þórr kom. Hrungnir átti hjarta þat, er frægt er, af hörðum steini ok tindótt með þrim hornum svá sem síðan er gert var ristubragð þat er Hrungnishjarta heitir. Af steini var ok höfuð hans. ...  
Á aðra hlið honum stóð leirjötunninn, er nefndr er Mökkurkálfi, ok var

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<sup>60</sup> Harbus, *The Life of the Mind in Old English Poetry*, 173.

hann allhræddr. Svá er sagt, at hann meig er hann sá Þór...En Þjálfi vá at Mökkurkálfa, ok fell hann við lítinn orðstír.<sup>61</sup>

Then the giants made a man of clay in Grjottunagord, and he was nine leagues high, and three broad under the arms, but they couldn't get a heart big enough that it would fit him until they took one out of a certain mare, and that was not so steady in him when Thor came. Hrungrir had a heart that is famous, from hard stone and spiked with three horns, just as is afterwards made into a runic symbol that is called Hrungrir's Heart. His head was also of stone...On the other side of him stood the clay giant, who is called Mökkurkálfi, and he was completely terrified. It is said, that he wet himself when he saw Thor...But Thjálfi attacked Mökkurkálfi, and he fell with little fame.

The giant's size does not matter—it is quickly defeated simply because it does not possess the courage that is necessarily the wellspring of all heroic strength.

Surprisingly, the *Beowulf* poet never discusses Beowulf's size; the strength of his hand is mentioned several times, and the coast guard identifies him amongst his troop instantly as the leader, but nowhere is Beowulf's height or physical build discussed.

In the Old Norse *Völsunga saga*—the subject of the next chapter—the narrator describes Sigurðr's physical size, which appears grossly out of proportion, but the text nonetheless stresses the importance of the heart and wisdom over sheer physical strength. Sigurðr himself tells Reginn after having slain Fáfnir:

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<sup>61</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research: University College London, 1998), 21–22. As another example in Old Norse literature of the significance of the heart to heroism, Thorgeir's heart is cut out at the end of book XVII of *Fostbræðra saga*; it is said to be small and hard. A large heart was said to hold a lot of blood, which in turn made its owner fearful.

Sigurðr svarar: “Þá er menn koma til vígs, þá er manni betra gott hjarta en hvasst sverð.” (*Völsunga saga*, XIX)<sup>62</sup>

Sigurðr answers: “When men come to battle, then a good heart is better for a man than a sharp sword.”

A strong heart translates into a strong mind, both of which serve a warrior more substantially in battle than do physical strength or equipment. In *Völsunga saga* the heart receives much other attention as the seat of both wisdom and courage. Once Sigurðr has killed the dragon, a single taste of the heart’s blood gives him the ability to understand the speech of birds. The meat of the heart seems to be able to provide simultaneously increased wisdom and perspicacity as well as bravery or mental fortitude. Later in the narrative, Sigurðr shares some of the heart with his wife:

Sigurðr gaf Guðrúnu at eta af Fáfnis hjarta, ok síðan var hún miklu grimvari en áðr ok vitrari. (*Völsunga saga*, XXVI)

Sigurðr gave Guðrún some of Fáfnir’s heart to eat, and afterwards she was much grimmer than before, and wiser.

The quality of grimness often refers to a kind of cruelty, but here appears to be more positively meant, perhaps a form of determination or resoluteness of will. Later on, however, she does demonstrate the cruelty to murder her own children. At the same time, Guðrún becomes explicitly wiser. She will use both her wisdom and her

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<sup>62</sup> All quotations from *Völsunga saga* are taken from Guðni Jónsson’s normalized edition in *Fornaldar Sögur Norourlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Islendingasagnautgafan, 1959). This is the most accessible edition. For detailed textual issues, I have consulted Kaaren Grimstad’s diplomatic edition. See Kaaren Grimstad, *Völsunga Saga: The Saga of the Volsungs; the Icelandic Text According to MS Nks 1824 b, 4o* (Saarbrücken, Germany: AQ Verlag, 2000). Though chapter divisions do not match up exactly between editions, I have indicated Guðni Jónsson’s chapter numbers to facilitate easier cross-referencing between editions.



strength of will power later in the saga when she herself dons a mail coat and fights alongside her brothers. Like Sigurðr's consumption of the Ale of Forgetfulness, Guðrún's consumption of dragon heart functions as a justification or explanation of future action. And in that final battle in which Guðrún participates, the heart again appears as an expression of physical as well as mental power when Högni is captured. Atli at first pretends to cut out Högni's heart, but in fact cuts out the heart of Hjallti, which is said to tremble greatly when presented to Gunnar. So Atli sends his men back to cut the heart out of Högni's breast in one of the more memorably heroic passages of the saga:

Nú gengu þeir eptir eggjun Atla konungs at Högna ok skáru ór honum hjartat. Ok svá var mikill þróttir hans, at hann hló, meðan hann beið þessa kvöl, ok allir undruðust þrek hans, ok þat er síðan at minnum haft. Þeir sýndu Gunnari hjarta Högna.

Hann svarar: "Hér má sjá hjarta Högna ins frækna ok er ólíkt hjarta Hjalla ins blauða, því at nú hrærist lítt, en miðr, meðan í brjósti honum lá."<sup>63</sup> (*Völsunga saga*, XXXVII)

Now they went to Högni in accordance with the egging of king Atli, and cut out his heart. And his strength was so great that he laughed while he endured this torment, and all wondered at his courage, and that has afterwards been remembered. They showed Gunnar the heart of Högni.

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<sup>63</sup> On the Eddic tradition of tales concerning Atli, See Wilhelm Berger, *Die altnordische Attilasage: mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der beiden Atlilieder der Edda Sæmundina*, (Koložsvár: Sumptibus editoris actorum comparationis litterarum univrsarum, 1886), 3–35.

He answers: “Here may be seen the heart of Högni the brave,  
and it is unlike the heart of Hjalli the cowardly because it now stirs  
little, but less when it lay in his breast.”

The stillness and strength of the heart express the heroism and power of a warrior. It is here, in the stillness of the heart, that the warrior engages in contemplation and reflection. The way in which the heart governs both wisdom and prowess indicates the inseparability between these two qualities in heroic tradition.<sup>64</sup> When we think of the theme of *sapientia et fortitudo*, the two qualities are usually considered separately, such that the warrior would have to cultivate them one at a time. But it seems that these two qualities belong together within the Old English and Old Norse tradition as a kind of heroic characteristic which no word in our vocabulary can adequately encompass. A significant connection between *sapientia et fortitudo* lies in the hero’s relationship with fate, and it is to this relationship that I would like to now turn the discussion.

*Fate –*

Fate obviously plays an important role in *Beowulf*, and much scholarly attention has been devoted to explicating and defining the significance of Beowulf’s

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<sup>64</sup> Concerning the above passage, Katharina Philipowski writes, “Tapferkeit manifestiert sich also nicht in den Taten oder in Sieg oder Niederlage, sondern in der Größe des Herzens. Hier wird bereits deutlich, dass das Herz auf unentwirrbare Weise beides ist: Poetische Metapher für das innerste Wesen einer Figur und gleichzeitig Teil ihres sterblichen Körpers, der mit ihm vergeht.” Katharina Philipowski, “Bild und Begriff: Sêle und Herz in geistlichen und höfischen Dialoggedichten des Mittelalters,” in *Anima und Sêle: Darstellungen und Systematisierungen von Seele im Mittelalter*, eds. Katharina Philipowski and Anne Prior (Berlin, Germany: Schmidt, 2006), 303. “Therefore bravery manifests itself not in the deeds or in victory or defeat, but in the size of the heart. Here it becomes entirely clear that the heart, in an inseparable manner, is both the poetic metaphor for the innermost being of a figure, and simultaneously part of their mortal body that goes with it.”

own fate. In his article on the cursing of the dragon's gold in the poem, William Cooke begins with a brief survey of the many and varied arguments concerning the fate of the Geatish hero.<sup>65</sup> The issue is, of course, complicated by the poem's ambiguously religious or secular presentation, and Beowulf's own depiction as a potentially pre-Christian or Christian warrior.<sup>66</sup> I will be able to contribute little to the discussion of fate as it relates to Christian and secular Germanic—or possibly even pagan—themes in the Old English poem. I stand largely in agreement with C. Tidmarsh Major, who argues for Anglo-Saxon syncretism, claiming that attempts to separate Christian from pagan or Germanic elements in *Beowulf* is futile and beside the point.<sup>67</sup> The poem, like much Old English literature, portrays a hybrid view of

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<sup>65</sup> William Cooke, "Who Cursed Whom, and When? The Cursing of the Hoard and Beowulf's Fate," *Medium Ævum* 76 (2007), 207.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas D. Hill has argued that *wyrd* in Old English sometimes has the meaning of "secular history." Citing fate's apparent malevolent nature in *Solomon and Saturn II* as well as Ælfric's strange term *wyrdwriteras*, Hill argues that a universal gloss of *wyrd* as "fate," or "chance" is inaccurate. *Wyrd* as associated with the fall of man and the angels is not just fate; Hill writes: "Had Adam and Eve resisted the temptation of the serpent and remained in Eden, there would have been no *wyrd*; *wyrd* is thus history as men and women who are alienated from God by sin experience it, and while one can at least argue for a kind of secular progressive teleology of history in the modern world, it is easy to see how a philosopher of history in the early medieval world could define *wyrd* in the profoundly negative terms which we see in the passage from *Solomon and Saturn II*. There is no single term which I can think of which conveys this sense of *wyrd* but something like 'secular history' or 'event without meaning' would convey the concept for which I am grasping." Thomas D. Hill, "Wyrd and History in Old English Sapiential Poetry" Kalamazoo, International Congress on Medieval Studies, 2005.

<sup>67</sup> C. Tidmarsh Major, "A Christian Wyrd: Syncretism in *Beowulf*," *English Language Notes* 32, no. 3 (1995), 1–10. "The pagan Anglo-Saxons readily accepted Christian teachings, but they did not completely discard their old beliefs in the process. The advent of this new religion was therefore not so much a conversion as a synthesis. The surviving Old English heroic poetry, in particular *Beowulf*, provides literary evidence for this melding of traditions. Hence, my research has convinced me that Anglo-Saxonists have asked the wrong questions about syncretism in *Beowulf*; they have tended to judge it by the standards of modern Christianity. Ultimately, to separate the pagan and Christian elements of *Beowulf* is as irrelevant as it is impossible. The Christianity of the *Beowulf*-poet is not at all the Christianity of the

religion that is fully formed into something new and cohesive.<sup>68</sup> I am therefore not interested in defining the exact nature of concepts that are fundamentally indefinable, such as fate and God. Since it seems that no strict definition bounded these concepts semantically in Anglo-Saxon times, it is difficult to limit meaning by strict definition; instead, we can get a good sense of what is meant by these concepts in context. I am primarily interested in and concerned with Beowulf's relationship to his own fate, how the poem portrays this relationship, and the effects it has in characterizing the hero.

When facing difficult encounters, Beowulf places his trust in two things: his own strength, and God. Despite the fact that he is the strongest man of his day, he is ever mindful of the fact that he may die in battle, and will eventually die at some point. Before his fight with Grendel, Beowulf speaks to his band of retainers about the upcoming battle, and ends his speech with a truism about the power of God to dispense victory to whomever he pleases:

ac wit on niht sculon  
secge ofersittan,      gif he gesecean dea  
wig ofer wæpen,      ond siþðan witig god  
on swa hwæþere hond,      halig dryhten,  
mærdō deme,      swa him gemet þince.<sup>69</sup> (*Beowulf*, 683–7)

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20th century. Therefore, the poem reveals both 'pagan' and 'Christian' beliefs that were not incompatible in the mind of its author. *Beowulf* is indeed a post-conversion poem, but its inherent Germanic elements are not incompatible with its Christian orientation" (2–3).

<sup>68</sup> Thomas D. Hill discusses the sympathy of the *Beowulf*-poet for his pagan ancestors. Hill notes their treatment is not unlike that of pre-Christian patriarchs. See Thomas D. Hill, "The Christian Language and Theme of *Beowulf*" in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. Henk Aertsen and Rolf H. Bremmer Jr. (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), 67.

<sup>69</sup> For a discussion of the sentential lines in *Beowulf* concerning fate, see Susan E. Deskis, *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1996), chapter 4. Deskis categorizes such sententia thematically, noting their importance to the characterization of figures in the poem.

We shall forgo the sword at night if he dare seek war without weapon,  
and afterwards wise God, the holy Lord will deem glory on whichever  
side seems fitting to him.

Beowulf knows his place. He is aware of his own physical strength and prowess, and knows he must use his fighting ability to help rid the Danes of their torment, but he also knows that all he can do is fight: winning is a different matter. Victory is something that neither he nor his strength can control at all, but is entirely dependent on a higher power. In this particular instance, that higher power is defined as God; elsewhere is referred to as fate, *wyrd*, though God and fate seem to be conflated in many instances in the poem.<sup>70</sup>

Even after defeating Grendel, the monster no one else could face, Beowulf does not seem entirely pleased with his success, and emphasizes his shortcomings when describing the battle to Hrothgar. He relates how he could not hold Grendel, and had to let fiend escape:

Uþe ic swiþor

þæt ðu hine selfne      geseon moste,  
feond on frætewum      fylwerigne.  
Ic hine hrædlice      heardan clammum  
on wælbedde      wriþan þohte,  
þæt he for mundgripe      minum scolde  
licgean lifbysig,      butan his lic swice.  
Ic hine ne mihte,      þa metod nolde,

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She writes of Beowulf, “His heroic status is the same before both battles, right down to the point of including a proverb on fate” (73).

<sup>70</sup> This is not unlike the description of Fortuna as a divine agent of God in Canto 7 of Dante’s *Inferno*. See also below, note 77.

ganges getwæman,      no ic him þæs georne ætfealh,  
feorhgeniðlan;      wæs to foremihtig  
feond on feþe. (*Beowulf*, 960–70)

I greatly desired that you might see him for yourself, the dead fiend in  
adornments! I thought to bind him quickly with hard grasps on the  
slaughter bed so that he should lie struggling for life against my hand  
grip, but his body escaped; I might not, since the Lord did not wish it,  
keep him from going, though I might hold him firmly enough, that life  
enemy: the fiend was too powerful in his flight.

Though we as an audience tend to look at Beowulf as an indomitable hero, he himself  
appears aware of his own limitations. Beowulf attributes his inability in part to God's  
will, the same force to which he attributes his victory, though also describes Grendel's  
flight as the result of his own inferior strength: *wæs to foremihtig / feond on feþe*. This  
is perhaps some of the greatest wisdom Beowulf shows: knowing the limitations and  
boundaries of his own capability and strength, and not attempting to surpass those  
boundaries.

Beowulf appears perhaps even more conscious of danger when he sets out to  
fight Grendel's mother. Though clearly an accomplished swimmer, and comfortable  
in watery abodes, Beowulf must fight Grendel's mother in foreign, less comfortable,  
and less familiar settings than the mead hall. Grendel's mother has, so to speak, the  
home-field advantage, and there appear to be numerous other dangerous creatures in  
the mere that could potentially inflict injury or cause harm. After Hrothgar tells  
Beowulf what has happened to Æschere, who the culprit was, and where she lives,  
Beowulf accepts the challenge to fight this second monster:

Beowulf mæpelode,      bearn Ecgþeowes:

“Ne sorga, snotor guma; selre bið æghwæm  
 þæt he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne.  
 Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan  
 worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote  
 domes ær deaþe; þæt bið drihtguman  
 unlifgendum æfter selest.  
 Aris, rices weard, uton raþe feran  
 Grendles magan gang sceawigan.  
 Ic hit þe gehate, no he on helm losað,  
 ne on foldan fæþm, ne on fyrgeholt,  
 ne on gyfenes grund, ga þær he wille.  
 Ðys dogor þu geþyld hafa  
 weana gehwylces, swa ic þe wene to.” (*Beowulf*, 1383–96)

Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow, “Do not sorrow, wise man! It is better for every man that he avenge his friend than mourn a great deal. Each of us shall expect an end to worldly life; let him who may accomplish glory before death: that is afterwards best for a departed warrior. Arise, Guardian of the kingdom, so we may quickly go out, go looking for Grendel’s kinsman. I promise you this: he cannot hide in cover, nor on the earth’s bosom, nor in a mountain wood, nor in the oceans deep, go where he will! Have patience this day with each of woes as I expect you to.”

This speech of Beowulf’s is not simply his acceptance speech for another fight, but also important counsel for the old king. Beowulf begins with an imperative, telling Hrothgar not to mourn and calling him a “wise man” (*snotor guma*). The “wise man”

is contrasted with the *ne sorga* immediately preceding it. In his speech, Beowulf moves from sorrow to wisdom, then offers the amelioration: *selre bið*.... Sorrow and wisdom do not seem to belong together. Beowulf then follows this up with a maxim. The maxim in this context allows Beowulf to provide a socially constructed and accepted form of counsel without overstepping his bounds as a thane, issuing too many imperatives to the king, or criticizing Hrothgar for his grief. It furthermore shows Beowulf's own understanding of the temporality of worldly life, and in particular, how every warrior lives always in the presence of death.<sup>71</sup>

Beowulf accepts the responsibility of fighting Grendel's mother without any thought or care for his own life. His motivations for fighting Grendel's mother are somewhat different from those that brought him to Denmark in the first place. Having already slain Grendel, Beowulf has performed his filial duty to repay his father's debt, so his decision to take on Grendel's mother must come from either genuine feeling for Hrothgar, his own desire to uphold his reputation, or some combination of both of these motivating factors. In any case, Beowulf heads out to the mere and prepares for the fight without regard for his life or death:

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<sup>71</sup> This theme is, of course, not limited to the context of Old English heroic poetry; rather it is one to be found in heroic literature from around the world and throughout the ages, from Virgil's *Aeneid*, to the classical Japanese treatise on the way of the warrior *Hagakue*. Virgil's *stat sua cuique dies* expresses a remarkably similar sentiment that conveyed by Beowulf's own words (*Aeneid*, X 467). The essential universality among heroic cultures of the theme of life's temporality does not detract from or diminish the theme's unique expression in the context of Old English poetry. Though the underlying concept of mortality may be common, the construction or method used to convey that concept is fundamentally unique to each culture. Deskis shows how many of the sentential lines of *Beowulf* have parallels in the *Aeneid*, but that the *Aeneid* need not be considered a source. See Deskis, *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*, 72–3. Deskis writes, “The sentential themes with which I have dealt in this chapter—the inevitability of fate and death, the desire for lasting fame, the upholding of honor—are not specific to any one cultural or religious tradition. Because they address broad and universal aspects of human existence, it would be difficult to demonstrate specific sources for any of these *Beowulfian sententiae*” (103–4).



Gyrede hine Beowulf  
eorlgewædum, nalles for ealdre mearn. (*Beowulf*, 1441–2)

Beowulf girded himself with his war gear, he cared not at all for his life.

This sentiment is paralleled less than a hundred lines later during the actual fight. The poet provides us with a heroic maxim:

Swa sceal man don,  
þonne he æt guðe gegan þenceð  
longsumne lof, na ymb his lif cearað.  
Gefeng þa be eaxle (nalas for fæhðe mearn)  
Guðgeata leod Grendles modor... (*Beowulf*, 1534–8)

So shall a man do when he thinks to attain long-lasting praise at war; he shouldn't concern himself at all about his life. Then the man of the War-Geats grabbed by the shoulder—he did not care about the hostility—Grendel's mother...

The poet repeats—just so that we are certain—that Beowulf does not care for his own life. This state of willingness to die is later contrasted by Beowulf's own retainers in the fight with the dragon. They are described:

Nealles him on heape handgesteallan,  
æðelinga bearn, ymbe gestodon  
hildecystum, ac hy on holt bugon,  
ealdre burgan. (*Beowulf*, 2596–99)

His companions, the sons of nobles, did not at all stand around him in a troop according to battle virtue, but they made their way to the wood, protected their lives.

Instead of selflessly defending their king and people, they actively seek to preserve their own lives. Only Wiglaf receives praise in the poem for aiding his lord. He does so, however, because the great love he feels for his king eliminates all fear of death in the young hero:

God wat on mec

þæt me is micle leofre      þæt minne lichaman  
mid minne goldgyfan      gled fæðmie.  
Ne þynceð me gerysne      þæt we rondas beren  
eft to earde,<sup>72</sup>      nemne we æror mægen  
fane gefyllan,      feorh ealgian  
Wedra ðeodnes. (*Beowulf*, 2650–6)

God knows of me that I would much prefer that fire embrace my body with my gold giver. It does not seem proper to me that we bear shields back home unless we might first fell the foe, defend the life of the Prince of the Weders.

This is the epitome of what is commonly thought to be the Germanic heroic ethos: willingness and readiness to die for and with one's lord. But readiness for death is essential in any heroic tradition. In *Beowulf*, it represents a form of heroic wisdom, wisdom that defines the poem's main hero.

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<sup>72</sup> A phrase reminiscent of the famous saying of Spartan women, "return with your shield, or on it." For the original, see Plutarch, *Moralia*, ed. Gregorios N. Vernardakes (Lipsiae: B.G. Teubneri, 1888), 241.16, 196.

Beowulf's awareness of his own mortality can be further seen in his speech just before diving into the mere. Knowing that he may die in the encounter with Grendel's mother, he makes provisions for his men and for king Hygelac, giving Hrothgar instructions to treat his men well and send his treasure back home to his own king so his lord may witness and appreciate what Beowulf accomplished before his death:

Beowulf mabelode,      bearn Ecgþeowes:  
“Gefenc nu, se mæra      maga Healfdenes,  
snottra fengel,      nu ic eom siðes fus,  
goldwine gumena,      hwæt wit geo spræcon,  
gif ic æt þearfe      þinre scolde  
aldre linnan,      þæt ðu me a wære  
forðgewitenum      on fæder stæle.  
Wes þu mundbora      minum magoþegnum,  
hondgesellum,      gif mec hild nime;  
swylce þu ða madmas      þe þu me sealdest,  
Hroðgar leofa,      Higelace onsend.  
Mæg þonne on þæm golde ongitan      Geata dryhten,  
geseon sunu Hrædles,      þonne he on þæt sinc starað,  
þæt ic gumcystum      godne funde  
beaga bryttan,      breac þonne moste.  
Ond þu Unferð læt      ealde lafe,  
wrætlíc wægsweord,      widcuðne man  
heardecg habban;      ic me mid Hruntinge  
dom gewyrce,      oþðe mec deað nimeð.” (*Beowulf*, 1473–91)

Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow: “Think now, famous kinsman of Halfdane, wise king, gold friend of men, now that I am ready for the journey, about what we spoke of before, that you ever be to me when I am departed in the place of a father, if I should part from my life in your need. Be a protector for my young retainers, my companions, if battle takes me; likewise, dear Hrothgar, send those treasures which you gave to me to Hygelac. Then the lord of the Geats might look on the gold, the son of Hrethel might see it, when he stares at that treasure that I found a dispenser of rings good in manly virtue, benefitted from him while I might. And let Unferth, the widely known man, have the old heirloom, the beautiful wavy-patterned sword, the hard edge. I will work glory with Hrunting, or death will take me!”

Beowulf describes himself as *sides fus*, a phrase that could refer both to his present journey into the dark and dangerous waters, and also to his journey to the afterlife.<sup>73</sup>

Beowulf is mindful of all his obligations: to his king, to his men, and even to Unferth. In contrast to many heroes in the Old Norse tradition, Beowulf does not know the details of what will happen to him; he must simply resign himself to the abstract power of fate without knowing the shape and form this destiny will take. This sentiment can be seen in Beowulf’s famous maxim about fate that he utters when describing the swimming contest with Breca:

Wyrð oft nereð

unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen deah. (*Beowulf*, 572–3)

Fate often saves an undoomed man if his courage avails him.

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<sup>73</sup> One is reminded of the funeral ship at the beginning of the poem that bears the body of Scyld Scefing. It is described as *utfus* (*Beowulf* 33).

Fate is a great mystery, and one which perhaps can never be fully comprehended. All a hero can do is understand his relationship to fate: he is controlled by and subservient to its power, but nonetheless expected and required to perform according to social custom and duty. The warrior must therefore concentrate not on the outcome of his endeavors, but on his own actions, his own strength, and his own courage. A coward who has not trained to fight cannot possibly win against a formidable opponent. But a warrior who spends his life training both mind and body to withstand the rigors of battle can in fact overcome a bigger or stronger opponent if he keeps his wits about him and remains courageous in the face of apparently insurmountable odds. Therefore, when two great warriors come together in battle, fate will decide the victor, but each warrior must concentrate on being courageous, rather than thinking about the outcome of the conflict. Concern for the outcome limits the hero's concentration on the battle at hand, making victory less likely.

Beowulf's wisdom in accepting fate helps explain why Hrothgar stresses the hero's youth. Though warriors must face death at any moment, those who have seen many winters are perhaps more aware of its reality. Hrothgar's warning against pride in his so-called "sermon" manifests largely as an appeal to be ever mindful of the temporality of worldly life.

þinceð him to lytel      þæt he lange heold,  
gytsað gromhydig,      nallas on gylp seleð  
fædde beagas,      ond he þa forðgesceaft  
forgyteð ond forgymeð,      þæs þe him ær god sealde,  
wuldres waldend,      weorðmynda dæl.  
Hit on endestæf      eft gelimpeð  
þæt se lichoma      læne gedreoseð,  
fæge gefealleð;      fehð oþer to,

se þe unmurnlice      madmas dæleþ,  
 eorles ærgestreon,      egesan ne gymeð.<sup>74</sup>  
 Bebeorh þe ðone bealonið,      Beowulf leofa,  
 secg betsta,      ond þe þæt selre geceos,  
 ece rædas;      oferhyda ne gym,  
 mære cempa.      Nu is þines mægnes blæd  
 ane hwile.      Eft sona bið  
 þæt þec adl oððe ecg      eafopes getwæfeþ,  
 oððe fyres feng,      oððe flodes wylm,  
 oððe gripe meces,      oððe gares fliht,  
 oððe atol ylðo;      oððe eagena bearhtm  
 forsited ond forsworced;      semninga bið  
 þæt ðec, dryhtguma,      deað oferswyðeð. (*Beowulf*, 1748–68)

What he has long held seems too little to him. He covets cruelly, does not give honorably adorned rings, and he forgets and neglects the future and the portion of honors, which God had given him before, the Ruler of glory. But indeed it happens in the end that the temporary body perishes, falls, fated to die; another assumes power who unabashedly deals out treasures, the heirlooms of earls, he has no care for fear. Guard yourself against such wickedness, dear Beowulf, best of men, and choose that better path, the eternal rewards. Do not cultivate

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<sup>74</sup> An example of the topos of the generous heir to a miser: one generation hoards unwisely, the next dispenses. For example, the *Thesaurus Proverbiorum Medii Aevi* lists a Spanish and a Dutch proverb illustrating this motif: “Non sibi divitias, aliis sed quaerit avarus.” Samuel Singer and others, *Thesaurus Proverbiorum Medii Aevi: Lexikon der Sprichwörter des romanisch-germanischen Mittelalters* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1995), Vol. 4, 325.

arrogance, famous fighter. Now the flourishing of your might will be for a while. But it will indeed soon be that illness or the edge cuts you off from your power, or the grip of fire, or the surge of the flood, or the attack of a sword, or the flight of a spear, or wretched old age; or the brightness of the eyes declines and darkens; finally, it will be, warrior, that death overpowers you.

Hrothgar counsels Beowulf against covetousness and pride, but here pride is not the root of other sins—rather, forgetting the temporality of worldly life, forgetting the imminence of one’s own death, ultimately causes all other iniquities. While potentially Christian, the *ece rædas* are not necessarily meant religiously here, and the nuanced language throughout this passage suggests carefully crafted syncretic ambiguity. Regardless, death and the temporality of worldly existence—mere facts of life not attributable to a single tradition—take center stage here as the concepts fundamental to heroic *sapientia* and therefore also fundamental to kingship.

Hrothgar’s sermon is not only an integral part of the narrative of *Beowulf*, but is appropriate to the genre, and to the audience expectations. As a father figure to Beowulf, it is Hrothgar’s duty to give counsel to his son.<sup>75</sup> While the sermon is now generally held to be an integral part of *Beowulf*—rather than an anomalous digression or even interpolation—I would like to suggest that Hrothgar’s counsel to Beowulf is among the most valuable of the treasures that Beowulf receives from Hrothgar.<sup>76</sup> This treasure lasts with the young warrior through to his old age, unlike the gold and other

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<sup>75</sup> See, for example, the Old English *Precepts* in George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Exeter Book* (London: Routledge, 1936), 382. For a discussion of *Precepts*, see chapter 3.

<sup>76</sup> Kaske notes the importance of *sapientia* as a treasure in “*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*,” 448.

gifts which he dispenses to his own retainers, and brings back to Hygelac and his queen.

In the fights against Grendel and Grendel's mother, Beowulf certainly shows an awareness of his mortality, but he is also aware of his own strength, and the possibility that he might actually survive each flight. One could argue that Beowulf's true fortitude is shown only in his final battle with the dragon. When the dragon's hoard is disturbed, and the foul creature begins ravaging the land, Beowulf appears to know that this will be his final foray:

Him wæs geomor sefa,  
wæfre ond wælfus,      wyrd ungemete neah,  
se ðone gomelan      gretan sceolde,  
secean sawle hord,      sundur gedælan  
lif wið lice,      no þon lange wæs  
feorh æþelinges      flæsce bewunden. (*Beowulf*, 2419–24)

He was sad of mind, restless and eager for slaughter, exceedingly close to fate, which should meet the old man, seek the hoard of the soul, separate asunder the life from the body. Nor was the life of the prince much longer encased in flesh.

Beowulf has reached the end of his days, and death draws ever nearer, but nonetheless the old hero continues to think only of his people. He knows that he is the only one strong enough to actually combat the dragon, and he does so both for the protection of his own reputation, and for the protection of his kingdom. Unfortunately for Beowulf, however, he appears to be in a lose-lose situation. If he does not fight the dragon, it will continue to ravage the land; but by fighting the dragon, he marches to his death, leaving his people leaderless.



In his final speech before advancing into battle, Beowulf recounts a lifetime of heroic deeds. But just as in his speeches before fighting Grendel and before fighting Grendel's mother, Beowulf acknowledges his own powerlessness to control the outcome of events:

“Nelle ic beorges weard  
forfleon fotes trem,      ac unc furður sceal  
weorðan æt wealle,      swa unc wyrd geteoð,  
metod manna gehwæs...

Ic mid elne sceall  
gold gegangan,      oððe guð nimeð,  
feorhbealu frecne,      frean eowerne!” (*Beowulf*, 2524–38)<sup>77</sup>

I will not retreat from the guardian of the Barrow one foot's step, but it shall be for us at the wall just as fate allots us, the Ruler of every man. I shall obtain gold with courage, or battle, deadly evil, will take your brave lord!

As in the other fights, Beowulf puts his trust in God and in his own strength. But it is partly this strength that ends up undoing the hero, for because of his great power, the sword he wields breaks at the critical moment:

Scyld wel gebearg  
life ond lice      læssan hwile  
mærum þeodne      þonne his myne sohte,  
ðær he ðy fyrste,      forman dogore  
wealdan moste      swa him wyrd ne gescraf

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<sup>77</sup> In this passage, *metod* appears to function in apposition to *wyrd*, indicating an ambiguous or non-existent distinction between the two concepts.

hreð æt hilde. Hond up abræd  
 Geata dryhten, gryrefahne sloh  
 incgelafe, þæt sio ecg gewac  
 brun on bane, bat unswiðor  
 þonne his ðiodcyning þearfe hæfde,  
 bysigum gebæded. fia wæs beorges weard  
 æfter heaðuswenge on hreoum mode,  
 wearp wælfyre; wide sprungon  
 hildeleoman. Hreðsigora ne gealp  
 goldwine Geata; guðbill geswac,  
 nacod æt niðe, swa hyt no sceolde,  
 iren ærgod. Ne wæs þæt eðe sið,  
 þæt se mæra maga Ecgðeowes  
 grundwong þone ofgyfan wolde;  
 sceolde ofer willan wic eardian  
 elles hwergen, swa sceal æghwylc mon  
 alætan lændagas. (*Beowulf*, 2570–91)

The shield well protected the life and body for the famous prince less time than his desire sought after, where he for the first time in his days might control himself in such a way that fate did not decree glory for him in battle. The lord of the Geats drew up his hand, angrily struck with the blade so that the edge gave way, bright in slaying, bit weakly when its people-king had need, enduring hardships. Then the guardian of the barrow was in a fierce mood after the battle-swing, he threw slaughter-fire; light of battle sprang wide. The lord of the Geats did not

boast of glorious victories. His war sword failed, naked in his need, as it should not, the iron that was good before. That was not an easy journey: that the famous kinsman of Ecgtheow would have to give up the earth; he would have to take up a dwelling place somewhere else against his will, as each man shall give up his loaned days.

The poet attributes the breaking of the sword in part to Beowulf's great strength, noting later that he had broken several swords before, but in the failure of the weapon at this critical moment we can see the workings of fate. The breaking of the sword recalls the death of Sigmundr in *Völsunga saga*, when the aged king mysteriously meets Óðinn on the battlefield, and the god breaks his sword so that he can be felled by other enemies.<sup>78</sup>

Tekst þar nú hörð orrosta, ok þótt Sigmundr væri gamall, þá barðist hann nú hart ok var jafnan fremstr sinna manna...Ok er orrosta hafði staðit um hríð, þá kom maðr í bardagann með síðan hött ok heklu blá. Hann hafði eitt auga ok geir í hendi. Þessi maðr kom á mót Sigmundi konungi ok brá upp geirinum fyrir hann. Ok er Sigmundr konungr hjó fast, kom sverðit í geirinn ok brast í sundr í tvá hluti.

Síðan sneri mannfallinu, ok váru Sigmundi konungi horfin heill, ok fell mjök liðit fyrir honum. Konungrinn hlífði sér ekki ok eggjar

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<sup>78</sup> It is also reminiscent of the legend of Offa, son of Wærmund (or Uffe, son of Wermund), who is so big he splits every shirt of mail and so strong he breaks every sword he tries until his father can lead him to the buried sword named *screp*. The story is preserved at the end of Book IV in Saxo Grammaticus. See Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: Danmarkshistorien*, eds. Karsten Friis-Jensen and Peter Zeeberg, Vol. 1 (København: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, 2005), Book IV.

mjög liðit. Nú er sem mælt, at eigi má við margnum. (*Völsunga saga*, XI)

They now began hard battle, and although Sigmundr was old, he fought hard then and was even the foremost of his men...and when the battle had gone on some time, then a man came into the battle with a wide hat and a blue hooded cloak. He had one eye and a spear in hand. This man came against king Sigmundr and raised up the spear before him. And when Sigmundr struck hard, the sword met the spear and broke asunder in two parts.

Afterwards the slaughter turned, and king Sigmundr's luck had disappeared, and the great army fell before him. The king did not shelter himself and greatly urged the army on. Now it is as is said, that no one can prevail against many.

*Beowulf* assigns no deity explicit responsibility for the failure of Beowulf's weapon; nonetheless, his death in the final battle appears to be ascribable only to fate, rather than to any weakness on the part of the hero. As John C. Pope writes, "We must be made to feel that, although he needs Wiglaf's assistance in killing the dragon, and even so must lose his life, it is not primarily because he no longer has the strength of his youth, but because the dragon is the most powerful of all his adversaries."<sup>79</sup> Pope earlier writes about Beowulf, "From his own point of view his death is anything but tragic."<sup>80</sup> Beowulf resigned himself to the inevitability of his own death early in life before the poem even begins, and maintains that resignation through to his old age. No matter how strong Beowulf may be, even in his youth he is still mortal, and

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<sup>79</sup> Pope, *Beowulf's Old Age*, 56.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

although it is easy for us in the audience to forget his mortality on account of his prodigious strength and ability to slay monsters, Beowulf himself remains ever mindful of the fact that he will at some point die.

If we were to distinguish the specific components that make up wisdom as characterized in *Beowulf* we might get something like this: proficiency in dialogue, be it formal and socially dictated (as with the coastguard, or in greeting Hrothgar), competitive (as in Beowulf's *flyting* with Unferð), or advisory (both the giving and reception of counsel); knowledge of proverbial lore; and finally, an awareness of one's own mortality and resignation to fate. Wisdom is defined not so much by one's knowledge of lore as by one's understanding of life and death, an understanding cultivated through an active reflection and meditation on the immanence of death. This understanding is achieved and maintained within the faculty of the heart rather than the head.

In reading the remnants of Germanic heroic literature, one develops an appreciation for the importance wisdom plays in characterizing the heroic ethos. However syncretic sapiential literature in Old English may be, and whatever evidence there may be of Christian Latin learning in secular and heroic texts, the fact remains that wisdom was not the monopoly of the monasteries. Rather, as King Alfred tells us, the kings of old possessed their own form of wisdom. It may not have involved studying the foundational texts of Christian Latin learning, but it appears to have been no less developed. It seems to have comprised a combination of conduct, ethic, and, most importantly, detachment from life. Since age and direct experience of the Anglo-Saxon heroic world seemed to be the primary requirements for obtaining this wisdom, it may never be possible for us to fully understand the true sapience of the heroic tradition. But in the maxims and gnomes and abstractions preserved in the songs they left behind, we may find markers that point us in the direction of that heroic wisdom.

CHAPTER 2

*Völsunga saga* tells the story of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, a migration-period hero involved in adventures of battle and love who eventually falls at the treacherous hands of his brothers-in-law, the kings of the house of Burgundy. The key events of the saga belong to a long tradition, but the qualifications and evaluations of those events—and the figures involved therein—are adapted and altered by the saga author. At the very least, qualities and actions evaluated in this saga by either other characters or the narrator serve to portray and articulate ethical issues the author wanted to explore or the audience might have found dramatically intriguing. This chapter examines the nature of *sapientia* in *Völsunga saga*, and the way the saga foregrounds Sigurðr's acquisition of wisdom, assigning it even greater importance than his feats of strength and courage. This wisdom, as in *Beowulf*, largely takes the form of complete surrender to fate.

*Völsunga saga* has long been regarded as a compilation of sorts, the bulk of its material deriving from Eddic poetry, and whatever other tales were circulating at the time concerning the deeds of Sigurðr and his family.<sup>81</sup> While scholars in the second half of the twentieth century have argued for the saga's unity, its composite nature cannot be denied, and is in fact a feature that lends the text versatility.<sup>82</sup> Though

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<sup>81</sup> There are several reasons for this estimation. The apparent adaption of Eddic sources with numerous resulting inconsistencies in the plot (e.g., the conflation of Sigrdrifa and Brynhildr and Sigurðr's two meetings with Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga*)—as well as the prosimetric style that incorporates Eddic verses—makes *Völsunga saga* seem more like a compilation by an antiquarian than a composition. Such inconsistencies contribute to the sense that the saga is perhaps a not wholly successful attempt to unify existing traditions

<sup>82</sup> See Manuel Aguirre, "Narrative Composition in the *Saga of the Volsungs*," *Saga-Book* 26 (2002), 5–37, R. G. Finch, "The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Völsunga Saga*," *Saga-Book* 16 (1965), 315–53, and R. G. Finch, "Atlakviða, Atlamál, and *Völsunga Saga*: A Study in Combination and Integration," in *Specvlvm*

considered an epic by many, *Völsunga saga* in fact defies classification as any single genre. Celebration of heroic deeds is mixed with didactic instruction in the form of wisdom dialogues, enriched as well by the proverbial wisdom of the one who is arguably the saga's central figure: Sigurðr.<sup>83</sup> And while the didactic components of the saga could certainly be argued to have narrative impact and significance, it would seem difficult to ignore the importance of their presence as teaching tools, designed to instruct an audience.

The author of the saga no doubt had a wide array of sources at his disposal, and was aware of different traditions of the story. While I do not discount arguments for the saga's inherent unity and careful craftsmanship, the fabric of the saga still shows obvious seams of combination and compilation.<sup>84</sup> We might think of

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*Norroenvm: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), 123–38. Aguire argues that the apparent inconsistencies are a conscious part of the saga's style, notably that redundancies are really a manner of what he describes as “over-telling,” a sort of structural repetition for emphasis. Finch is primarily concerned with the saga author's use of poetic sources from the Edda, showing that the saga author consciously removed or altered poetic language to effect a saga style that was more prosaic. He deduces that the compiler of *Völsunga saga* sought to eliminate as much poetic diction from the sources as possible to create a completely new work in prose. Finch concludes: “Throughout this study the term ‘compiler’ has been used. Should it not perhaps yield to ‘author’?” Finch, “The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Völsunga Saga*,” 353.

<sup>83</sup> Though the text is known as *Völsunga saga*, the *Saga of the Volsungs*, one might regard it in the tradition of Icelandic family sagas as a sort of *Sigurðssaga fáfnisbana*, a dynastic tale primarily concerned with the life of that dynasty's most prominent figure.

<sup>84</sup> The inconsistencies sometimes make the narrative's and characters' progress difficult to track. For example, Sigurðr is just a boy when he kills Fáfnir, but this does not match with his heroic description in the battle with Lyngvi that immediately precedes the dragon fight; similarly, Brynhildr is presented as a stoic and wise warrior when we first see her, then as a noble lady performing feminine tasks, such as weaving the tapestry, and finally as an emotional and manipulative figure out for revenge. These inconsistencies are not so startling that they should be classified as “errors,” but they are enough to give the reader pause. One could argue that they are precisely what lends the text a significant portion of its appeal: they force the reader to stop and

approaching the saga with a kind of “loose reading.” Formulaic utterances and conventional narrative techniques need not accurately reflect the narrative in order to have the desired effect. Apparent inconsistencies may therefore be used intentionally to create a reaction or response in the audience. The real consistency of the saga lies not in the action, but in the values esteemed in the presentation of leading characters. Several characters are inscrutably complex in their depiction in the saga; Sigurðr himself is simultaneously the greatest and noblest warrior to ever walk the earth and a man guilty of treachery and deceit. Despite his deception of Brynhildr, Sigurðr remains praised as the noblest man alive, even by Brynhildr herself.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, while we cannot necessarily reconcile all actions and all subplots in the saga, there is a certain consistency in characterization.

One of the most striking features of *Völsunga saga* is in fact the relative lack of sword swinging and head splitting that occurs within the central segment concerning Sigurðr. The tale of Sigurðr’s ancestors contains more of the typical violence we might associate with a heroic legend, and Guðrún’s revenge is far from bloodless. Sigurðr’s exploits, on the other hand, have to do with much more than just fighting. Guðni Jónsson’s edition of *Völsunga saga* is divided into 42 chapters.<sup>86</sup> Sigurðr is born in chapter 13, and in chapters 17 and 18 respectively, he avenges his father by killing king Lyngvi and then slays the dragon Fáfnir. After chapter 18, however, we

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consider carefully not just what has happened, but also the motivations and reasons behind such action. In a work in which characters can change shapes and turn into wolves, such transformations in Brynhildr should not be seen as particularly drastic or out of place; instead one may trace her portrayal through a kind of pattern of devolution, from warrior to suicidal maniac.

<sup>85</sup> Somewhat like Gawain in *Gawain and the Green Knight*.

<sup>86</sup> Kaaren Grimstad’s edition—as well as Jesse Byock’s popular translation—divides the saga into 44 chapters. See Grimstad, *Völsunga Saga: The Saga of the Volsungs*, and Jesse L. Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*, trans. Jesse L. Byock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Chapter numbers cited in this dissertation are those of Jónsson’s edition.



do not see Sigurðr draw blood until he avenges his own death by cutting Guttormr in half with the sword Gram in chapter 30. It is also not until after his main feats of strength that we receive the description of his size in chapter 22. The warlike nature of Sigurðr's character is therefore established early in his portion of the narrative, and does not require expansion through accounts of greater feats of courage. Indeed, the description of the battle in which Sigurðr avenges his father shows the young man as fearless and indomitable. More battle passages could scarcely add to this image of physical power:

Ok er orrostan hefir svá staðit mjök langa hrið, sækir Sigurðr fram um merkin ok hefir í hendi sverðit Gram. Hann höggr bæði menn ok hesta ok gengr í gegnum fylkingar ok hefir báðar hendr blóðgar til axlar, ok stökk undan fólk, þar sem hann fór, ok helzt hvárki við hjálmr né brynja, ok engi maðr þóttist fyrr sét hafa þvílíkan mann. (*Völsunga saga*, XVII)

When the battle had gone on thus for a very long time, Sigurðr attacks past the standards and has in his hand the sword Gram. He hews both men and horses and goes through the opponents, so that he has both his arms bloody to the shoulder, and people fled from him wherever he went, and neither helmet nor mail coat withstood him, and no one thought he had ever seen such a man before.

Though this passage is relatively short, it fulfills its purpose of establishing Sigurðr as the dominant warrior of his day. The use of active verbs enhances the battle prowess ascribed to Sigurðr, contrasting strongly with the initial description of battle immediately preceding the depiction of Sigurðr:

Mátti þar á lopti sjá margt spjót ok örvar margar, öxi hart reidda, skjöldu klofna ok brynjur slitnar, hjálma skýfða, hausa klofna ok margan mann steypast til jarðar. (*Völsunga saga*, XVII)

There in the air could be seen many spears and many arrows, axes were swung hard, shields cloven and mail coats slit, helmets were split, heads cloven and many a man fell to the earth.

The description is cast entirely in the impersonal with past participles dependent on implied forms of *vera*; no agent is given for the otherwise powerful actions of war presented here. This serves to enhance Sigurðr's agency in the battle both generally and specifically in his fight with Lyngvi and Hjorvarðr. The text presents an almost cinematic sweep over the battlefield, giving the impression of a vast, tumultuous, and bloody conflict, then narrowing to focus on the exploits and feats of the single character of Sigurðr, whose heroic fortitude outstrips that of all those around him.

In order for the young man to assume truly grand proportions, however, the easy defeat of human opponents seems insufficient: he must overcome a supernaturally strong obstacle to be considered the single greatest man of his day. In this case, that obstacle is the dragon Fáfnir, whom Sigurðr's foster father and tutor, Reginn, urges him to kill after Sigurðr has avenged his father. Sigurðr's ancestors, despite their association with gods and the supernatural—such as their use of the wolf skins and Signy's shape-shifting—only fight human enemies. His victory over the dragon distinguishes Sigurðr from his ancestors, and becomes the defining feature in both his name (Sigurðr *Fáfnisbani*) and his physical appearance:

Hans skjöldr var margfaldr ok laugaðr í rauðu gulli ok skrifaðr á einn dreki. Hann var dökkbrúnaðr it efra, en fagrrauðr it neðra, ok þann veg var markaðr hans hjálmr ok söðull ok vápnrokkr. Han hafði

gullbrynjuna, ok öll hans vápn váru gulli búin. Ok því var dreki  
markaðr á hans vápnum öllum, at er hann er sénn, má vita, hverr þar  
ferr, af öllum þeim, er frétt hafa, at hann drap þann mikla dreka, er  
Væringar kalla Fáfni. (*Völsunga saga*, XXII)

His shield was manifold and bathed in red gold and inscribed with a  
dragon. It was dark brown on top but light red on the bottom, and in  
this way his helmet and saddle and surcoat were marked. He had a  
golden mail coat and all his weapons were adorned with gold. And  
because a dragon was marked on all of his weapons, when he was seen,  
all who had heard that he had killed the great dragon whom the  
Værings call Fáfni would know who traveled there.

Despite the fact that the dragon is the single most important defining feature in  
identifying Sigurðr, *Völsunga saga* itself spends little time describing the actual battle  
for which the hero is so famous.

Given the colorful description of battle in the depiction of Sigurðr's  
vengeance, we might expect to see Sigurðr go head-to-head with the fearsome creature  
Fáfni. But this is not what we get at all. Instead, the saga emphasizes from the start a  
deceptive strategy in overcoming the dragon. Reginn advises Sigurðr:

“Ger gröf eina ok sezt þar í. Ok þá er ormrinn skríðr til vatns,  
legg þá til hjarta honum ok vinn honum svá bana. Þar fyrir fær þú  
mikinn frama.”

Sigurðr mælti: “Hversu mun þá veita, ef ek verð fyrir sveita  
ormsins?”

Reginn svarar: “Eigi má þér ráð ráða, er þú ert við hvatvetna hræddr. Ok ertu ólíkr þínum frændum at hughreysti.” (*Völsunga saga*, XVIII)

“Make a ditch and sit yourself in it. And then, when the serpent crawls to the water, stab him in the heart and thus work his death. You will receive great fame for this.”

Sigurðr spoke: “How will it go, if I get in the way of the dragon’s blood?”

Reginn answers: “No one can give you advice, if you are afraid of everything. And you are unlike your kin in courage.”

While Reginn’s plan is essentially sound, Sigurðr’s foresight, here mocked as cowardice, already shows the hero’s caution, setting the stage for his future wisdom quests.<sup>87</sup> The view Reginn presents of Sigurðr as a timid boy certainly does not match the valiant man just shown victoriously striving against king Lyngvi. In fact, Reginn’s taunts of Sigurðr are the only negative evaluations of him in the entire saga.<sup>88</sup> Even after she has been betrayed and is plotting Sigurðr’s death, Brynhildr still refers to him

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<sup>87</sup> Given Reginn’s later treatment of Sigurðr it may be that he neglects to come up with a plan to protect Sigurðr from the dragon’s blood precisely because he actually wants Sigurðr to be harmed or killed. The fact that Sigurðr, like his half brother Sinfjotli, can tolerate poison externally, makes it seem that Sigurðr would come to harm from the dragon’s blood if he were to drown in it, rather than the blood itself causing harm if it were to come in contact with Sigurðr’s body in a way that Grendel’s mother’s blood has a corrosive effect on the giant’s blade. In a similar manner, Beowulf appears able to avoid the poisonous blood of Grendel’s mother that melts the giant sword.

<sup>88</sup> Elizabeth Ashman Rowe has examined Sigurðr’s portrayal in other versions of the story—including in art—and has found that with a few exceptions, Sigurðr was regarded as an exemplary figure in medieval Iceland. See Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, “Quid Sigvardus Cum Christo? Moral Interpretations of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani in Old Norse Literature,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* (2006), 167–200.

as the best of all men (*Þú berr af öllum mönnum*) and does not denigrate him despite his ill-treatment of her.<sup>89</sup> When Reginn taunts Sigurðr the first time about fighting Fáfnir, Sigurðr does not reply boastfully or appear to get angry in any way. Rather, he admits his potential inferiority to his ancestors:

“Vera má, at eigi höfum vér mikit af þeira kappi eða snilld, en eigi berr nauðsyn til at frýja oss, er vér erum enn lítt af barnsaldri. Eða hví eggjar þú þessa svá mjök?” (*Völsunga saga*, XIII)

“It may be that we do not have much of their bravery and skill, but you do not need to taunt us, when we are yet little past childhood. But why do you urge this so much?”

Sigurðr remains levelheaded and modestly counters Reginn’s charge of cowardice, and also sees beyond the insult, realizing that there must be some impetus for Reginn to taunt him in this manner. When they ride out to fight Fáfnir and Reginn again mocks Sigurðr for not having the courage of his ancestors, Sigurðr does not reply; instead, he goes off to fight Fáfnir while Reginn goes and hides in fear. Sigurðr’s actions speak louder than words in countering the unjustified accusation of cowardice.<sup>90</sup>

When Sigurðr begins to execute Reginn’s plan to kill Fáfnir, Óðinn comes and advises Sigurðr to dig several ditches into which the blood can flow. Sigurðr, who so recently appeared as the active agent of destruction, assumes a strangely passive role in the battle against Fáfnir, taking direction from Reginn, then Óðinn. This passivity

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<sup>89</sup> Whatever personal grievances she has in regards to Sigurðr, she recognizes his public prominence and significance as the greatest warrior to live north of the Alps.

<sup>90</sup> One could argue that Reginn fulfills a more traditionally female role here, certainly not because of his cowardice, but because of his use of taunts and insults to goad someone else into taking revenge for him. Such action results in an unflattering depiction of the smith, later mirrored by Gunnar’s goading of Guttormr to kill Sigurðr.

does not give an impression of weakness—the hero has already established himself as preternaturally strong—but rather a form of caution and respect for the wisdom of age. He is physically capable of overcoming the dragon, but at this point he lacks the experience and mental acuity to apply his strength in the most effective manner. He is perceptive enough to know that there will be a problem with the dragon’s blood running into the pit and drowning (or perhaps poisoning) him, but he cannot figure out a solution on his own. For this he needs the advice of others. No one later recounts that he was only able to perform the deed with the help of Óðinn—he is simply known as the slayer of Fáfnir.

Despite the build up to the dragon fight, the confrontation itself is anything but climactic. The entire “battle” with the dragon consists of a single blow and lasts only a few lines:

Ok er ormrinn skreið yfir gröfina, þá leggr Sigurðr sverðinu undir bægslit vinstra, svá at við hjöltum nam. Þá hleypr Sigurðr upp ór gröfinni ok kippir at sér sverðinu ok hefir allar hendr blóðgar upp til axlar. Ok er inn mikli ormr kenndi síns banasárs, þá laust hann höfðinu ok sporðinum, svá at allt brast í sundr, er fyrir varð. (*Völsunga saga*, XVIII)

And when the serpent crawled over the ditch, then Sigurðr plunges the sword up under the left shoulder, so that it went in to the hilt. Then Sigurðr leaps up out of the ditch, and draws the sword toward himself, and has his arms all bloody to the shoulders. And when the great worm knew it was his mortal wound, he thrashed his head and tail, so that everything broke asunder that lay before him.

As in the battle against king Lyngvi, Sigurðr *hefir allar hendr blóðgar upp til axlar* (has his arms all bloody up to the shoulders). But this repetition—which instantly reminds us of Sigurðr’s prowess in the previous chapter—is necessary to convince us that the slaying of Fáfnir is a feat of martial strength and valor. Though dispatched quickly, the dragon appears a more formidable an opponent than Sigurðr’s human adversaries. This version of the battle emphasizes overcoming strength through cunning and strategy. It seems that Sigurðr needs nothing more than his tremendous strength to overcome human adversaries, and like other legendary heroes wants either a clean fight, or a fight in which the odds are stacked against him. Victory in such circumstances only increases the warrior’s honor.<sup>91</sup> But the fight with Fáfnir demonstrates that Sigurðr does not rely on brute strength alone, and understands the importance of applying force in a calculated manner. The narrative emphasis begins to move here from external to internal strength, and the story moves quickly along to the wisdom dialogue between Sigurðr and Fáfnir.<sup>92</sup> This point in the saga marks a significant narrative shift away from Sigurðr’s warlike objectives to his pursuit of greater wisdom, a pursuit whose seeds can be seen even in the first descriptions of Sigurðr as a young boy. This active quest for wisdom is best evidenced by five main episodes in the narrative, the three most important of which occur after Sigurðr’s battle with Fáfnir. I would like to now examine these episodes one by one.

#### 1. *Sigurðr Chooses a Horse:*

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<sup>91</sup> For example, Roland fights for such honor in the *Chanson de Roland*, and Siegfried constantly seeks more and more difficult opponents and challenges to increase his reputation.

<sup>92</sup> The discussion between Reginn and Sigurðr concerning how to go about killing the dragon, the advice of Oðinn, and the actual slaying of Fáfnir all together only take up about one half the space taken up by the wisdom dialogue between Sigurðr and the dying dragon, highlighting the importance of Sigurðr’s wisdom to the text.

Even before performing any heroic feat, Sigurðr demonstrates his eagerness to learn from those older and wiser than he. When he goes to choose a horse in chapter 13, Óðinn appears to him in disguise. This is the fourth of seven times Óðinn appears in the saga (not including the episode in which he helps Rerir, which he does presumably from Ásgarðr), and the only time he is specifically identified.<sup>93</sup> Sigurðr asks the old man for advice: *Hest skyldum vér kjósa. Ráð um með oss* (We must choose a horse. Advise us about this). This willingness to seek advice bespeaks a wisdom far beyond his years, especially if he is just a boy when he avenges his father, as Brynhildr mentions, and when he kills Fáfnir as is explicitly stated in *Fáfnismál*.<sup>94</sup> The test for the horses is simple enough, and one that ensures a courageous horse for a great warrior. Grani is descended from Sleipnir, an ancestry that mirrors Sigurðr's own descent from Óðinn, his great, great, great grandfather.

## 2. Sigurðr Learns his Fate from his Uncle Grípir:

Not long after he receives counsel from Óðinn in choosing a horse, and just after the sword Gram has been re-forged, Sigurðr goes to his maternal uncle Grípir to

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<sup>93</sup> Óðinn appears in order to give the sword to Sigmundur, to ferry Sinfjotli to Valhöll, to take Sigmundur's life, to aid Sigurðr in choosing a horse, just before the battle with Lyngvi, to give advice to Sigurðr about how to dig the ditches to kill Fáfnir, and finally at the end of the saga to give advice about how to kill the sons of Guðrún. For a brief discussion of these appearances, see Jess H. Jackson, "Óðinn's Meetings with Sigmundur and Sigurðr in the *Volsungasaga*," *Modern Language Notes* 43, (1928), 307–08.

<sup>94</sup> Brynhildr tells Guðrún "ok veit ek einn mjök af þeim bera, en þat er Sigurðr, sonr Sigmundar konungs. Hann var þá barn, er hann drap sonu Hundings konungs ok hefndi föður síns ok Eylima, móðurföður síns." (*Völsunga saga*, XXV) "And I know of one who greatly surpasses them, and that is Sigurðr, the son of King Sigmundur. He was then a boy when he killed the sons of King Hunding and avenged his father and Eylimi, his mother's father." *Fafnismál* opens with Fáfnir's exclamation "Sveinn ok sveinn, / hverjum ertu svein of borinn?" (*Fafnismál*, 1) "A boy, a boy, of whom were you, boy, born?" Text from Gustav Neckel, *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1927), 176–84.



have his fortune told, in Chapter 16, the shortest chapter in the saga. Though unwilling, Grípir relents *ok sagði þó loksins við ákafliga bæn Sigurðar öll forlög hans, eptir því sem eptir gekk síðan* (And according to Sigurðr’s vehement request he nonetheless finally said all his fate, according to how it later came to pass). The episode in the saga is much abridged when compared to the Eddic *Grípisspá*. While *Grípisspá* could easily be a late composition in fact based on *Völsunga saga* itself, we cannot be entirely certain as to the order of composition.

*Grípisspá* is generally considered a late composition, but provides an interesting perspective on *Völsunga saga*.<sup>95</sup> If the poem was known to the audience of the saga, readers or listeners would know that Sigurðr has to ask Grípir several times to tell the complete story of his future:

“Mann veit ek engi fyr mold ofan,  
þann er fleira sé fram en þú, Grípir!  
Skalattu leyna, þótt liót síe  
eða mein gøriz á mínom hag!” (*Grípisspá*, 22)

“Vilkat ek reiði ríks þjóðkonungs,  
góðráðs, at heldr, Grípis, þiggia!  
Nú vilk víst vita, þótt viltki sé,  
hvat á sýnt Sigurðr sér fyr höndvm?” (*Grípisspá*, 26)<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> See Richard L. Harris, “A Study of *Grípisspá*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 43 (1971), 344–55. Medieval Icelanders, however, probably only had a loose chronology of when certain texts were composed; after a generation, it may have been forgot whether *Grípisspá* was written before or after the other Eddic poems concerning Sigurðr. That medieval Icelanders had some conception of the chronology of Eddic texts is evidenced by such titles as *Hamðismál in forna*, but it is difficult to say how accurate a knowledge of textual history was current at the time.

<sup>96</sup> Text from Neckel, *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, 160–68.

“I know of no man on earth who might be more prophetic than you, Grípir; you must not hide it, though it be ugly, or if harm will affect my condition.”

“I do not want the wrath of the powerful king, I’d rather accept the good advice of Grípir; now I will know with certainty, though it be undesirable, what Sigurðr may expect before him.”

The poet creates drama through Grípir’s refusal to tell Sigurðr his future. The exchange thereby takes on a character similar to those poems in which gods must ride into another world to request wisdom from otherworldly figures, as in *Völuspá* and *Baldr’s Dreams*. It soon becomes clear to Sigurðr that much pain and misery lie ahead in his fortune, but the young hero insists on knowing his fate in its entirety. The traditional view of *Grípisspá* is that it provides a summary or context for the other Eddic poems concerning Sigurðr, so Sigurðr’s insistence is necessary to propel the narrative of the poem; nonetheless, this insistence contributes to the depiction of his character.

One of the other striking features of *Grípisspá* is Sigurðr’s reaction to his own future actions. In the saga, the author praises Sigurðr on several occasions, and never criticizes him for his role in the deception of Brynhildr. But in the Eddic poem Sigurðr appears horrified by the future deception, like an actor horrified by the role he is about to play:

“Hvárt er þá, Grípir—get þv þess fyr mer—  
sér þú geðleysi i grams skapi,  
er ek skal við mey þá málom slíta,  
er ek allz hugar unna þóttomk?” (*Grípisspá*, 32)

“Verst hyggiom þvi: vándr munk heitinn  
Sigurðr með seggiom at sógöro!  
Vilda ek eigi vélom beita  
iöfra brúði, er ek æzta veitk.” (*Grípisspá*, 40)

“What is this, Grípir? Speak about this for me: do you see inconstancy in the warrior’s condition, that I shall cut apart the oaths to that maiden whom I thought to love with all my heart?”

“It seems the worst to me that I, Sigurðr, will be considered horrible among men, to my sorrow; I do not want to deceitfully mistreat the noble bride whom I know to be the best.”

Since the poem is exclusively dialogue, there is no authorial mediation to qualify Sigurðr’s actions; instead, they are qualified by Grípir himself, who prophesies that blame for Sigurðr’s actions—especially his deceptions and oath breaking—will fall on queen Grímhildr and her treacherous mead:

“Þú verðr, siklingr, fyr svikom annars,  
mundo Grímhildar gialda ráða;  
mun bióða þer biarthaddat man,  
dóttur sína, dregr hon vél at gram.” (*Grípisspá*, 33)

“You will be, king, subjected to the treachery of another, you will pay for Grímhildr’s plots. She will offer you the bright-haired maiden, her daughter. She will deceive the king.”

The irony is that Grípir's prophecy comes true in a literary sense in *Völsunga saga*; Sigurðr bemoans that men will revile him in the future, but these men are in a sense represented by the author and audience of the saga—living several generations after the saga's conclusion—and the saga author, at least, does not revile him at all. Instead, the saga emphasizes Grípir's excuse for Sigurðr, stressing that Grímhildr causes the greatest treachery. Although *Grípisspá* shows Sigurðr to be more reflective than he seems to be in the saga, the hero's anguish appears primarily based on the fact that he will commit a horrible deception against and break his oath to a noble lady, rather than that any physical torment lies ahead. He does not fear bodily pain or death, but rather the shame of his own inappropriate action. Mental anguish is more frightening to him than physical pain. This is consistent with the characterization when Sigurðr says to Brynhildr upon swearing his first oath of marriage:

“Þá frjóumst vér mest, ef vér búum saman, ok meira er at þola þann harm, er hér liggr á, en hvöss vápn.” (*Völsunga saga*, XXIV)

“We would prosper from that most if we live together, and the pain of not doing so would be harder to endure than a sharp weapon.”<sup>97</sup>

*Grípisspá* and *Völsunga saga* present Sigurðr, the man who knows no fear, as possessing inner feeling, even if seemingly callous to the outside world. Sigurðr is sensitive to love and to the pain of his own shame, making him surprisingly human despite his strength. But as a great hero, Sigurðr does not allow emotion to govern his actions.

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<sup>97</sup> The strange thing is, of course, that Sigurðr leaves Brynhildr almost immediately. It is almost as if they can only be together in a metaphorical sense, and that Sigurðr's status as the greatest warrior ever means that he has to go on wandering in search of greater glory.

The most striking thing about *Grípisspá* is Sigurðr's dissatisfaction with his fate. His burning desire to know his own future seems only increased when Grípir refuses to tell any further:

“Verst hyggiom því, verðr at skiliaz  
Sigurðr við fylki at sógöro;  
leið visa þú —lagt er alt fyrir —  
mærr, mér, ef þú vilt, móðurbróðir!” (*Grípisspá*, 24)

“This is the worst I can think of, Sigurðr parting from the king in sorrow; show me the path— it's all set down before—chieftain, if you will, maternal uncle!”

Sigurðr demonstrates his heroism here by demanding to know all his future, regardless of whether it be pleasurable or painful. His reactions, however, indicate he is far from pleased with the course his life will take. Here Sigurðr shows how human he is—a trait easily overlooked in a saga where the character explicitly takes on superhuman proportions. One might assume that a warrior would gladly accept such a fate as Sigurðr's, knowing that he would eventually become the most renowned hero north of the Alps; but nowhere in the poem does Sigurðr console himself with the thought of his future glory. Instead, he is concerned by the inevitable tumult that lies ahead. The poem closes with the following stanza:

“Skiliomk heilir! Munat sköpom vinna!  
Nú hefir þú, Grípir, vel gört, sem ec beiddak!  
Fliótt myndir þú friðri segia  
mína ævi, ef þú mættir þat!” (*Grípisspá*, 53)

“We part, farewell! No one can contend with fate. Now you have accomplished well, Grípir, what I requested. You would have quickly told me of a more peaceful life for me if you could have.”

As in the saga, Sigurðr comforts himself here with his proverbial knowledge concerning fate. I mentioned earlier the similarity between *Grípisspá* and other poems in which gods ride into an other world to seek knowledge about the future. This final stanza, however, separates *Grípisspá* and the character of Sigurðr from those other examples. In contrast to the gods who bind Fenrir and obtain oaths from all things not to harm Baldr, Sigurðr does not even consider attempting to change the course of his life or the events he has been told will play out. Instead, he demonstrates the stoic acceptance of fate required of a great hero.<sup>98</sup>

### 3. *Sigurðr's Dialogue with the Dying Dragon:*

Once Sigurðr has stabbed Fáfnir with his death wound, the dragon is still able to hold an extended and cogent discussion with the young hero. Sigurðr, who is the younger and less experienced partner in dialogue, demonstrates his knowledge of proverbial wisdom several times throughout the passage:

“fár er gamall harðr, ef hann er í bernsku blautr.”

“Hverr vill fé hafa allt til ins eina dags, en eitt sinn skal hverr deyja.”

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<sup>98</sup> The difference in characterization between Sigurðr here and the gods in similar circumstances could be accounted for by the simple explanation that Sigurðr is mortal and not a god. For a more complete discussion of this issue, see chapter 3. In a way, Sigurðr's acceptance is almost too passive. It seems the paradoxical nature of the heroic ethos to accept one's fate, yet struggle against it towards a better end for one's friends and family. *Grípisspá* may function as a summary designed to introduce the other poems concerning Sigurðr in the poetic *Edda*. If that is the case, Sigurðr's lack of ambition to overcome the miseries of his fate may simply function stylistically to emphasize the future events themselves.

“Sá ægishjálmr, er þú sagðir frá, gefr fám sigr, því at hverr sá, er með mörgum kemr, má þat finna eitthvert sinn, at engi er einna hvatastr.”  
(*Völsunga saga*, XVIII)<sup>99</sup>

“Few are hard in old age if he is soft in childhood.”

“Everyone wants to have wealth until that one day, but everyone shall die one time.”

“This helm of terror about which you speak gives few victory, because everyone who comes among many people will find one time that no one is the bravest of all.”

Even though Sigurðr is the one who questions most in the dialogue, he—not Fáfnir—speaks in proverbs. The proverbs reflect the general tenor of the entire narrative, dealing with issues of heroic development and resignation to one’s own fate. I will discuss the significance of fate later in this chapter; let it suffice for now to illustrate the prominence of proverbial knowledge in Sigurðr’s speech. Even after the dialogue with Fáfnir has ended and the dragon has died, Sigurðr has yet more proverbial wisdom to share: *þá er menn koma til vígs, þá er manni betra gott hjarta en hvasst sverð* (When men come to battle, then a good heart is better for a man than a sharp sword). Putting so many proverbs into the mouth of Sigurðr emphasizes his role as a seeker of wisdom, suggesting that this thirst for wisdom distinguishes Sigurðr from his ancestors and makes him the foremost of his line.

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<sup>99</sup> Sigurðr’s gnomic utterance here contradicts his own depiction in the saga as a man characterized by superlatives: the greatest, strongest, etc. Sigurðr knows he is mortal and, like Beowulf, is aware of his own limitations even if those limitations have not been adequately tested. In a strange paradox, this awareness of mortality lends Sigurðr the humility required of someone described by superlatives.

Sigurðr knows a significant number of proverbs, but he does not necessarily use them to best effect in his dialogue with Fáfnir. In contrast to the conventional wisdom dialogue in Old Norse, there is no wager of life, because Fáfnir is already dying. This raises the question of whether or not Sigurðr is actually the victor in the dialogue, or whether Fáfnir is in fact wiser. Sigurðr does not heed the advice of the dying dragon, but his reasons to do so are rooted in proverbial wisdom: *Heim munda ek ríða, þótt ek missta þessa ins mikla fjár, ef ek vissa, at ek skylda aldri deyja, en hverr frækn maðr vill fé ráða allt til ins eina dags* (I would ride home, though I would lose this great wealth, if I knew that I should never die, but every brave man wants to have wealth until that one day). One could argue that Sigurðr’s knowledge of proverbs leads him astray—he would perhaps do better not to take such sayings literally. Judy Quinn argues that Sigurðr’s proverbial responses in *Fáfnismál* are not sufficient to stand up to Fáfnir’s wisdom. She writes:

Gnomic wisdom is conventionally associated with the voice of a wise master, not a young student. Sigurðr’s lack of mastery of gnomic discourse prompts Fáfnir to demonstrate how gnomes work in the mouth of a wise giant.

‘Norna dóm                    þú munt fyr nesiom hafa  
   oc ósvinnz apa;  
 í vatni þú drucnar,            ef í vindi rær:  
   alt er feigs forað.’

What is more, Fáfnir uses the diction of gnomic advice to insult Sigurðr again—only a fool would mock such forebodings. Fáfnir has won this round.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Judy Quinn, “Verse Form and Voice in Eddic Poems: The Discourses of *Fáfnismál*,” *Arkiv for Nordisk Filologi* 107 (1992), 123.



Not only does Sigurðr take his own proverbs too literally, he also appears not to understand the subtle significance of Fáfñir's words, much in the same way Parzival takes his mother's advice literally until he learns better discernment. There may be a difference here between an intellectual knowledge of proverbial wisdom, and its application on the basis of experience. Fáfñir has experience, and knows that proverbs are not to be applied literally in every situation. Sigurðr is only at the beginning of his quest for wisdom, so his decision to take the gold could be read in different ways. Knowing what happens to him and to other characters in the saga, taking the gold seems a decidedly bad decision. At the same time, however, Sigurðr already knows his whole fate, and knows that taking the gold is part of his future. The curse of the gold further explains his actions. In a sense, Sigurðr's knowledge of his entire fate forms a justification for his behavior—specifically for not heeding the advice of Fáfñir—much in the same way as the Ale of Forgetfulness explains—but does not excuse—his deception of Brynhildr.<sup>101</sup>

Although the saga does not contain authorial criticism of Sigurðr, this is nonetheless one place where we, as an audience, might question the hero's actions.

When Sigurðr refuses to listen to the warning about the gold, Fáfñir says:

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<sup>101</sup> Sigurðr has succumbed to the main affliction of his family line: poison. Although Sigmundr can consume poison with no ill effect, Sinfjotli cannot and ultimately dies from this weakness; Fáfñir endangers Sigurðr by spewing poison, not fire; and finally Sigurðr, though not consuming a mortal potion, cannot guard himself from the poisonous Ale of Forgetfulness. The Ale of Forgetfulness may also be tied in to the tradition of the *poculum mortis*. For a discussion of this tradition in Old English literature, see Carleton Brown, "Poculum Mortis in Old English," *Speculum* 15 (1940), 389–99, Thomas N. Hall, "A Gregorian Model for Eve's Biter Drync in *Guthlac B*," *Review of English Studies: A Quarterly Journal of English Literature and the English Language* 44 (1993), 157–75, and Hugh Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon Appetites: Food and Drink and their Consumption in Old English and Related Literature* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1999), 195. Lionarons notes that "if accepting a drink from a valkyrie is how a warrior joins Odin's warband, it is also—metaphorically—how a warrior dies." Lionarons, "Dísir, Valkyries, Völur, and Norns: The *Weise Frauen* of the *Deutsche Mythologie*," 292.

“Fátt vill þú at mínum dæmum gera, en drukkna muntu, ef þú ferr um sjá óvarliga, ok bíð heldr á landi, unz logn er.” (*Völsunga saga*, XVIII)

“You want to take little from my examples, but you will drown if you travel uncautiously at sea, and rather stay on land until it is calm.”

This seems strange, since Sigurðr’s travels at sea within the saga are already over by this point. If Fáfnir’s words are not meant to be taken literally, then this strange proverb may function not as a literal prophecy, but rather as a general truism meant to be applied to a wide range of situations. Sigurðr does look hotheaded and perhaps even rash in this chapter of the saga—first refusing to give his name, then countering warnings with taunts.<sup>102</sup> Perhaps Fáfnir’s words are just a way of proverbially saying, “calm down and be cautious.” It is impossible to know for sure. There is of course always the chance that Sigurðr suspects treachery in Fáfnir’s words and therefore discounts all prophetic and proverbial counsel, at the same time accepting Fáfnir’s mythological knowledge as accurate. Since he has already received prophecy from Grípir, he should know what portions of Fáfnir’s alleged foresight are accurate and which are false. This dialogue presents one of the more difficult and ambiguous passages in the saga, and Fáfnir’s depiction as a figure of wisdom is especially problematic given his inability to prophesy correctly.

Sigurðr questions Fáfnir about mythological wisdom (*Seg þú þat, Fáfnir, ef þú ert fróðr mjök: Hverjar eru þær nornir, er kjósa mögu frá mæðrum?* [Say, Fáfnir, if you are greatly wise, who are the Norns, who separate sons from mothers?]), which

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<sup>102</sup> The refusal to provide a name makes Sigurðr appear either confidently in control of his own destiny or strategically defensive in a situation he knows is dangerous. It is difficult to tell which interpretation of this action is correct, since Sigurðr’s refusal to heed Fáfnir’s advice appears incautious; it may be that some combination of the two interpretations is correct.

the hero accepts, but he rejects Fáfnir's counsel to leave the gold behind. Sigurðr's unwillingness to take Fáfnir's *ráð* is particularly striking given the young hero's active search for counsel both before and after his battle with the dragon. Perhaps he assumes that Fáfnir will repay his treachery with lies.<sup>103</sup> At this point in the saga, Sigurðr may be too young and inexperienced to be considered "wise," but whatever ambiguity remains at the end of the dialogue between Sigurðr and Fáfnir as to whether Sigurðr chooses the appropriate path, there is little doubt of the hero's understanding—at least intellectually if not yet experientially—of mortality and resignation to fate. Such understanding and resignation embody heroic wisdom—and heroism itself—making action secondary to an inward characteristic. Resignation to fate infuses all a hero's actions such that true heroism comes not from action, but from an understanding of heroic principles and ideals.

#### 4. *Sigurðr's First Dialogue with Brynhildr:*

The fourth episode in the saga that foregrounds Sigurðr's thirst for wisdom appears in chapter 21, immediately following the episode in which Sigurðr tastes the heart's blood of Fáfnir. This is the first meeting with Brynhildr, when he wakes her from the sleep with which she has been cursed by Óðinn for killing Hjalmgunnar in battle against the god's wishes. After declaring his lineage, Sigurðr continues *ok þat sama hefir oss sagt verit frá yðrum vænleik ok vitru, ok þat skulu vér reyna*, (And that has also been told us about your beauty and wisdom, and we shall put that to the test). The remainder of chapter 21 and the whole of chapter 22 comprise a wisdom dialogue between the two characters in which Sigurðr questions, and Brynhildr answers. Sigurðr begins the dialogue by commanding *Kenn oss ráð til stórra hluta* (Teach us counsel for mighty things). What follows are 15 stanzas spoken by Brynhildr

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<sup>103</sup> *Hávamál*, verse 42.

concerning the magical powers and properties of runes. Here, wisdom and heroic prowess are intimately connected, not just through the contents of the poem as a whole, but also in individual passages within the verse. Brynhildr says in the second stanza:

“Sigrúnar skaltu kunna,  
ef þú vilt snotr vera.”

“Victory runes shall you know if you want to be wise.” (*Völsunga saga*, XX)

There appears to be no separation between the physical and intellectual refinements of a warrior—indeed, the one seems to stand for the other—though Sigurðr’s incessant quest for wisdom would seem to indicate that knowledge and learning are more difficult to attain than physical prowess. Sigurðr, as the descendant of Óðinn and the Völsungs, is born with the physical strength and stature required of a great hero, and possesses a certain innate courage; but Sigurðr goes to great lengths to attain more wisdom—not unlike his ancestor, Óðinn, who even sacrifices an eye for a drink of Mimir’s well. Despite his strength, it is largely this search for wisdom that separates Sigurðr from both his ancestors and other warriors, and distinguishes him as the greatest warrior who ever lived north of the Alps. Sapience defines the legendary warrior.

##### 5. *Sigurðr’s Second Dialogue with Brynhildr:*

The next chapter continues the wisdom dialogue between Sigurðr and Brynhildr in prose. Sigurðr says, *kenn enn fleiri spekiráð* (Teach more wise

counsel).<sup>104</sup> Here, again, the dialogue takes the form of a request for instruction rather than a challenge of wisdom. The counsel Brynhildr then gives to Sigurðr is general and proverbial in nature, reminiscent of that found in *Hávamál*. Some of the phrases seem to have little to do with events in the narrative preceding or following this meeting. For example, Brynhildr says, *Ef þú ferr þann veg, er vándar vættir byggja, ver varr um þik. Tak þér ekki herbergi nær götu, þótt þik nátti, því at opt búa þar illar vættir, þær menn villa* (If you travel the road where evil creatures dwell, guard yourself. Do not take shelter near the street, though it darkens, for evil creatures often live there who lead men astray). Many other phrases of advice seem to foreshadow events later in the saga. For example, *Lát eigi tæla þik fagnar konur, þótt þú sjáir at veizlum, svá at þat standi þér fyrir svefni eða þú fáir af því hugarekka* (Do not let beautiful women entice you, though you see them at feasts, so that it stands between you and sleep, or you get a heart-ache from it). It is only a short time in the narrative after Sigurðr and Brynhildr profess their love for each other and promise marriage that Sigurðr is given the Ale of Forgetfulness, and falls in love with Guðrún at the court of king Gjúki. Much of the advice in this passage seems to foreshadow the events that are about to take place, and Brynhildr's own conclusion may indicate that she does so on purpose: *En lítt megu vér sjá fyrir um yðart líf, en eigi skyldi mága hatr á þik koma* (We can only see a little of your life to come, but the hatred of your inlaws should not come upon you). Unfortunately for both Sigurðr and Brynhildr, neither of them can control the hate of Sigurðr's future in-laws.

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<sup>104</sup> In this particular instance the Guðni Jónsson edition fails us. It reads *kenn ek*. Grimstad's normalized version reads *kenn enn* (Grimstad, *Völsunga Saga: The Saga of the Volsungs*, 152). As *kenn* here functions as an imperative, *ek* would have to be the indirect object: teach *me*. But *ek* is nominative. If we take *kenn* not as its form "to teach," but rather as its form "to know," then Jónsson's edition functions grammatically, but does not make sense in the context of the narrative.

Although Brynhildr says that she can see only a little of the hero's future when Sigurðr meets her, she later interprets Guðrún's prophetic dreams accurately. When Guðrún relates the dream about the golden stag, Brynhildr replies with this answer:

“Ek mun ráða sem eptir mun ganga: Til ykkar mun koma Sigurðr, sá er ek kaus mér til manns. Grímhildr gefr honum meinblandinn mjöð, er öllum oss kemr í mikit stríð. Hann muntu eiga ok hann skjótt missa. Þú munt eiga Atla konung. Missa muntu bræðra þinna, ok þá muntu Atla vega.” (*Völsunga saga*, XXIV)

“I will counsel you as it will afterwards happen: to you will come Sigurðr, the one who I chose as a husband for me. Grímhildr gives him mead blended with malice, which will bring us all into great strife. You will marry him and soon lose him. You will marry king Atli. You will lose your brothers, and then you will kill Atli.”

Like Sigurðr, Brynhildr knows her fate long before the events play out. The difference between the two characters, however, lies in their respective attitudes towards death and the inevitable disaster descending upon them, which can be sensed by both the words and deeds of each character. Although we as the audience know that Brynhildr is a fearsome fighter, we never actually see her as a warrior. We only hear about her battle with Hjalmgunnar, and once woken from the sleep by Sigurðr she does not appear to fight again. This is not, however, unlike Sigurðr, whose feats of courage cease shortly after his entrance into the saga. Despite this similarity, Brynhildr does not appear in her depiction in *Völsunga saga* to match Sigurðr in terms of heroism worthy of emulation. She is anything but resigned to her fate.<sup>105</sup> The single

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<sup>105</sup> This could be connected to Brynhildr's ambiguous status as a valkyrie, an agent of the system of fate itself. As part of the mechanism of fate, Brynhildr may possess some of the defiance toward fate that characterizes the actions of the gods. See above,

deed as a warrior we learn about is itself an act of defiance of the gods. In contrast to Rerir, who prays submissively to the gods, Sigmundr, who accepts his fate when Óðinn breaks his sword, or Sigurðr, who actively—though perhaps unwittingly—seeks advice from Óðinn, Brynhildr openly challenges the will of the powerful god. Her slaying of Hjalmgunnar is an act that shows tremendous courage and what may be described as an innate greatness, but one that also shows a lack of the resignation so integral to depictions of other great heroes. Her unwillingness to marry, her entire plot of vengeance, and her grief at Sigurðr’s death are all justified and display Brynhildr as a passionate and powerful figure; but they also show—albeit subtly—a resistance to fate. Ironically, however, the inescapability of fate dictates that even her resistance may be a part of a larger cosmic plan.

In terms of narrative emphasis, Sigurðr expends far more effort in attaining wisdom than he does in building his fame as a warrior. Though he is said to have performed many great deeds, the precise nature of these deeds remains unclear. Instead, the saga focuses on depicting Sigurðr primarily as a figure of wisdom. In addition to the five instances of his active quest for wisdom discussed above, the author foregrounds Sigurðr’s mental faculties in other significant ways. I would like to look now in particular at three of these instances.

#### 1. *Sigurðr Accepts Tutoring from Reginn:*

The author begins the description of Sigurðr’s youth by emphasizing the education he receives:

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note 98. Even her weaving of the tapestry could be seen as connecting Brynhildr to the construction of fate. See Joyce Tally Lionarons, “Dísir, Valkyries, Völur, and Norns: The *Weise Frauen* of the *Deutsche Mythologie*,” in *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm’s Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. Tom Shippey (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 286.

[Reginn] kenndi honum íþróttir, tafl ok rúnar ok tungur margar at mæla, sem þá var títt konungasonum, ok marga hluti aðra. (*Völsunga saga*, XIII)

[Reginn] taught Sigurðr sports, chess, and runes and to speak in many tongues as was then customary for a king's son, and many other things.

This sentence provides one of the few examples of the types of training involved in secular—or at least royal—learning. The skills involved are both mental and physical, once again suggesting the balance between intellectual and bodily abilities required of a good leader. On its own, this sentence does not seem particularly remarkable; but in relation to the wider corpus of Old Norse literature, the description of childhood education in Old Norse society is extremely rare and largely taken for granted.<sup>106</sup>

Here, where the author sets the stage for the greatest hero north of the Alps, the emphasis initially falls on training rather than innate ability. Most heroes in Old Norse literature dominate their opponents because of physical size and strength alone, and the acquisition of special skills related to martial valor does not play a prominent role in most sagas. Although his impossibly large physical stature receives some recognition later in the saga, Sigurðr's education emphasizes the importance of learning in establishing the greatness of this legendary hero.

## 2. *Sigurðr Accepts Counsel from Reginn and Óðinn:*

I have already discussed the significance of the interchange between Reginn, Sigurðr, and Óðinn before the battle with Fáfnir, but this instance of counsel deserves

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<sup>106</sup> The depiction of education and warrior training appears more frequently in related literatures. The Old Irish hero, Cú Chulainn, for example, goes to learn special martial skills from Scathach. Gottfried von Stassborg also give some indication of Tristan's education in music, hunting, and other courtly arts.



brief mention once again here. Reginn advises Sigurðr about how to kill Fáfñir without Sigurðr actually asking for this advice. When the young hero spots a flaw in the plan, however, and does indeed ask for counsel, Reginn refuses him further advice. Instead, an unexpected solution comes from Óðinn. In contrast to the episode in which Sigurðr asks the old man for advice in choosing the horse, here Sigurðr is the passive recipient of counsel without having asked for it. Sigurðr accepts and benefits from the unsolicited aid, showing his willingness to learn.

### 3. *Sigurðr Understands the Speech of Birds:*

When Sigurðr tastes the heart's blood of Fáfñir while roasting it for Reginn he can immediately hear and understand the speech of birds, listening to a dialogue that nuthatches have in some brush nearby. Forms of the word "wise" (*vittr*) occur three times within a few lines; the synonym *horskr* and the two words meaning "wisdom," *speki* and *snjallræði*, also occur in this passage, and there are two references to reception of advice or counsel. The concentration of words of wisdom here is notable. The words *horskr* and *speki* each occur twice in the saga, while forms of *snjall* occur three times. Of the six words describing or denoting wisdom in the saga (*vittr*, *fróðr*, *snjall*-, *horskr*, *speki*, *snotr*) four appear at least once in this exchange. The exceptions are *snotr*, which appears only once in Brynhildr's wisdom poem, and *fróðr* which appears twice independently in relation to Breði and Fáfñir and once in the compound *fróðleik* in relation to the sons of Völsungr. In this scene, Sigurðr would be *vittrari* if he killed Reginn,<sup>107</sup> and he would also be "wise" if he ate the heart of Fáfñir himself.<sup>108</sup> The heart's blood has given him supernatural abilities of wisdom or

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<sup>107</sup> At least within the context of the society in which revenge of blood relations plays a significant role.

<sup>108</sup> Though these terms no doubt carry different shades of meaning—for example, *horskr* (which shows up as "hofkr" in the MS (Grimstad, *Völsunga Saga: The Saga of*

perception, and the actual consumption of the meat could potentially give him even greater strength in his mental and perceptive facilities. This appears to happen not only with Sigurðr, but also with Guðrún when she is given some of the meat: *Sigurðr gaf Guðrúnu at eta af Fáfnis hjarta, ok síðan var hún miklu grimvari en áðr ok vitrari* (Sigurðr gave Guðrún some of Fáfnir's heart to eat, and afterwards she was much grimmer than before, and wiser).<sup>109</sup> Wisdom is not something that only can be gained by words; it can also be alimentary and must be ingested to have its effect on the recipient, a literal representation of “rumination,” or chewing.<sup>110</sup> There are also obvious parallels with the Eucharist, particularly in the drinking of blood. It is unlikely the Christian ritual of the Eucharist was a source for the attainment of wisdom from consumption of food and drink in *Völsunga saga*, but it would likely have been present in the minds of medieval audiences of the saga.

The acquisition of the ability to understand the speech of birds also marks one of the great differences between the Norse and German traditions of the story. In both versions, the dragon's blood gives the hero supernatural ability. Both the ability to understand the speech of birds and the *Hornhaut* minimize the heroes' weaknesses and make them more difficult to defeat. This is particularly obvious in the case of Siegfried, except for the single weak spot in his otherwise impenetrable skin. The gift

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*the Volsungs*, 144)) also carries associations of bravery, and *fróðr* may be related to experience, skill, or age—no distinction is particularly apparent in this passage. The words appear to be synonyms used for variation. For lists of words denoting wisdom in *Völsunga saga*, see Appendix B.

<sup>109</sup> On the collocation of “grimness” and wisdom, see above, pg. 48.

<sup>110</sup> For more on the consumption of liquid and solid “wisdom” see Judy Quinn, “Liquid Knowledge: Traditional Conceptualisations of Learning in Eddic Poetry,” in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and their Implications*, eds. S. Rankovic, L. Melve, and E. Mundal (Utrecht, forthcoming: Utrecht Studies in medieval Literacy). The notion of wisdom, knowledge, and digestion all functioning within the same faculty also appears in Old English. See Jager, *The Word in the 'Breost': Interiority and the Fall in Genesis B*, 279–90.

Sigurðr receives from the dragon's blood, however, is not physical in nature, and does not contribute to his strength and prowess as a fighter; it emphasizes Sigurðr's role as a figure of wisdom, with sources of knowledge far exceeding those normal human beings. The specific ability to understand the speech of birds also connects Sigurðr to his mentor and ancestor, Óðinn, the divine epitome of the wise warrior, whose two ravens bring him news from around the world. This detail of Sigurðr's ability to understand birds, although mentioned later in Chapter 23, seems to disappear from the saga, particularly in the events leading up to Sigurðr's death. In contrast to the *Nibelungenlied*, where Hagen must both figure out the location of Siegfried's weakness and devise a plan to ensure he is weaponless and defenseless, there is no mention in *Völsunga saga* of Gunnar and Hogni having to avoid being overheard by birds while plotting Sigurðr's death. Despite all his strengths, skill as a warrior, and gift of foresight, Sigurðr is always presented as essentially mortal, and his own speech indicates his awareness of this mortality in a way not mirrored in the characterization of his German counterpart.

Sigurðr actively seeks wisdom by questioning Óðinn, Grípir, Fáfnir, and Brynhildr in two dialogues, passively receives instruction from Reginn and Óðinn, and—apparently as reward for bravery—comes to understand the speech of birds. In addition to these events in Sigurðr's youth, the narrator specifically calls Sigurðr “wise” (*hann var vitr maðr*, XXII), stressing the hero's ability with words and in giving counsel. All of these instances—both in terms of Sigurðr's active quest for wisdom and in terms of the narrative emphasis on his mental faculties and acuity—serve to establish wisdom as a characteristic of the central hero just as significant, if not more so, than his physical prowess.

So far I have concentrated on demonstrating this emphasis on wisdom in the saga, but have not defined this wisdom or the process of its acquisition, except insofar

as to say that it has something to do with resignation to fate and death. A complex concept, wisdom evades definition; perhaps the best way to describe it is as a kind of discernment or intuition that results from a combination of learning and experience. If we now examine the components that make up wisdom as presented in *Völsunga saga*, we can arrive at an understanding of the complex web of qualities that comprise this wisdom, and begin working towards an accurate definition specific to the saga and perhaps applicable Old Norse literature in general.

Because the saga presents Sigurðr's life from birth to death we can examine the trajectory of his education and maturation in ways that are impossible for some other saga heroes. Five components emerge as the constituents of wisdom: proverbial and mythological knowledge, the ability to question, the gift of prophecy, the ability to answer, and finally a resignation to fate.

#### 1. *Proverbial and Mythological Knowledge:*

Proverbial and mythological knowledge plays a prominent role in much Old Norse literature. Heroes human and divine must somehow acquire this knowledge. The rare insight *Völsunga saga* provides into childhood education in Old Norse society, particularly royal education, when the text states that Sigurðr's foster father Reginn taught Sigurðr sports, chess, and "rúnar" raises a difficult question concerning runes.<sup>111</sup> Although we cannot be entirely sure what "rúnar" mean, we can be fairly

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<sup>111</sup> Another example of education is *Rígsþula* 35:

Upp óx þar  
Jarl á fletjum,  
lind nam at skelfa,  
leggja strengi,  
alm at beygja,  
örvar skefta,  
fleini at fleygja,  
frökkur dýja,  
hestum ríða,

certain that the term extends beyond the mere Germanic writing system to include some sort of proverbial or even magical knowledge. If the *rúnar* here are anything like the *rúnar* of Brynhildr’s counsel, then the *rúnar* that Reginn teaches Sigurðr are both proverbial and magical. We have already seen how Sigurðr demonstrates his knowledge of proverbs, even reciting proverbial knowledge that echoes *Hávamál*.<sup>112</sup> Proverbs form a context in which to interpret worldly experience and are a necessary building block in developing wisdom. Knowledge of proverbs alone, however, does not make a sage.

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hundum verpa,  
sverðum bregða,  
sund at fremja.

Earl grew up there on the floors, learned to brandish the shield, lay a string,  
bend a bow, make arrowshafts, throw javelins, shake spears, ride horses,  
release dogs, draw swords, to swim.

Earl’s son, *Konr ungr*, or King, like Sigurðr can understand the speech of birds and knows runes. Perhaps the best example of instruction in Old Norse is the so-called *Konungs skuggsjá*, or *Speculum Regale*, a dialogue between father and son in which the son questions the father about the ways of the world and society. It begins with the father telling the son, “En ef þú vilt nema mannvit, þá vil ég sýna þér þann grundvöll, er upphaf er allrar speki, eftir því sem einn höfuðspekingur hefur mælt. Það er upphaf speki að hræðast almatkan Guð. En hann skal þó eigi hræðast svo sem óvin heldur með ástarhræðslu.” *Konungs skuggsjá: Speculum Regale*, 6. “But if you desire to take the wisdom of men, then I will show you the foundation, that is the beginning of all wisdom, according to that which one great wise man has said. That is the beginning of wisdom to fear almighty God. But he shall not be feared as an enemy but with the fear of love.” Here, at the outset of this text—which has numerous Christian sources and influences—we see a version of the notion that wisdom comes from resignation to a higher power. Later in the dialogue, the father tells the son concerning a loss of men, “ger það í hug þér, að hver drýgir I því mannlega náttúru, að hann deyr úr heiminum. Því að engi er till þess skapaður, að jafnan skyli lifa í heiminum” (130). ““Keep this in your thoughts, that everyone carries out a human law of nature when he dies out of this world. Because no one is made such that he shall always live in the world.”

<sup>112</sup> For example: *því at hvern sá, er með mörgum kemr, má þat finna eitthvert sinn, at engi er einna hvastastr* (because everyone who comes among many people will find one time that no one is the bravest of all) is strikingly similar to *Hávamál* verse 64.

In addition to knowing and understanding the wide body of proverbial knowledge clearly prevalent in Old Norse society, the hero—as presented in *Völsunga saga*—was expected to be well-versed in mythology. The term “wisdom dialogue” often simply refers to question and answer dialogues concerning details of Norse mythology, as in *Gylfaginning* and *Vafþrúðnismál*. Sigurðr’s dialogue with Fáfnir contains some such material:

Sigurðr mælti: “Seg þú þat, Fáfnir, ef þú ert fróðr mjök: Hverjar eru þær nornir, er kjósa mögu frá mæðrum?”

Fáfnir svarar: “Margar eru þær ok sundrlausar, sumar eru Ása ættar, sumar eru álfa ættar, sumar eru dætr Dvalins.” (*Völsunga saga*, XVIII)

Sigurðr said: “Say, Fáfnir, if you are greatly wise, who are the Norns, who choose sons from mothers?”

Fáfnir answers: “They are many and varied. Some are of the Æsir’s kin, some are of the elves’ kin, and some are the daughters of Dvalin.”

This mythological information lacks the prophetic value of the advice and magical “runes” Sigurðr receives from Brynhildr. Brynhildr’s advice seems to foreshadow many events later in the saga, but the norns and the island of Óskapt, for example, do not recur. The inclusion of this material seems arbitrary, easily substitutable by other mythological trivia. Judy Quinn has pointed out, however, that the inclusion of the norns relates to the theme of fate in the saga:

Sigurðr is effectively humbled by the dying dragon’s pronouncement, and rather than carrying on with a *senna* he institutes a knowledge trial, where at least he can pose the questions, and possibly expose a blind

spot in the sage's knowledge as Óðinn manages to do in his contest with the giant Vafðrúðnir. Since Fáfnir apparently knows so much about his fate, he may well learn something from him. His questions and Fáfnir's answers are linked thematically to the problematic of the poem—the nature and workings of fate—or the judgment of the norns—in Sigurðr's life. As Kragerud has shown, what appears at first to be a digression, is in fact the development of an idea with the help of a mythological paradigm—here the nature of the norns and the ultimate fate of all the gods.<sup>113</sup>

Sigurðr has already shown a preoccupation with the workings of fate by going off to his uncle Grípir, and here he continues to demonstrate that preoccupation by asking questions concerning the mechanism that determines and executes the fates of men.<sup>114</sup>

Sigurðr is still young and inexperienced, so perhaps feels more comfortable engaging in a dialogue about the concrete details of mythology rather than the abstractions of proverbial wisdom. While the inclusion of these particular details of mythology may partly elude our understanding, it is important here that the young hero engages in a dialogue concerning mythology; the ability to participate in such an exchange appears to be an important credential in establishing the learning of a character, a necessary step along the way to attaining wisdom.

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<sup>113</sup> Quinn, *Verse Form and Voice in Eddic Poems: The Discourses of Fáfnismál*, 123.

<sup>114</sup> The word *kjósa* in Sigurðr's question regarding the norns is used in the compound *val-kjósa*, from which we get the word *valkyrie*. These norns engage in an act of choosing in a manner similar the valkyries: and Brynhildr as a valkyrie chooses not the slain, but the living Sigurðr as her husband as part of the formulation of his fate. The construction *kjósa frá* is odd. Joyce Tally Lionarons writes of it: "The phrase *kjósa mæðr frá mögum* is generally understood to mean that, like the *dísir* of *Sigrdrifumál*, the norns offer help to women in childbirth, although the use of *kjósa frá* is anomalous here and is glossed 'to separate' rather than 'to choose' only in this instance." See Lionarons, "Dísir, Valkyries, Völur, and Norns: The *Weise Frauen* of the *Deutsche Mythologie*," 285.

## 2. *The Ability to Question:*

Mythological knowledge often finds expression in dialogue of some kind. The ability to question constitutes an important component of wisdom. Before one is knowledgeable and experienced enough to begin answering questions, one must learn how to question appropriately. As discussed earlier, this is a common theme in *Hávamál*, and several of the stanzas relate to the importance of appropriate silence and speech. Many times it is beneficial to remain silent, but complete silence prohibits one from gaining the benefits of dialogue or questioning. The ability to question and ask for advice requires an appreciation for one's own limitations of knowledge or experience. Despite his illustrious lineage and clearly privileged upbringing, Sigurðr demonstrates an eagerness to benefit from the experience of his elders. He questions Óðinn about how best to choose a horse, he seeks the prophetic knowledge of his uncle Grípir, and he gets advice from both Reginn and Óðinn about how to kill the dragon Fáfnir. Once Fáfnir is dead, he heeds the advice of the nuthatches, then goes and seeks for yet more wisdom from Brynhildr. Even after establishing himself as a great warrior and king, capable of killing even nonhuman enemies, Sigurðr continues to demonstrate a certain humility by asking for advice.

Sigurðr's requests for advice also demonstrate an active knowledge of many of the proverbs from *Hávamál* dealing with the conduct of young men, particularly in regards to appropriate speech and silence. Take for example these stanzas dealing with speech and silence:

Fróðr sá þykkiz er fregna kann  
og segia it sama.  
eyvito leyna mego ýta sönir



því er gengr um guma.<sup>115</sup> (*Hávamál*, 28)

Fregna og segia skal fróðra hver,

sá er vill heitinn horskr;

einn vita né annar skal,

þióð veit, ef þrír ero. (*Hávamál*, 63)

Inn aldna iötun eg sótta: nú em ek aptr um kominnæ

fátt gat eg þegiandi þar:

mörgom orðom mæltu ek í minn frama

í Suttungs sölum. (*Hávamál*, 104)

Wise he seems who can question, and also speak; the sons of men cannot at all hide what is going on among men.

Question and answer shall each wise man, who wishes to be called brave.<sup>116</sup> One shall know, not another; the whole people knows if three know.

The old giant I visited, now I have come back; I got little from remaining silent there. With many words I spoke to further my position in Suttung's hall.

In *Hávamál*, seemingly contradictory emphasis is placed on the virtue of silence and the virtue of appropriate speech or questioning. These verses quoted above stress the necessity of speech in acquiring and possessing wisdom. Knowing when to speak and

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<sup>115</sup> Text from Gustav Neckel, *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, 16–43.

<sup>116</sup> The word *horskr* can mean both “wise” and “brave.”

when to keep silent, however, appears to be the true wisdom. Elsewhere the poem states:

Þagalt ok hugalt skyldi þjóðans barn  
ok vígdjarft vera;  
glaðr ok reifr skyli gumna hverr,  
unz sinn bíðr bana. (*Hávamál*, 15)

Silent and thoughtful and stout-hearted should a prince's son be; glad and cheerful should every man be until he awaits death.

Wisdom and awareness of death are found together in this stanza. In the few glimpses we have of Sigurðr as a young man, he demonstrates an appropriateness in asking for advice, yet otherwise remains silent and prudent.

### 3. *Prophecy* –

After Sigurðr's last wisdom dialogue with Brynhildr, the hero finally receives the appellation "wise." The saga states:

Hann var vitr maðr, svá at hann vissi fyrir óorðna hluti. Hann skildi fuglsrödd. (*Völsunga saga*, XXII)

He was a wise man, so that he knew about things not yet come to pass.  
He understood the speech of birds.

This raises an interesting point concerning the nature of wisdom, when it seems to be associated with some form of supernatural foreknowledge. Indeed, all the saga's main figures of wisdom are blessed with the gift of foresight. Signy describes this gift as a peculiar attribute of her kin:

“Eigi gerir hugr minn hlæja við honum, ok veit ek af framvísi minni ok af kynfylgju várri, at af þessu ráði stendr oss mikill ófagnaðr, ef eigi er skjótt brugðit þessum ráðahag.” (*Völsunga saga*, IV)

“My thoughts do not laugh with him, and I know from my foresight and from our familial skill that this course of action will be harmful to us if this agreement is not quickly broken.”

Many of the Völsung line do appear to have this prophetic gift. On his deathbed Sigmundr prophesies Sigurðr’s greatness; Grípir foretells Sigurðr’s future, and Sigurðr himself knows events before they happen. The saga’s other main figure of wisdom, Brynhildr, is also able to see into the future, a skill evident both in her dialogue with Sigurðr and in her interpretation of Guðrún’s dream. In *Völsunga saga*, wisdom and foresight appear inseparable. This marks a significant difference between *Völsunga saga* and *Beowulf*; while foresight may be present with *Beowulf* in a limited form, foreknowledge of events is entirely absent. Beowulf lives in an uncertain world, and part of his wisdom concerns his ability to accept this uncertainty. Sigurðr, on the other hand, demonstrates wisdom not only in knowing the future, but also in knowing its inevitability.

#### 4. *The Ability to Answer and Give Counsel:*

Sigurðr spends much of his early life asking for advice and counsel. But at a certain point, he has obtained enough knowledge and experience to begin sharing his own wisdom with others in the form of advice. Although we do not see Sigurðr give counsel as much as we see him ask for it, the saga emphasizes the hero’s ability with words and leadership in discussion:

Hann var langtalaðr ok málsnjallr, svá at ekki tók hann þat erendi at mæla, at hann mundi fyrr hætta en svá sýnist öllum sem enga leið muni eiga at vera nema svá sem hann segir. (*Völsunga saga*, XXII)

He was long-spoken and eloquent, so that he did not speak to a purpose without it seeming to everybody—before he was finished speaking—that there could be no route other than the one he argued.

Perhaps the most interesting component of this quotation is that it evinces Sigurðr's development through the course of the saga. This comes after his wisdom dialogues with Fáfnir and Brynhildr, but before his second meeting with Brynhildr and his arrival at the court of Burgundy. This passage stresses that while he possesses an innate courage and greatness associated with his familial line, many of the qualities that contribute to his reputation as the greatest warrior have been learned or cultivated over time. Sigurðr has progressed from the precocious boy asking questions to the sage warrior capable of deciding and instructing. The saga therefore presents the hero in surprisingly realistic terms: as a man descended from Óðinn who stands approximately 7 feet tall at the waist, Sigurðr must develop and mature as a human being.<sup>117</sup>

The nonhuman character of Fáfnir, however, presents an interesting case of a sapiential figure. Fáfnir is one of two characters in the saga described as *fróðr*, the other being the thrall Breði whom Sigi kills at the beginning of the saga.<sup>118</sup> It is

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<sup>117</sup> *Völsunga saga* tells us in Chapter XXII that Sigurðr's sword was five spans long, and that Sigurðr was so tall that the tip of the sword when hanging from his waist only grazed the top of full-grown rye. A span being a standard measurement of nine inches based on the spread of a man's fingers, this puts Sigurðr at approximately 7–8 feet tall at the waist. Before this description no one—including Brynhildr—seems to notice his grotesque stature. It is mentioned upon his arrival at Heimir's court, but not again.

<sup>118</sup> Though, as mentioned earlier, the sons of Völsung are said to practice *fróðleik*.

difficult to tell whether the saga author consciously decided to describe Fáfnir as “wise” in a manner different to Sigurðr and other characters. Perhaps the author was simply copying the word from the poetic source, as the word does appear in *Fáfnismál* 12. What is interesting about Fáfnir, however, is that while he possesses a large store of mythological knowledge, his ability to prophesy does not appear strong. He foretells correctly that the gold will be the death of Sigurðr and all who possess it, but this he knows from the curse that was put on it in the first place. While dying, he takes comfort in the prophetic “knowledge” that Reginn will avenge his death. While Fáfnir’s brother does plan to kill Sigurðr, Sigurðr heeds the advice of the nuthatches and heads him off, as it were. In contrast to Grípir’s prophecy, which comes to pass exactly as foretold, Fáfnir’s prophecy is not clearly borne out by the events of the saga.

To what end the saga author presents Fáfnir as lacking foresight is not entirely clear. It may be that his advice is not meant to be taken literally, as he himself suggests:

Heiptyrði tekr þú hvetvetna því, er ek mæli. (*Völsunga saga*, XVIII)

Spiteful words you take from everything I say.

Fear of the dying dragon is understandable. Yet Fáfnir is ambiguously helpful in this situation: he rightfully warns Sigurðr about the cursed gold, as well as providing the young hero with answers to his mythological questions. Additionally, his “prophecy” about Reginn is itself a kind of warning later confirmed by the counsel of the nuthatches. Though Sigurðr kills Reginn—preventing the smith from killing him—Reginn has, in effect, already brought about Sigurðr’s death by urging him to kill Fáfnir and take the cursed gold. In a sense, then, Fáfnir’s prophecy does come true. Fáfnir is almost like the *völur*, compelled to answer the questions posed to him,

despite whatever his own desires may be. This association is strengthened by his possession of otherworldly knowledge as he hangs on the threshold of death.

##### 5. *Resignation to Fate:*

Socially constructed knowledge, the ability to question, foresight, and the ability to answer are all components of wisdom. While several of these elements appear common to both *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga*, their expression in each text is significantly different. The final component of wisdom—and the most important—is the hero's complete understanding of his or her own mortality, a component more or less identical in both *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga*. The hero largely finds definition through his or her relationship with death. But it is not just death a hero must face; it's the difficulties of life as well. Sigurðr may possess an innate courage and fearlessness, but this does not mean that he is content with his fate. When he seeks to alter the fate he knows is inevitable by speaking with Brynhildr, we see the hero at his most emotional: after offering to forsake Guðrún for Brynhildr and being refused, he sighs so deeply that he rips his coat of mail:

Út gekk Sigurðr  
andspjalli frá,  
hollvinr lofða  
ok hnipnaði,  
svá at ganga nam  
gunnarfúsum  
sundr of síður  
serkr járnofinn. (*Völsunga saga*, XXIX)

Out goes Sigurðr leaving the conversation, loyal friend of men, and became greatly downcast, so that the iron-woven shirt tore away from the sides of the battle-eager one.

Sigurðr possesses such fundamental greatness that even his sorrow takes on epic proportions. His emotional state resembles the Old English concept of *bolgenmod*, a swelling of the heart. Sigurðr knows his fate already, even if he does not know all the details of how such a fate will be carried out; his conversation with Brynhildr, however, represents the one time where Sigurðr tries to avoid the inevitable calamity he knows is imminent. His only recourse is to once again submit his will to fate, resigning himself to the treacherous death that awaits him.<sup>119</sup>

The most important aspect of foresight is being able to determine the time and manner of a person's death. The strange paradox in *Völsunga saga*, as in other texts in which fate plays a significant role, is that knowing one's fate does not allow one to change it. The role of the hero is defined as resignation to whatever may come. This resignation does not require an exact knowledge of the future, but knowing what events are going to happen may make it easier to accept one's fate. If prophecy is

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<sup>119</sup> Zoe Borovsky tries to distinguish between male and female reactions to conflicts of loyalty, citing *Völsunga saga* as an example. She writes: "The definition of the heroic body is to remain pure, undivided, *heill*, or whole... While heroic women will embody divided loyalties and demonstrate the *blandinn* state, heroic men will seek to avoid accusations of divided loyalties and display instead the *heill* or pure state." Zoe Borovsky, "'En Hon Er Blandin Mjök': Women and Insults in Old Norse Literature," in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, eds. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 7. The dialogue preceding the verse quoted above indicates that things are far more complex than Borovsky's argument would lead us to believe, since Sigurðr explicitly offers to leave Guðrún for Brynhildr, but Brynhildr refuses on grounds of not wishing to be disloyal to Gunnar. The male character Sigurðr seems to have more divided loyalty than the female character Brynhildr. It would be difficult to argue that male characters—even Gunnar—do not feel divided loyalties as acutely as the female characters in the saga. The complexities of narrative and character in *Völsunga saga* make Borovsky's generalizations about gender difficult to substantiate.

legitimately available, it would seem difficult to resist the temptation to know one's future. The most important aspect in establishing a relationship with death is for the hero to recognize and accept his or her own limitations of control. What makes Sigurðr a great hero is in large part his resignation to fate, which he demonstrates by repetition of proverbs concerning the inescapability of death. In his dialogue with Fáfnir, Sigurðr, though young, shows an awareness of his imminent death. First he says:

Hverr vill fé hafa allt til ins eina dags, en eitt sinn skal hverr deyja.  
(*Völsunga saga*, XVIII)

Everyone wants to have wealth until that one day, but everyone shall die one time.

Then he goes on to repeat himself:

Heim munda ek ríða, þótt ek missta þessa ins mikla fjár, ef ek víska, at ek skylda aldri deyja, en hverr frækn maðr vill fé ráða allt til ins eina dags. (*Völsunga saga*, XVIII)

I would ride home, though I would lose this great wealth, if I knew that I should never die, but every brave man wants to have wealth until that one day.

This theme of death's inescapability crops up again later in the saga as Sigurðr nears the end of his days. When Sigurðr faces the vicious murder plot of Brynhildr, the saga author states:



Mátti hann ok eigi við sköpum<sup>120</sup> vinna né sínu aldrlag. (*Völsunga saga*, XXX)

He could also not contend against his fates or his death.<sup>121</sup>

And Sigurðr himself reiterates this sentiment only a few lines later:

Engi má við sköpum vinna. (*Völsunga saga*, XXX)

No one can contend against fate.

The inevitable truth he knew in his youth has come to pass, and this proverbial utterance demonstrates not only a recognition of what has happened, but also a resignation to the death he now experiences. Repetition of proverbs emphasizes the importance of fate both to the saga as a whole and to the characterization of Sigurðr himself. He is the greatest warrior of all the ancient sagas, yet he spends most of his time seeking wisdom: the words of this wise man show humility before fate.

Sigurðr is not the only character to speak proverbs concerning death and fate. Richard Harris has been working on a concordance to the proverbs in *Völsunga saga*, and while any attempt to define what makes a proverb can be argued, the list of what Harris considers proverbs in *Völsunga saga* gives the reader a sense of a unified theme centered around fate.<sup>122</sup> What is perhaps most significant here is not the mere mention of fate and its inescapability, but which characters utter proverbs about death and

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<sup>120</sup> The word *sköpum* here is in dative plural, but a translation of “fates” seems contrived. Nonetheless, it would seem that fate could be conceived as the sum of preordained events. This formula—that one cannot *við sköpum vinna*—appears 4 times in *Völsunga saga*. See Appendix C.

<sup>121</sup> The word *aldrlag* literally refers to the length of Sigurðr’s life, carrying many of the connotations of *skap*.

<sup>122</sup> Richard Harris, “Concordance to the Proverbs and Proverbial Materials in the Old Icelandic Sagas,” [http://www.usask.ca/english/icelanders/fsproverbs\\_VLS.html](http://www.usask.ca/english/icelanders/fsproverbs_VLS.html), (2008).

thereby demonstrate fearlessness and an acceptance of death. Völsungr speaks of fate before facing certain death in the battle with Siggeir:

því at eitt sinn skal hverr deyja, en engi má undan komast at deyja um sinn. (*Völsunga saga*, V)

For one time shall each man die, but no one can escape dying that one time.

Völsungr reiterates an oath of fearlessness by which he has lived all his life and demonstrates through this proverbial utterance his resignation to the inevitable death that lies before him. He will not act differently now that he knows he will die than he did when faced battles with uncertain outcomes. In a similar manner, Sigmundr's prophetic death speech refers to fate, even if the concept is not mentioned by name:

“Margr lifnar ór litlum vánum, en horfin eru mér heill, svá at ek vil eigi láta græða mik. Vill Óðinn ekki, at vér bregðum sverði, síðan er nú brotnaði. Hefi ek haft orrostur, meðan honum líkaði.” (*Völsunga saga*, XII)

“Many live from little hope, but my luck has vanished so that I do not want to let myself be healed. Óðinn does not wish that we draw a sword, since it is now broken. I controlled the battle, while it pleased him.”

Sigmundr makes no effort to avoid his death, but faces it bravely and with resolution. He resigns himself not only to the abstract notion of fate, but specifically to the will of his patron and ancestor, Óðinn. This stands in stark contrast to Brynhildr's later defiance. Sigmundr's final words in particular demonstrate his resignation:

“ok hans nafn mun uppi, meðan veröldin stendr. Uni nú við þat, en mik mæða sár ok ek mun nú vitja frænda várra framgenginna.”

(*Völsunga saga*, XII)

“And his name will be famous while the world stands. I am now content with that, but my wounds weary me and I will now visit our departed kinsmen.”

Sigmundr’s euphemism for death here creates an exceptionally poignant image. Death is just the beginning of a journey, a journey of reunion he appears to face without emotion.

More than either Völsungr or Sigmundr, Sigurðr mentions fate on numerous occasions.<sup>123</sup> In fact, he is the one character to utter more than one proverb concerning fate and death, even though the proverbs uttered by his forebears Völsungr and Sigmundr are perhaps more dramatically significant. Other leading characters, however, such as Brynhildr, Gunnar, and Guðrún, refer proverbially to their own mortality once. Gunnar and Guðrún only do so shortly before their deaths when it is already clear that death is imminent. When interpreting his wife’s dreams, Gunnar realizes that they do not bode well and says:

“ok má ekki forðast sitt aldrlag, en eigi ólíkt, at vér verðum skammæir.” (*Völsunga saga*, XXXV)

“And no one can avoid death, but it is not unlikely that we will be short-lived.”

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<sup>123</sup> For a complete list of proverbs and formulae in *Völsunga saga* dealing with fate or death, see Appendix C. As discussed in chapter 1, Beowulf’s own speech often contains references or proverbs concerning fate.

When Guðrún meets her brothers at the court of King Atli, she is surprised to see them, given her warning. She quickly drops her surprise, however, and ascribes their presence to the overwhelming power of fate:

“en engi má við sköpum vinna.” (*Völsunga saga*, XXXVI)

“But no one can contend against fate.”

In both cases, characters seem to accept fate only when it stares them directly in the face. Sigurðr—and to some extent Brynhildr—differ in that they show an awareness of their own mortality long before they die. When Sigurðr goes to visit Brynhildr while staying at the court of Heimir, he greets her and asks how she is doing. She responds:

“Vel megu vér, frændr lifa ok vinir, en háttung er í, hverja giftu menn bera til síns endadags.” (*Völsunga saga*, XXIV)

“We are well, my kinsmen and friends live, but there is danger in such good luck men carry to their final day.”<sup>124</sup>

Both Sigurðr and Brynhildr in fact demonstrate awareness of death while in possession of worldly prosperity. Resignation to the overwhelming power of fate and knowledge of one’s own powerlessness before such a force seem to constitute warrior wisdom, particularly when a hero demonstrates that resignation when no threat looms on the horizon.

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<sup>124</sup> The translation of this line is somewhat problematic. Grimstad translates it as “but none of us knows if our luck will continue until the day we die.” Grimstad, *Völsunga Saga: The Saga of the Volsungs*, 161. Byock translates it as, “but it is unknown what fortune men will have to their dying day.” Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*, 74. I have opted for a more literal translation here, but the sense is clear: though things are going well, it is uncertain whether such good fortune will hold for the rest of Brynhildr’s life.

*Female Figures in the Saga –*

Before concluding, I would like to examine the female characters in the saga. As a great warrior—or valkyrie—Brynhildr forms the perfect female counterpart to Sigurðr.<sup>125</sup> Sigurðr himself describes her as having *vænleik ok vitru*, “beauty and wisdom,” when he first meets her, then later proclaims that *Aldri finnst þér vitrari kona í veröldu* (No one could ever find a wiser woman than you in the world). Brynhildr certainly possesses a significant store of proverbial and mythological knowledge, is able to engage in dialogue—both questioning and answering—and possesses some ability of foresight. I would argue, however, that she manifests more as a divine figure of wisdom, and thereby does not appear as heroic as Sigurðr for the sole reason that she does not accept her fate with resignation.<sup>126</sup> Instead, Brynhildr appears as a profoundly emotional character whose instability—particularly when coupled with her tremendous power and influence—creates a whirlwind of destruction. This is not to say that she is unjustified in her search for vengeance; rather, she appears more like the gods in her contention with fate, perhaps because of her role as a valkyrie.<sup>127</sup>

What is strange about Brynhildr’s role in the saga is that she fulfills the more common path of vindictive female characters in Icelandic sagas, and orchestrates Sigurðr’s death by means of manipulation rather than by means of her own strength.

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<sup>125</sup> Indeed, Anderson considers Brynhildr the central figure of the legend. See Theodore M. Andersson and Vilhjalmur Bjarnar, *The Legend of Brynhild* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

<sup>126</sup> Though her status and role as a divine or semi-divine valkyrie is difficult to define, much of the evidence within the text, as well as support from the Edda and other sources, suggests her divinity. She would then have a completely different perspective on death than mortal figures such as Sigurðr.

<sup>127</sup> Even her wisdom appears divine, and Sigurðr must cross through fire to enter a mythological otherworld, much like the riding of the flame in *Skírnismál*.

In contrast to the *Nibelungenlied*, in which Brunhild loses her strength along with her virginity, Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga* simply loses her pride upon marriage. Nonetheless, she appears more like the typical saga woman seeking vengeance than the Shieldmaiden we might expect, exacting retribution through manipulation of dominant male characters. I would argue, however, that the use of manipulation rather than direct force does not rob Brynhildr of heroic potential. Rather, her emotionality during her search for vengeance lessens her heroic stature. Though an apparent figure of wisdom, Brynhildr comes off as passionate and emotional—as well as vindictive—rather than possessing the more detached demeanor we might expect from a hero or heroine completely resigned to fate.<sup>128</sup>

Although Brynhildr's passion and emotion in the saga lessen her heroic appeal, this is really only in comparison to Sigurðr. In many ways, Brynhildr is more heroic than any of the Burgundian kings. She certainly makes Gunnar look weak both physically and mentally, and she reveals his disloyalty to his friends as blind pursuit of his own gain. Högni alone appears able to contend with her, first putting her in fetters, then stating that it would be best for her to die.<sup>129</sup> In large part, Brynhildr's actions do not appear particularly heroic in the saga because she lacks endorsement from other voices. The author showers Sigurðr with superlatives and praise, both through the voice of the narrator and through the voices of other characters: he is the biggest, best,

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<sup>128</sup> The inconsistency between Brynhildr's status as a warrior and her portrayal as a powerless, albeit vindictive and manipulative, female figure no doubt could be the result of conflation of two traditions, one relating to the figure of Brynhildr and the other to Sigdrifa. While this could be the case, the text as we have it presents Brynhildr as a single character and her actions and traits must be examined as such.

<sup>129</sup> In chapter XXXI, Högni puts her in fetters when she wants to kill Gunnar, then advocates her death in the next chapter after Guttormr has gone through with the deed of killing Sigurðr.

strongest, wisest warrior not only of his day, but of all the ancient sagas.<sup>130</sup> All other characters—save Sigurðr’s own semidivine ancestors—pale in comparison.

The strangest aspect of Brynhildr’s anger is that she initially directs almost all of it at characters other than Sigurðr, blaming Grímhildr, Gunnar, and Guðrún for her misfortune and betrayal. She says to Guðrún, *ok vissu þér þat, at þér véltuð mik, ok þess skal hefna* (*Völsunga saga*, XXVIII [And you knew that you were betraying me, and this I shall avenge]). Only a few lines later, Brynhildr extends her blame to Grímhildr: *Dyljumst eigi við, at ek hygg Grímhildi eigi vel. ...Hún veldr öllum upphöfum þess böls, er oss bítr. Hún bar Sigurði grimmt öl, svá at eigi mundi hann mitt nafn* (*Völsunga saga*, XXVIII [I do not hide that I do not think well of Grímhildr... She brought about the whole beginning of this evil that bites us. She bore Sigurðr the cruel ale so that he would not remember my name]). In conversation with her husband, she directs her blame and hatred at Gunnar:

“Nú treystist engi at ríða nema Sigurðr einn. Hann reið eldinn, því at hann skorti eigi hug til. Hann drap orminn ok Regin ok fimm konunga, en eigi þú, Gunnarr, er þú fölnaðir sem nár, ok ertu engi konungr né kappi. Ok þess strengda ek heit heima at föður míns, at ek munda þeim einum unna, er ágæztr væri alinn, en þat er Sigurðr. Nú erum vér eiðrofa, er vér eigum hann eigi, ok fyrir þetta skal ek ráðandi þíns dauða. Ok eigum vér Grímhildi illt at launa. Henni finnst engi kona huglausari né verri.” (*Völsunga saga*, XXIX)

“Now no one dared to ride except Sigurðr alone. He rode the flame because he was not short of courage for it. He killed the dragon and

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<sup>130</sup> ...ok hans nafn gengr í öllum tungum fyrir norðan Grikklands haf, ok svá mun vera, meðan veröldin stendr. (*Völsunga saga*, XXII) “And his name pervades all the languages north of the Greek sea, and so it will be while the world remains.”

Reginn and five kinds, but not you, Gunnar, when you grew pale like a corpse, and you are not a king nor a champion. And I swore this oath at home at my father's, that I would love only that one who was the most excellent born, and that is Sigurðr. Now we are breakers of oaths, because we do not have him, and for that I shall bring about your death. And we have to repay Grímhildr with ill. One might find no woman more cowardly or worse than she.”

Through the deception, Brynhildr has unknowingly become a breaker of oaths and is now entirely alone among her enemies; nothing can provide consolation.<sup>131</sup> It is easy to forget that Atli is in fact her brother, and that Brynhildr has other powerful kinsmen in whom she might have found support after discovering her betrayal.<sup>132</sup> Instead, she does not involve her other kinsmen at all, orchestrating vengeance alone by pitting those involved in her deception against each other.

When Sigurðr attempts to comfort Brynhildr in chapter XXIX, she responds: *Mér var engi verri í þessum svikum* (No one was worse to me in this deception). Despite her love for him, Brynhildr says a few lines later, *Þat er mér sárast minna harma, at ek fæ eigi því til leiðar komit, at bitrt sverð væri roðit í þínu blóði* (That is most painful to me of my sorrows that I cannot bring it about that a sharp sword be reddened in your blood). Yet when Sigurðr professes his love for her in one of the most moving passages of the saga, Brynhildr seems almost mollified, almost thrown into even greater passion: *Of seinat hefir þú at segja, at þik angrar minn harmr, en nú*

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<sup>131</sup> Frederik Heinemann has argued that Brynhildr's anger is derived not from being tricked into marrying a man she does not love, but from having to marry at all, and that she in fact feels no affection for Sigurðr. Heinemann ignores such obvious evidence to the contrary as Brynhildr's suicide and burial with Sigurðr. See Fredrik J. Heinemann, "Retrospectivity in *Volsunga saga*: The Brynhildr-Story," *Leeds Studies in English* 35 (2004), 23–42.

<sup>132</sup> Atli appears as Brynhildr's brother in Eddic poetry and in later redactions of the tale as well. See Anderson, *The Legend of Brynhild*, 35.



*fám vér enga líkn* (Too late have you to say that my pain distresses you, but now we will get little relief). Sigurðr's offer to forsake Guðrún and marry Brynhildr seems to come as a great surprise, to which Brynhildr reacts by stating her desire for death: her own and that of everyone involved in the deception. When Brynhildr speaks to Gunnar immediately after these events, she blames Sigurðr entirely for the betrayal:

“Ek vil eigi lifa,” sagði Brynhildr, “því at Sigurðr hefir mik vélt ok eigi síðr þik, þá er þú lézt hann fara í mína sæng. Nú vil ek eigi tvá menn eiga senn í einni höll, ok þetta skal vera bani Sigurðar eða þinn eða minn, því at hann hefir þat allt sagt Guðrúnu, en hún brigzlar mér.”

*(Völsunga saga, XXIX)*

“I do not want to live,” said Brynhildr, “because Sigurðr has betrayed me and you no less, when you let him come into my bed. Now I do not want to have two men at the same time in one hall, and this shall be the death of Sigurðr or yours or mine, because he has told everything to Guðrún, and she upraids me.”

Brynhildr's motivations for revenge are immensely complicated. She wishes to get back at Sigurðr and Gunnar for betraying her, avenge her broken oath, and punish Guðrún not just for having married the superior man, but for gloating about it as well. Yet Brynhildr's vengeance, despite its justification and force, stumbles on her latent feelings for Sigurðr, confirmed as mutual only just before the bloodshed actually begins.

There is no question that Brynhildr is wronged, and wronged severely; but she receives a significant amount of negative attention in the saga, and other characters describe her as a beautiful, but wicked woman fated to cause turmoil and strife.

Sigurðr, for instance, proclaims on his deathbed, *En þessu veldr Brynhildr, er mér ann*

*um hvern mann fram (Völsunga saga, XXX [But Brynhildr, who loved me more than any other person, worked this]).* While Sigurðr is immediately correct, he does not seem to accept responsibility for his own part in this betrayal, particularly as he goes on to state *ok þess má ek sverja, at Gunnari gerða ek aldri mein* (And I may swear this, that I never did harm to Gunnar). This may be true if he is referring to having laid Gram between himself and Brynhildr during the betrothal; but Sigurðr does not state that he did no disservice to Brynhildr. Nonetheless, Sigurðr does not go as far as Gunnar, who says directly to Brynhildr, *mikit forað ertu, ok meiri ván, at þú sér feig* (You are a great monster, and it is to be expected that you are doomed to die). The lack of authorial evaluation of the deception of Brynhildr makes it difficult to analyze various characters' reactions to her vengeance. The male characters in the saga avoid taking responsibility for their involvement in Brynhildr's deception, and Gunnar's blame of Brynhildr rings especially hollow given his own incitement of his younger brother to kill Sigurðr. And while Sigurðr does take part in deceiving Brynhildr, the real villains of the saga are the Gjúkings, who first deceive Sigurðr for their own gain and drive a wedge between the two heroic lovers.

Both Sigurðr and Brynhildr are in similar situations—having been deceived into marrying someone other than they wished—yet they approach their plights differently. Like Brynhildr, Sigurðr also has reason to seek vengeance against Grímhildr; but instead, he contents himself with the one he has married and remains silent in order to keep the peace. Granted, Sigurðr has not made a vow like Brynhildr's to marry only the greatest woman alive. Brynhildr's plight is miserable, but the more horrible the fate, the more heroic a character seems when accepting of that fate. Brynhildr's lack of acceptance makes her appear more like a divine figure contending fate than a human hero resigned to the immanence of death. The narrative structure of the saga itself stresses the transience of life through its sweeping depiction

of so many generations in such a short space. Brynhildr, however, acts as though she has the lifespan of a god.

Ultimately, Guðrún becomes a heroic figure in her own right, perhaps even more powerfully than Brynhildr herself. After all, Guðrún dons a mail coat and fights alongside her brothers in the final battle. She also kills her own children—much like Signy in the tale of Sigmundr’s revenge—displaying a direct agency not seen in the character of Brynhildr.<sup>133</sup> In a sense, Guðrún’s marriage to Sigurðr has made her one of the Volsungs and her vengeance takes on a Völsung-like flavor in which she shows disregard for her own life akin to the heroic detachment found in a great warrior. Although introduced merely as a fair maiden, Guðrún has eaten some of Fáfnir’s heart, and as a result has become *grimmari en áðr ok vitrari* (grimmer than before and wiser). The pairing of these qualities is noteworthy, especially given Guðrún’s transformation in the saga. With the enhancement of these two qualities she takes on a heroic role, demonstrating once again the necessity of both *sapientia* and *fortitudo* in the hero. And although tests of “wisdom” often take the form of contests of knowledge—particularly mythological knowledge—both in *Völsunga saga* and elsewhere in Old Norse literature, the suggestion that one might attain wisdom from the consumption of flesh suggests that one aspect of wisdom is intimately associated with the courage necessary for heroic action.

The confusion of emotion complicating justified or even dutiful vengeance—such as we see in characters like Brynhildr and Guðrún—should be familiar to audiences of Icelandic sagas. In *Völsunga saga* the resulting bloodshed takes on particularly grand proportions, in part due to the fact that characters are kings and

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<sup>133</sup> See Kaaren Grimstad and Ray M. Wakefield, “Monstrous Mates: The Leading Ladies of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Völsunga saga*,” in *Women and the Medieval Epic*, eds. Sara S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 235–52.

queens who hold sway over large numbers of retainers, whereas in the Icelandic family sagas the events tend to play out on a smaller, more local level. The emotional outbursts of the queens are likewise dramatic. In the end, however, Sigurðr's readiness to die keeps his death from becoming an overly emotional event. On his deathbed, Sigurðr comforts his wife Guðrún, and speaks of the dangers that will afflict their son:

“Þínir bræðr lifa þér til gamans, en þess til ungan son á ek, er kann eigi at varast fjáendr sína, ok illa hafa þeir fyrir sínum hlut sét. Ekki fá þeir slíkan mág at ríða í her með sér né systurson, ef sjá næði at vaxa. Ok nú er þat fram komit, er fyrir löngu var spát ok vér höfum dulizt við, en engi má við sköpum vinna. En þessu veldr Brynhildr, er mér ann um hvern mann fram, ok þess má ek sverja, at Gunnari gerða ek aldri mein, ok þyrmda ek okkrum eiðum, ok eigi var ek of mikill vinr hans konu. Ok ef ek hefða vitat þetta fyrir ok stiga ek á mína fætr með mín vápn, þá skyldu margir týna sínu lífi, áðr en ek fella, ok allir þeir bræðr drepnir, ok torveldra mundi þeim at drepa mik en inn mesta vísund eða villigölt.” (*Völsunga saga*, XXX)

“Your brothers live on to your joy, but I have this son so young who cannot guard himself against his enemies, and they have done badly for their part. They will not get such a kinsman to ride into battle with them, nor such a nephew, if he were allowed to grow up. And now that has come to pass, what was prophesied long ago and we denied it, but no one can contend against fate. But Brynhildr, who loved me more than any other man, worked this betrayal, and I may swear this, that I never did harm to Gunnar, and I treated our oaths reverently, and I was

not too great a friend to his wife. And if I had known about this earlier and risen to my feet with my weapons, then many should have lost their lives before I fell, and all the brothers would have died, and they would have found it more difficult to kill me than the greatest bison or wild boar.”

Like Fáfñir, Sigurðr has been ambushed when he least expected it. Sigurðr, as an honorable man, cannot understand unmotivated hatred, or at least the unwarranted enmity of his friends. He resembles Gunnar of Hliðarendi in this respect, trusting in the good of friends, neighbors, and kinsmen, even though they both know theoretically that they will die. The saga seems to indicate—through the characters of Fáfñir, Brynhildr, and Sigurðr—that defeat by such trickery or deception does not render a character weak or unwise. Indeed, it is precisely their strength and wisdom that make a cunning strategy necessary. Here, Sigurðr’s speech contains the striking paradox of prophecy and fate: what was foretold has come to pass, yet Sigurðr claims he did not know what was going to happen. Judy Quinn writes: “He does not say it, but Sigurðr is describing the prowess of a Völsung, leaving the audience to wonder why he was not alive to the Gjúkings’ treachery earlier, given the warnings he had been issued through advice and prophecy.”<sup>134</sup> Sigurðr did in fact know what was going to happen, and that is, perhaps, what makes his death scene so poignant: it fully affirms the inescapability of both death and fate.

Throughout his portion of the narrative, Sigurðr questions or openly asks for advice from many wise figures: Grípir, Reginn, Oðinn, and Brynhildr; he utters numerous proverbs throughout the saga and engages in mythological discourse in his

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<sup>134</sup> Judy Quinn, “Trust in Words: Verse Quotation and Dialogue in *Völsunga saga*,” in *Fornaldarsagornas Struktur och Ideologi*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen and Agneta Ney, *Nordiska Texter och Undersökningar* 28 (Uppsala: Swedish Science Press, 2004) 97.

dialogue with Fáfñir; he receives praise for his ability to provide counsel; and he possesses the gift of foresight. All these aspects contribute to Sigurðr's image as a wise warrior and king. Many of these components, such as the giving and receiving of counsel, closely resemble the components of Beowulf's wisdom, but they are by no means identical. Beowulf presents his dialogic abilities through formalized speeches, narration of past events, and verbal competition based on personal experience. Sigurðr, however, demonstrates his ability in dialogue through requests for counsel, questions concerning mythology, and requests for wisdom. Aside from his attempt to mollify Brynhildr, Sigurðr does not actually give counsel within the saga—it is merely stated that he does so. Furthermore, the notion of competitive dialogue appears differently in *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga*. Beowulf's *flyting* with Unferð is more a contest of experience than a contest of words; Sinfjotli's *senna* with Granmar, on the other hand, may incorporate past experience, but is more importantly comprised of stylized insults. Both contests deal with challenges to manliness and prowess, but take different forms.

By examining figures of wisdom in *Völsunga saga* and other Old Norse literature it is possible to determine the complex web of qualities that comprise the *sapientia* of a hero. There is significant overlap between *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga* in terms of the depiction of heroic wisdom; however, while aspects of heroic wisdom appear common to *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga*, this is true only in the general, not in the specific. The element that remains most consistently represented across texts is the hero's resignation to a higher power. Even here, we see differences in the appellation of that higher power. In *Beowulf* it may be *wyrd* or *God*; in *Völsunga saga* it takes the form of *skap*, or simply death itself. The act of resignation as a form of heroic wisdom remains consistent across texts, but its articulation and manner of expression differ significantly. For example, the importance of prophecy to *Völsunga*

*saga* significantly influences the nature of acceptance of fate. Sigurðr cannot be matched in war or wisdom, so if he is to be defeated, it must be in some other arena. One could argue that he is overcome by love, but the true agent of Sigurðr's downfall is fate itself.

## THE WISDOM OF WISDOM POETRY

### CHAPTER 3

Now that we have analyzed two narratives from Old English and Old Norse to examine how wisdom in these texts might be defined, another logical place to look for evidence is in those texts which modern scholars deem to comprise the corpus of Old English and Old Norse wisdom poetry. A discussion of wisdom literature necessarily involves a discussion of genre. We cannot be certain of the nature or boundaries of the wisdom literature genre in either Old English or Old Norse culture, but the compilations of didactic material into such poems as the two Old English *Maxims* poems and the Old Norse *Hávamál* would suggest some form of wisdom genre as ethnic to Anglo-Saxon and medieval Icelandic societies. Nonetheless, as we have seen in the previous two chapters, wisdom is a necessary attainment for a hero, and is often intimately associated with heroic strength; the same internal faculty of the heart often governs both intellectual acuity and heroic valor. Wisdom and heroic strength therefore go hand-in-hand, so it is difficult to separate the genre of wisdom literature—in so far as one exists ethnically—from the genre of heroic literature.<sup>135</sup>

In this chapter I would like to examine how what we think of as Old English and Old Norse wisdom literature extols the same qualities of the wise warrior as do the narratives: wisdom is the product of learning and experience that often manifests itself as a realization of one's own limitations and mortality. Given the prominence of gnomic passages in Germanic heroic literature and an apparent preoccupation with establishing the sagacity of great warrior figures, what we think of as wisdom literature is in fact integral to heroic literature. A complicating factor in making such

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<sup>135</sup> For a discussion of genre as derived from within the context of a culture itself (ethnic genre) as opposed to one imposed on literature by scholars working outside the the culture (poetic genre) see Dan Ben-Amos, *Folklore Genres* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976).



a claim for Old English literature in particular is the strong association between writing and the church, but as I hope to make clear in this chapter, much of Old English literature demonstrates a calculated ambiguity such that it cannot be classified as strictly religious or strictly secular.<sup>136</sup> This chapter will begin by looking at how some of the shorter didactic poems in Old English and Old Norse reflect the categories of wisdom established in the heroic literature examined in chapters one and two. The main discussion, however, will center around the theme of fate, which is pivotal in establishing both the wisdom and heroism of a character, using a few representative examples: *Precepts*, *Vainglory*, *The Fortunes of Men*, *The Gifts of Men*, the two Old English *Maxims* poems, and *Hávamál* in Old Norse.

The previous two chapters discussed the components that make up wisdom in Old English and Old Norse contexts. Common to both were proverbial knowledge, dialogic proficiency in questioning and answering, and—most importantly—resignation to fate. Old Norse wisdom also appeared to involve mythological knowledge and—on the basis of *Völsunga saga*—an ability to prophesy. In this chapter, I will explore how the so-called wisdom poems of Old English and Old Norse reflect or contest these components of wisdom in their respective social contexts. We will see how these wisdom poems celebrate the components of wisdom found in Old English and Old Norse heroic narrative, and how another component—skill in creating and solving riddles—can also be important in establishing the wisdom of a hero.

#### *Syncretic Ambiguity –*

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<sup>136</sup> Additionally, just because a text was produced in a clerical context does not necessarily mean that those who wrote it down were particularly well versed or educated in the Christian Latinate tradition, or that Anglo-Saxons saw the distinction between “Christian” and “secular” or “Germanic” as we do today. Indeed, a clear distinction of this kind may not have existed at all.

While Old English wisdom poems create the impression of a large body of somber and didactic material produced in Anglo-Saxon England, it is clear from such compositions as *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer* that this material formed an important part of heroic and secular literature as well as poems of a clearly religious nature, such as those found in the Junius manuscript.<sup>137</sup> What is perhaps most interesting about the gnomic and proverbial material in many Old English compositions is its ambiguity of social applicability. Much of the advice and many of the didactic statements could easily apply to nobility or peasantry, monks or warriors. In the Old English *Precepts*, for example, aside from the fact that there are ten bits of instruction – perhaps mirroring the Ten Commandments – little instantly distinguishes this poem as particularly religious. Careful analysis and comparison, however, shows that *Precepts* draws heavily on the long Christian tradition of penitentials.

Of the wisdom poems in Old English, *Precepts* is one of the most didactic, comprised of ten pieces of advice given from a father to his son. In contrast to other wisdom poems, *Precepts* is noticeably lacking in examples. Whereas *The Fortunes of Men*, *The Gifts of Men*, and *Vainglory* are comprised almost exclusively of examples of men and their deeds, *Precepts* seems much more to be built of distilled didactic phrases. The dearth of examples serves to make the wisdom found within the poem more general, more applicable to a wide range of people. It is arguably both religious and secular, whereas the talk of boasting and slaying within a hall found in *Vainglory* and *The Fortunes of Men* is, if not pagan, at least secular and perhaps peculiar to

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<sup>137</sup> Cavill argues that Old English wisdom poets simply sought to gather and collect social knowledge, and did not have heroic aims in the presentation of their material: “the preoccupations of the poets are not particularly heroic. They are broadly social and ordinary.” Paul Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 165. I would argue, however, that the prevalence of such social and ordinary knowledge in the midst of decidedly heroic passages suggests there is no clear dividing line between the heroic and the sapiential.

Germanic culture. The reason for this lack of examples in *Precepts*, I argue, is not simply that the poem may have been composed in emulation of the ten commandments of Moses, but that the poem is—at least partially—comprised of clerical ordinances found also in the penitential of Pseudo-Ecgeberht.

Silence and speech are subjects in six of the ten addresses of the father in *Precepts*, and in the fifth and tenth, advice regarding language is given multiple times. Here are all the references made to speech and silence within the poem:

Ðus frod fæder      freobearn lærde,  
modsnottor mon,      maga cystum eald,  
wordum wisfæstum,      þæt he wel þunge (1–3)

Thus the wise father, the man wise in mind, old in the virtue of kinsmen, taught the free child with sagacious words so that he would prosper well:

#### FIRST ADDRESS

Wes þu þinum ylðrum      arfæst symle,  
fægerwyrde (11–12)

Always be honorable to your elders with fair words.

#### THIRD ADDRESS

ac þu þe anne genim  
to gesprecan symle      spella ond lara  
rædhycgende. (24–6)

But always take to yourself one thoughtful in counsel to speak news and lore.

#### FIFTH ADDRESS

Druncen beorg þe ond dollic word,  
man on mode ond in muþe lyge (34–5)  
Wes þu a giedda wis,  
wær wið willan, worda hyrde (41–2)

Protect yourself from drunkenness and foolish words, crime in the heart  
and lying in the mouth.

Be wise in songs, guarded against pleasures, protective of words.

#### SEVENTH ADDRESS

Wærwyrde sceal wisfæst hæle  
breostum hycgan, nales breahhtme hlud (57–8)

The sagacious hero shall be cautious in speech, think in his heart, not at  
all aloud with noise.

#### EIGHTH ADDRESS

Leorna lare lægedefe,  
wene þec in wisdom, weoruda scyppend  
hafa þe to hyhte, haligra gemynd,  
ond a soð to syge, þonne þu secge hwæt. (61–4)

Learn lore, be eager to learn, train yourself in wisdom, have as hope the  
Lord of Hosts, be mindful of what is more holy, and speak truly  
whenever you say anything.

## TENTH ADDRESS

Snyttra bruceþ      þe fore sawle lufan  
warnað him wommas      worda ond dæda  
on sefan symle      ond soþ fremed (78–80)  
Yrre ne læt þe      æfre gewealdan,  
heah in hreþre,      heoroworda grund (83–4)  
Ne beo þu no to tælende,      ne to tweospræce (90)

He enjoys wisdom who for love of the soul guards himself against evils of words and deeds always in his mind and acts truthfully.

Do not ever let anger control you, high in your heart, the foundation of hostile speech.

Do not be too verbose, nor too deceitful in speech.

The poem is in many ways concerned with language, not least because the bulk of it comprises the direct speech of a father to his son. What is interesting, however, is that the son has no voice in the poem, separating *Precepts* from the widespread genre of instructive dialogue.<sup>138</sup> Perhaps the reason for the absence of dialogue is the irrefutability of the father's words: there is nothing to be questioned in them and they are to be accepted as universal truth. They are, in essence, law.

Despite the pervasiveness of themes of language and silence in Old English, *Precepts* employs particular parallels to actual Old English laws to render its treatment of language different from that in the other wisdom poems. Indeed, parallels between

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<sup>138</sup> The lack of respondent and the generic designation of the speaker as “fæder” denies the poem specific location or context. It therefore seems to have connections to both Latin catechisms and Old English and Old Norse wisdom dialogues.

*Precepts* and the *Pænitentiale Pseudo-Ecgberti* are strong enough to warrant asserting that the two texts are closely related and belong to the same tradition. Compare, for example, the following passages from *Precepts* and section LXVI of the *Pænitentiale Pseudo-Ecgberti*:<sup>139</sup>

Druncen beorg þe      ond dollic word,  
man on mode      ond in muþe lyge  
yrre ond æfeste      ond idese lufan (34–6)

Protect yourself from drunkenness and foolish words, crime in the heart and lying in the mouth, anger and jealousy and the love of a woman.

Uton secan ure cyrcean Sunnandagum, and mæsse-dagum, and between þam tidum symble, swa betere swa oftor, and beorgan us wið æfest, and wið yrre, and wið unnytte word, and wið ofer-druncennysse, and wið tælnysse, and wið twy-spræcnysse, and wið lease gewitnysse, and wið morþor, and wið mæne aðas, and wið oftrædlic hæmed, and wið ælce unclænnysse ures lichaman. And uton geþencan hu besceawigende we scylon beon ure sawle and ures lichaman, þa hwile þe us God unne þæt we her beon, þæt we huru æfter þysse worlde reste habbon mid Godes mildse.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> The text as edited by Thorpe is titled *Pænitentiale Ecgberti*, but, as will be discussed below, this is not the Ecgbert who was archbishop of York in the eighth century. See *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England*, ed. Benjamin Thorpe (Great Britain: Record Commission, 1840). To avoid confusion with the actual penitential of Ecgbert of York, this later text will be referred to as the *Pænitentiale Pseudo-Ecgeberti*.

<sup>140</sup> Quotations of *Pseudo-Ecgbert* are taken from the *Pænitentiale Ecgberti* in *Ibid.*, 226.

Let us come to our church on Sundays and feast days, and always between those times, the more often the better, and let us guard ourselves against jealousy, and against anger, and against useless words, and against over-drunkness, and against slander, and against deceitful speech, and against false witness, and against murder, and against evil oaths, and against frequent fornication, and against each uncleanness of our body. And let us think how we shall be mindful of our soul and body, for the time that it pleases God that we be here, so that we may indeed have rest with God's mercy after this world.

In both, the reader or listener is called on to 'protect' himself against drunkenness, stupid or useless words, anger, spite, and fornication. Furthermore, the son is advised in the seventh address of *Precepts* to hold his pledges, which corresponds to the 'mæne aðas' of the *Pænitentiale*. And finally, the tenth address of the father in *Precepts* commands the son: 'Ne beo þu no to tælende, ne to tweospræce' (90 [Do not be too verbose, nor too deceitful in speech]), which perfectly mirrors the *Pænitentiale*'s 'wið tælnysse, and wið twy-spræcnysse' (against slander, and deceitful speech). The parallels are both many and exact.

Other passages from the *Pænitentiale* contain similar lists of things to be avoided. Take, for instance, this passage from section LXIV:

And þas þing we scylon forgan, þæt ys oferhyd, and gytrunge, and æfest, and idelne gylp, and stala, and reaflac, and unriht-hæmed, and oferdruncennys, and morðor, and mæne aþas, and leasunge, and wyrignyssa, and gecyd.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

And of that thing that we should forgo, that is pride, and greed, and jealousy, and idle boasts, and theft, and robbery, and unrightful fornication, and over-drunkenness, and murder, and evil oaths, and falsity, and weariness, and testimony.

Several of the same actions or qualities are represented here, such as ‘æfest,’ ‘unriht-hæmed,’ and ‘oferdruncennys.’ Passages from the *Canons Enacted Under King Edgar*,<sup>142</sup> though not containing as striking parallels as the ones examined above, also provide a similar progression of orders:

LVII. And we lærað, þæt preostas beorgan wið ofer-druncen, and hit georne belean oðrum mannum

LVIII. And we lærað, þæt ænig preost ne beo ealu-scop, ne on ænige wisan gliwige mid him-sylfem, oþ[þe mid] oðrum mannum, ac beo swa his hade gebyrað, wis and weorðfull.

LIX. And we læreað, þæt preostas wið aðas beorgan him georne, and hig eac swiðe forbeodan.

LX. And we lærað, þæt ænig preost ne lufige wifmanna neawiste, ealles to swiðe, ac lufige his riht-æwe, þæt is, his cirice.<sup>143</sup>

LVII. And we teach, that priests guard themselves against overdrunkenness, and eagerly urge the practice on to other men.

LVIII. And we teach, that no priest be an “ale scop,” nor in any way boisterous with himself or among other men, but be as his habit commands, wise and honorable.

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<sup>142</sup> The text of the *Canons Enacted Under King Edgar* can be found in *Ibid.*, 395–415.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 400–01.



LIX. And we teach, that priests guard themselves eagerly against oaths, and that they also strongly forbid them.<sup>144</sup>

LX. And we teach, that any priest not love the company of women, all too greatly, but love his rightful bride, that is the church.

One finds similar language in the above canons, notably that a priest is supposed to ‘beorg’ himself against the qualities of drunkenness, singing idle songs, oaths, and love of women. Playing the role of ‘ealu-scop’ could be considered parallel to the ‘dollic word’ of *Precepts* and the ‘unnyt word’ of *Pseudo-Ecgberti*.

A connection between the *Poenitentiale Pseudo-Ecgberti* and *Precepts* seems certain, but the nature of the connection remains unclear without examining the textual transmission. The *Pseudo-Ecgberti* is an Old English version of a penitential based in part on one by Haltigar from the early ninth century, and in part on the *Roman Penitential* of Cummeanus and the penitential of Theodore, who died in the late seventh century and was the first to write a penitential in England.<sup>145</sup> The first three books of the penitential are based on Haltigar, but book IV—from which the passages examined above come—and the subsequent books are based on the earlier penitentials of Cummeanus and Theodore.<sup>146</sup> The Old English version of *Pseudo-Ecgberti* is preserved in multiple manuscripts from the eleventh century, notably C.C.C.C. 190, from which Thorpe derived his edition.<sup>147</sup> While the Exeter Book predates this (it is

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<sup>144</sup> Perhaps this is because oaths were associated with drunken boasting and were made as pledges to men rather than God.

<sup>145</sup> For a discussion of the history of penitentials in England, see Allen J. Frantzen, “The Tradition of Penitentials in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 11 (1983), 23–56.

<sup>146</sup> See Arthur W. Haddan and W. Stubbs, eds., *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. III (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1878), 414–15.

<sup>147</sup> Thorpe, *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England*, 170–239. For a complete overview of the manuscript transmission of the Pseudo-Ecgbert text in Old English,

dated to middle of the second half of the tenth century),<sup>148</sup> the source texts for the Old English *Pseudo-Ecgberti* come from the early ninth century or before, and could easily have served as sources for the Old English *Precepts* as well, especially since the passage from *Pseudo-Ecgberti* that so closely resembles *Precepts* is based on the older penitentials.<sup>149</sup> While a direction of transmission is difficult to establish, given how early the penitentials of Theodore and Cummeanus were written, it seems probable that if the excerpts of *Precepts* discussed above did not come from *Pseudo-Ecgberti* directly, they came from an earlier transmission of the relevant portion of the penitential. Regardless of what the exact order and direction of transmission may have been, *Precepts* and the *Pseudo-Ecgberti* belong to the same tradition. What is perhaps most interesting is how *Precepts* presents the material in such a way as to avoid specifying a monastic context for either the transmission or the application of the advice contained within the poem.<sup>150</sup>

Much of *Precepts* has to deal with understanding appropriate speech and silence. The counsel of silence offered in Old English poems could in most instances be either Germanic or based on Latin and Christian influence. Indeed, knowing when to speak and when to be silent is an important part of functioning within any society and culture. The ubiquity of social norms concerning speech and silence lends

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see Josef Raith, ed., *Penitentialia Pseudo-Ecgberti; Die altenglische Version des halitgarischen Bussbuches* (Hamburg: H. Grand, 1933), viii–xxiv.

<sup>148</sup> See N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 70–5.

<sup>149</sup> Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, is thought to have died around 690, so his penitential must have been composed before this date. See Frantzen, *The Tradition of Penitentials in Anglo-Saxon England*, 27.

<sup>150</sup> In 1895 James Bright wrote about the probable monastic context for the performance of *Precepts*. See James W. Bright, “Notes on *Foeder Larcwidas*,” *Modern Language Notes* 10 (1895), 68–69. Examining the text of the poem alone, however, does not necessarily produce the conclusion that this is a religious poem. The connection of *Precepts* to penitentials has not yet been made.

*Precepts* much of its ambiguity in terms of context and application. Despite the connection with penitentials and Bright's argument for a monastic context, the advice offered by the father could easily be the advice given to a young warrior, even though it also appears in the religious context of the *Pænitentiale Pseudo-Ecgberti*. But one context exists in Old English and Old Norse literature for the counsel of silence that is largely peculiar to a heroic Germanic milieu: holding one's tongue while drunk, and neither boasting nor swearing foolish oaths.

After checking the *Thesaurus Proverbiorum Medii Aevi* for proverbs related to drinking and silence, surveying this extensive if not comprehensive gathering of proverbs and sententiae suggests that the notion of heroic boasting and swearing of oaths while drunk was largely, if not entirely, a Germanic theme in the middle ages.<sup>151</sup> Other proverbs concerning silence in conjunction with drinking have to do with the revealing of secrets while drunk. *Pseudo-Ecgberti* advises separately against drunkenness, foolish words, and oaths, but does so more because of the supposed immorality of these acts, than because of any social danger that may arise from them. In Old English and Old Norse, however, the heroic context of boasting and swearing oaths concerning future accomplishments is perhaps more prevalent. Warriors in sagas often pledge oaths while drunk only to regret the act later. In *Beowulf*, for example, Hrothgar states explicitly:

Ful oft gebeotedon      beore druncne

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<sup>151</sup> Samuel Singer and others, *Thesaurus Proverbiorum Medii Aevi: Lexikon der Sprichwörter des romanisch-germanischen Mittelalters*. One is reminded, as well, of the humorous trouble Charlemagne and his companions get themselves into through drunken boasting in the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*. The concept of such boasting while drunk seems lost on the Byzantines. While the *Pèlerinage* is, of course, an Old French composition, Charlemagne was a Germanic king and was known for his love of traditional tales and poetry. The influence of Germanic language and culture on Old French is strong, and one might well look to Old French epic for further comparison of conceptions of wisdom in medieval epics. Such analysis of Old French epic will occupy the subject of a future study.

ofer ealowæge      oretmecgas  
 þæt hie in beorsele      bidan woldon  
 Grendles guþe      mid gryrum ecga.  
 ðonne wæs þeos medoheal      on morgentid,  
 drihtsele dreorfah,      þonne dæg lixte,  
 eal bencþelu      blode bestymed,  
 heall heorudreore (480–87)

Very often warriors boasted over the ale cup, drunk on beer, that they would await Grendel’s war in the beer hall with blades. Then in the morning when day dawned, the meadhall, the company’s hall, was stained with gore, all the benches were smeared with blood, the hall with gore.

Pledging to fight Grendel is a deadly mistake, one that has apparently happened several times to drunken warriors. Gunnar makes the same mistake of pledging an action while drunk in *Völsunga saga*, an action he will later regret. The meadhall is often represented as a place where conflicts arise. In *The Fortunes of Men*, someone dies by the sword on the meadbench: ‘bið ær his worda to hræd’ (50 [his words are ever too hasty]), and in *Vainglory* reference is made to the battleground within the hall (‘æscstede inne in ræcede’ (16)), a reference to the conflicts that might arise on account of drunken boasting while feasting.<sup>152</sup> Beowulf’s *flyting* with Unferth may be one such example of verbal conflict on the brink of armed struggle. Knowing when to keep silent can literally save one’s life in Germanic society.<sup>153</sup>

<sup>152</sup> All text of *The Fortunes of Men* and *Vainglory* is taken from Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, 382.

<sup>153</sup> At the same time, however, knowing when to speak is also important. Orchard states that *Beowulf* is made up of approximately 40 percent dialogue (Andy Orchard, *A*

These examples suggest that the counsel of silence appears in Old English literature both in religious and secular contexts. While the reasons may be different in each context, the importance of knowing how and when to hold one's tongue in Anglo-Saxon society seems essentially universal. Some Old English poems, such as *The Fortunes of Men* and *Vainglory*, present a Germanic heroic context for ill-placed verbosity, even if the poems themselves are laced with religious language. The genre of the riddle dialogue in Old English and Old Norse presents another heroic context for silence: a young and unlearned warrior aspiring to greatness would indeed be foolish to engage in a wisdom dialogue in which the wager is the contestants' heads. *Precepts*, on the other hand, is decidedly ambiguous, and could represent either religious or secular teaching. While the poem's language undoubtedly connects it genetically to the *Pœnitentiale Pseudo-Ecgberti*, its ambiguous context is, I argue, intentional. Germanic notions of speech and silence were easily adapted to Christian notions of religious silence and measure. The poem therefore presents Christian teaching in a form equally applicable to the secular world, and perhaps serves to show that the wisdom of some counsel, regardless of its context, is simply sound advice.

#### *Proverbial and Mythological Knowledge –*

Chapters one and two sought to demonstrate a heroic preoccupation with wisdom largely through the prevalence of proverbial and gnomic material in *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga*: heroes had to be well versed in proverbial lore. Here, I would like to look at how this material functions independently in the so-called wisdom poems. Old English wisdom poems do not explicitly extol the acquisition of proverbial knowledge, but this is quite simply because Old English wisdom poems are primarily

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*Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2003), 10. Knowing when to speak and when to be silent is a recurrent theme in *Hávamál* and much of the *Edda* is itself in dialogue.

comprised of such proverbial knowledge themselves. It would perhaps be better to describe this knowledge as “gnomic” and “proverbial,” because aside from some poems—such as *Maxims I* and *II* and *Precepts*—other wisdom poems contain material that is formulaic and didactic but not necessarily proverbial.<sup>154</sup>

One of the most puzzling aspects of the corpus of Old English literature is, in fact, the abundance of didactic, proverbial, or gnomic poetry. It is difficult to find an umbrella term to encompass and describe this subset of Old English literature. Indeed, the term “wisdom literature” is perhaps the best approximation. When one reads several of these poems one gets a sense for how they function and of what types of material they are comprised.<sup>155</sup> Nonetheless, wisdom poetry evades classification, and only vague generalities accurately describe the “genre.” Although Old English and Old Norse wisdom poetry may not adhere to strict generic guidelines, may not be limited to particular subject matter, may be shared in monologue or dialogue, and may contain some combination of ambiguously defined proverbs, gnomes, and maxims,

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<sup>154</sup> For a discussion of maxims and gnomes in Old English, see Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry*, 205. In chapter 3, Cavill distinguishes between a maxim, which is ethical and pre-scripted, and a gnome, which is observational. Cavill also argues for the term “nomic” instead of “gnomic” to encompass more than can be done with the limited definition of a “gnome.” Attempts to classify the types of proverbial and gnomic statements found throughout Old English and Old Norse literature are inherently problematic, and Cavill’s are no exception. Classifications by grammatical structure or by content doubtless contain numerous contradictions, exceptions, or overlap between categories. Take for instance Michael S. Fukuchi, “Gnomic Statements in Old English Poetry,” *Neophilologus* 59 (1975), 610–13. Fukuchi tries to classify all gnomic statements in Old English: “In general, there are four kinds of gnomic statements or gnomes: the self-contained gnome, the dependent gnome, the imperative gnome, and the gnome of direct address. Some are context-free, while others are context-sensitive” (610). While there may be some use in such classification schemes, Fukuchi’s categories are hardly more than vague and overlapping approximations based on generalizations. Unfortunately, this may be as much as can be hoped in terms of classifying gnomic statements that have eluded fast definition for decades if not centuries.

<sup>155</sup> The same is true for Old Norse wisdom poems.

what is clear is that this literature expresses a large corpus of socially constructed and accepted knowledge. Paul Cavill argues that this social knowledge actually helps order society.<sup>156</sup> He is right to suggest that we look beyond the poems to their social context, since most conceptions of wisdom find definition and shape through social context and societal interaction between people.

Old Norse literature does not seem as concerned as Anglo-Saxon literature with with hiding its pre-Christian past, and the production of secular lay literature created a wholly different atmosphere in Old Norse texts. In addition to the gnomic material contained in such poems as *Hávamál*, mythological knowledge remains an important part of establishing wisdom even outside such legendary tales as *Völsunga saga*. Contests of mythological knowledge such as those found in *Vafðrúðnismál* and *Alvismál* stand out in the poetic Edda and the contest in *Gylfaginning* presents a similar dialogue in prose. Admittedly, the characters in these examples are themselves either mythological or legendary. It is quite understandable that the gods are well versed in mythology; after all, their own lives are myths. But there is substantial evidence—in addition to the poems of the poetic Edda and the material of the prose Edda—that figures of wisdom in medieval Iceland also had to be well versed in lore. The prominence of mythological details in skaldic poetry and the fact that this prominence served as the impetus for Snorri to write the prose Edda is strong evidence in itself to suggest that a knowledge of mythological tales continued to be an important component of wisdom in Iceland after Christianization. In order not only to

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<sup>156</sup> “From the perception that maxims are nomic in that they order and organise experience and society, I reached the conclusion that the *Maxims* poems played a part in constructing an Anglo-Saxon social reality. The difference between the two is only one of degree. But herein lies the main point of this book, which is that when we are dealing with a phenomenon, maxims, which is not merely rhetorically useful but obviously socially useful, some attempt to look beyond the texts to a social context is imperative.” Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry*, 185.

be well educated and understand the poetry composed by skalds, but also be able to compose such poetry, medieval Icelanders had to possess knowledge of pre-Christian mythological systems. As Ari Froði's *Íslendingabók* attests, the educated also had to master genealogy, which often mixes with mythology.

What is interesting about the importance of mythological knowledge is how the same word *vittr* seems to apply to what we might consider “knowledge” as well as what we might consider “wisdom.” While knowledge—like mythological details—can be learned, wisdom involves life experience. It may be that mythological knowledge was considered “wisdom” because a complete knowledge of mythology was not taken for granted, while experience may have been part of a societal norm. We cannot know for certain exactly what connotations and spheres of meaning each word relating to knowledge and wisdom in the Old Norse had, and there certainly appears to be slippage between such terms as *vittr*, *froðr*, and *snotr*.

The concluding lines of *Vafðrúðnismál* indicate that knowledge of the gods and their actions constitutes a form of wisdom.<sup>157</sup> After Óðinn asks a question to which he alone knows the answer, Vafðrúðnir responds:

“Ey mann ne þat veit,    hvat þú í árdaga  
sagðir í eyra syni!

Feigom munni    mæltu ek mína forna stafi

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<sup>157</sup> Judy Quinn has argued for a distinction between the kind of wisdom demonstrated by giants, such as Vafðrúðnir, and *völur*, such as in *Völuspá*. She writes: “The *völva*’s knowledge is essentially experiential; she expresses it through the cognitive processes of remembering and seeing, whereas the giant’s knowledge, while having an experiential aspect, is chiefly sapiential, and is expressed through the cognitive process of knowing.” Judy Quinn, “Dialogue with a ‘Volva’: *Voluspá*, *Baldrs Draumar* and *Hyndluljóð*,” in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, eds. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 251. Quinn later notes that the words used to describe Vafðrúðnir’s wisdom are “descriptions of his wisdom that all share a conceptualisation of knowledge as information transformed and reified, a specialised form of wisdom that must be actively pursued” (256).



ok of ragna rök.

Nú ek við Óðin deildak mína orðspeki;

þú ert æ vísastr vera! (*Vafþrúðnismál*, 55)<sup>158</sup>

None of men know what you in earlier days spoke into the ear of your son. With a doomed mouth I've spoken my ancient knowledge and about the doom of the gods. Now I shared my word-wisdom with Óðinn; you are always the wisest of beings.

Óðinn's question in some ways seems decidedly unfair: how could the giant possibly know the answer? And yet that is the point. If mythology constitutes an important part of wisdom then Óðinn, as a central figure of that mythology, will necessarily possess more mythological knowledge—and therefore more wisdom—than his contestants in dialogue. The beauty of *Vafþrúðnismál* is that Óðinn demonstrates his supremacy in wisdom not just through his final question, but also in his initial deception of the giant Vafþrúðnir. Only a fool would knowingly contend with Óðinn in wisdom; the clever god must therefore disguise himself in order to engage in a contest of knowledge whose subject matter largely concerns himself and his family.

Although the evidence is far scantier in Old English, the body of mythological or some other socially constructed lore does not appear to have been a consistent part of wisdom. If mythological knowledge was an important component of heroic culture in pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon society, it has not been replaced by knowledge of Christian mythology.<sup>159</sup> Knowledge of Christian mythology, however, appears

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<sup>158</sup> Text from Gustav Neckel, *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, 44–53.

<sup>159</sup> For example, the type of material in the second prose *Solomon and Saturn* or *Adrian and Ritheus*. For an edition of these texts, see Cross and Hill, *The Prose Solomon and Saturn and Adrian and Ritheus*.

essential for establishing the wisdom of religious figures. Saints often demonstrate an encyclopedic knowledge of Scripture, sometimes as a way of defeating opponents in dialogue.<sup>160</sup> In the Old English poetical corpus, there is also the collection of *Solomon and Saturn* dialogues to suggest that knowledge of Christian mythology accompanies wisdom. The first poetic and first prose dialogues concerning the Our Father Prayer are perhaps better characterized as requests for instruction by Saturn than real challenges of supremacy in wisdom. These two dialogues, along with the second prose dialogue, demonstrate the necessity of Christian mythology in establishing wisdom, as the wise figure Solomon displays his knowledge of the efficacy of the Pater Noster prayer in the first verse and first prose dialogues, and his knowledge of biblical and apocryphal details in the later second prose dialogue. It remains unclear, however, whether this would be the case in a secular or heroic context.

#### *Riddles –*

The second poetic *Solomon and Saturn* dialogue—and the only one of the four dialogues to receive attention from modern scholars for its literary merit—is much more akin to the contests of wisdom in Old Norse, such as in *Vafþrúðnismál*, or perhaps even more closely to the riddle dialogue in *Hervarar saga og Heiðreks*. It introduces a new component not found in either *Beowulf* or *Völsunga saga*: skill in creating and answering riddles. Although many of the riddles preserved in Old English are translations of Latin riddles, the sheer number of them in the Exeter book as well as in *Solomon and Saturn II* would seem to indicate that even if these riddles

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<sup>160</sup> St. Anthony, as a primary example, memorized the entire Bible by heart before going out into the desert, and is able to defeat the learned scholars who come to challenge him. See Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, *Vita Beati Antonii Abbatis*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, in *Patrologia Latina Database 73* (Paris, 1844–65), available online at <<http://pld.chadwyck.co.uk>> (Alexandria, VA, 1996).

were not originally native to Anglo-Saxon England they represent a kind of learning and intellectual puzzle that would have been appreciated by religious and secular audiences alike.<sup>161</sup> Although a translation of a Latin original, the Old English *Apollonius of Tyre* attests to the importance of riddles in royal education. The young prince Apollonius must solve a riddle in order to gain the hand of King Antiochus's daughter in marriage. The riddle is presented in both Latin and English, the translation presumably aiding the audience more than the learned Apollonius:

Scelere vereor. Meterna carne vescor. [Ʒat is on englisc. (S)cylde ic (þ)olige. Moddrenum.] Flæsce ic bruce. Eft he cwæð. Quero patrem meum. Mec matris virum. Uxoris mec filiam. Nec invenio. Ðæt is on englisc. Ic sece minne fæder. Mynre modor wer. Mines wifes dohtor and ic ne finde.<sup>162</sup>

*Scelere vereor. Meterna carne vescor.* That is in English, “I should suffer. I use the flesh of mothers.” Again he spoke: *Quero patrem meum. Mec matris virum. Uxoris mec filiam. Nec invenio.* That is in English, “I seek my father, my mother's husband, my wife's daughter, and I do not find.”

Apollonius has received the best possible education, and has confidence in his ability to solve the riddle even before hearing it. Inasmuch as the Apollonius story comes to England from the Latin tradition, and the riddles are given in Latin first, one might argue that *Apollonius*—along with the Old English translations of Latin riddles—is not

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<sup>161</sup> On the Old English riddles, see Craig B. Williamson, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977). On the connections between the Old English riddles and Byzantine riddles see Celia Milovanovic-Barham, “Aldhelm's *Enigmata* and Byzantine Riddles,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 22 (1993).

<sup>162</sup> Peter Goolden, *The Old English Apollonius of Tyre* (Oxford, England: Clarendon, 1958), 6.

representative of social norms in Anglo-Saxon society. But Anglo-Saxon England was a highly syncretic society, absorbing influences many cultures and texts, and though we may trace certain elements or texts to earlier Latin traditions, there is no reason to assume that they were not seamlessly incorporated into an Anglo-Saxon world view.<sup>163</sup> The evidence suggests that riddles were enjoyed and used as instruction by both religious and secular communities.

The prevalence of riddles in Old Norse literature—including secular heroic literature—suggests that riddles were an important part of royal secular education in medieval Iceland, and not just part of the monastic tradition of *ruminatio*. The riddles in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* are both extensive and well formulated, and the riddle dialogue between Heiðrekr and Gestumblindi is rigidly structured. Most of the exchanges adhere to the format of the first:

“Þat kýs ek,” segir hann, “at bera fyrr upp gáturnar.”

“Þat er rétt ok vel fallit,” segir konungr.

Þá mælti Gestumblindi:

“Hafa vildak

þat er ek hafða í gær,

vittu, hvat þat var:

Lýða lemll,

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<sup>163</sup> Pickford argues that the Apollonius story was so popular in Medieval Europe precisely because the narrative lends itself to Christian interpretation. Like much Old English literature, the Apollonius story is neither expressly pagan nor expressly Christian, yet contains many Christian themes leaving it open to interpretation. Pickford writes: “The *Apollonius*, however, can be read wholly as a Christian Romance, and such, presumably, was the intention of the anthologist who included it among the stories of the *Gesta Romanorum* 6. Yet the *Apollonius* shows such remarkable similarities with Greek Myth that one feels certain that its roots lie embedded in the stories which were told of Apollo, and of Orpheus, who accounted Apollo the greatest of gods.” T. E. Pickford, “*Apollonius of Tyre* as Greek Myth and Christian Mystery,” *Neophilologus* 59 (1975), 599.

orða tefill  
ok orða upphéfill.  
Heiðrekr konungr,  
hyggðu at gátu.”

Konungr segir: “Góð er gáta þín, Gestumblindi, getit er þessar. Færi honum mungát. Þat lemr margra vit, ok margir eru þá margmálgari, er mungát ferr á, en sumum vefst tungan, svá at ekki verðr at orði.”<sup>164</sup>

“I choose,” he says, “to ask riddles.”

“That is right and well suited,” said the king.

Then Gestumblindi spoke:

I would like to have that which I had  
yesterday, figure out what that was: thrasher  
of the people, hinderer of words, and the  
raiser of words. King Heiðrek, crack the  
riddle.

The king says, “Your riddle is good, Gestumblindi, it is cracked. Bring him ale. That weakens the wits of many, and many are then much more talkative, when ale is brought, and some twist their tongue so that they cannot speak.

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<sup>164</sup> G. Turville-Petre, ed., *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research: University College London, 2006), 37–38.

In many riddles, the solutions have to do with ordinary objects and daily activities; the artistry in composition lies in couching quotidian subject matter in elusive and allusive language. Edward Irving has even suggested that the Old English riddles sometimes give insight into ordinary experience that might not have been seen as appropriate for inclusion in heroic verse.<sup>165</sup> As an intellectual exercise, creation and sharing of riddles requires one to examine the ordinary in close detail, and from perspectives perhaps different from one's own. In addition to the proverbial and mythological knowledge apparent in the Old English and Old Norse tales of *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga*, it would seem on the basis of their prevalence cross-culturally in Old English and Old Norse literature that riddles were also an important part of heroic education.

*Dialogue: The Ability to Question and Answer –*

Skill with speech and the ability to engage in dialogue are defining characteristics of the characters Beowulf and Sigurðr. Heroes must be able to engage in dialogues to share knowledge and riddles, but literary heroes also had to be able to engage in competitive dialogue of insults, known in Old English as the *flyting* and an Old Norse as the *senna*. Though modern scholars create genre divisions between dialogues of riddles and dialogues of insults, there is some overlap between these classifications, and a *senna* may involve mythological knowledge, while a riddle might be insulting. What was important was the hero's ability to handle dialogue of any kind, be it competitive or instructive, peaceful or aggressive.

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<sup>165</sup> Edward B. Irving Jr., "Heroic Experience in the Old English Riddles," in *Old English Shorter Poems: Basic Readings*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (New York: Garland, 1994), 199–212. In discussion of the "shield" riddle, Irving writes, "Any former soldier might remark that we have here, as very rarely in heroic poetry, the experience of the enlisted man, nameless and forgotten in ditch or foxhole" (200).

In Old Norse, competitive dialogues are far more common than in Old English. There are also many examples of instructive dialogues in which competition may play a minimal role or be absent altogether. *Hávamál* is perhaps the best example of an Old Norse wisdom poem that is not competitive in nature. It generally appears to be the voice of one speaker providing advice, and only the audience can provide the partner in dialogue. The poem begins:

Gáttir allar, áðr gangi fram,  
um skoðaz skyli,  
um skyggnaz skyli,  
þvíat óvíst er at vita, hvar óvinir  
sitja á fleti fyrir. (*Hávamál*, 1)

One should—before going through—look around, spy around the threshold, for it cannot be known where enemies sit on the floor.<sup>166</sup> The speaker immediately presents important social wisdom. Significantly, this opening stanza establishes a real and ever-present sense of danger: you never know what enemies might be on the other side of the door. The advice in *Hávamál* is largely practical, advocating moderation and caution. The poem instructs rather than contends, aids rather than destroys.

Sigurðr's dialogues with Brynhildr are also examples of noncompetitive wisdom dialogues. Sigurðr specifically asks for instruction, but does not state any claim as being the wiser, nor do Sigurðr and Brynhildr wager their lives or anything else on the outcome of their dialogue. *Precepts*, in which a father instructs a son, provides a similar example of instruction:

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<sup>166</sup> As an interesting analogue, one is reminded of the scene in Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* when Kambei has his young apprentice test the ronin they are seeking to hire by hiding behind the doorway and striking the ronin with a stick as they enter.

ðus frod fæder      freobearn lærde,  
modsnottor mon,      maga cystum eald,  
wordum wisfæstum,      þæt he wel þunge...(*Precepts*, 1–3)

Thus the wise father, the man wise in mind, old in the virtue of  
kinsmen, taught the freeborn one with sagacious words so that he  
would prosper well...

Like the example of Reginn teaching Sigurðr sports, chess, and runes, the opening of  
this poem suggests that proverbial knowledge may have been actively passed on in  
Anglo-Saxon society rather than simply being imbibed through exposure.

Like *Precepts*, the instruction in the *Konungs Skuggsjá* also presents a dialogue  
between father and son.<sup>167</sup> The format of *Precepts* is also similar to that of the latter  
portion of *Sigrdrifumál*, but *Sigrdrifumál* contains eleven admonitions or pieces of  
advice before breaking off, so does not appear to have the same connection with the  
Ten Commandments.

Þat ræð ek þér it fyrsta,      at þú við frændr þína  
vammalauss verir;  
síðr þú hefnir,      þótt þeir sakar gøri;  
þat kveða dauðom duga. (*Sigrdrifumál*, 22)

I counsel you first, that you be unblemished among your kinsmen; take  
less vengeance, though they make an attack; that is said to help the  
dead.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> *Konungs skuggsjá: Speculum Regale.*

<sup>168</sup> My literal rendering may be somewhat difficult to follow, but the sense of the  
passage is that one should not be overzealous to avenge one's dead kinsmen; in fact, it





One shall teach a young man, order and show him so that he may well know, until one has tamed him; give him food and clothes, until one has led him to sense. Nor should one forswear him when he is a child before he might prove himself. Thus shall he prosper among the people, so that he becomes brave-minded.

This passage seems to describe the gentle, but disciplined upbringing of children; it emphasizes the need for training and the importance of giving children the tools and teaching necessary to become constructive members of society. Like horses, they must be tamed and taught. The passage also stresses the importance of patience with children as they are learning. There are many figures in Old Norse—often referred to as *kolbitar* or “coal biters”—and even Beowulf in Old English, who do not appear promising as children but turn out to be exceptional warriors and leaders. The literature presents heroes as developing over time, rather than as static figures.

There is significant evidence elsewhere in the corpus of Old English literature to suggest the dialogic nature of wisdom. The *Solomon and Saturn* dialogues demonstrate the dialogic expression and often competitive nature of wisdom. Even the gnomic poem *Maxims I*, a largely didactic poem comprised of proverbial statements strung together without much to suggest the poem’s existing in dialogue, begins with references to the importance of dialogue in establishing and testing wisdom:

Frige mec frodum wordum!      Ne læt þinne ferð onhæln,  
degol þæt þu deopost cunne!      Nelle ic þe min dyrne geseccan,  
gif þu me þinne hygecræft hylest      ond þine heortan geþohtas.  
Gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan. (*Maxims I*, 1–4)

Ask me with wise words. Do not let your spirit be concealed, nor let what you know deepest remain secret. I do not want to say to you my hidden knowledge if you hide from me your powers of mind and you heart's thoughts. Wise men shall exchange sayings.

Wisdom can be cultivated through contemplation, reflection, and meditation, but the results of this cultivation can be greatly enhanced through dialogue. Although I discussed the importance of appropriate silence in maintaining one's reputation—and, indeed, life—in both Old English and Old Norse societies, the wise do not keep silent all the time. Discussion, debate, instruction, and competition all take place between wise figures through the medium of words. This passage from *Maxims I* strongly echoes Óðinn's words in *Hávamál*, when he states that too much silence can be harmful:

Fregna ok segja      skal fróðra hverr,  
sá er vill heitinn horskr;  
einn vita,      né annar skal.  
þjóð veit, ef þrír ero. (*Hávamál*, 63)

Asking and speaking shall each wise man, he who wants to be called brave. When one person knows, another should not. The people knows if three know.

With the intimate association between speech and action, one can understand the dual meaning of words such as *horskr*, meaning both “brave” and “keen-minded.” Later in the poem, Óðinn gives a narrative example that affirms the truth of this maxim, alluding to the myth of the mead of poetry:

Inn aldna iötun ek sótta;      nú em ek aprt um kominn;  
fátt gat ek þegiandi þar:

mörgom orðom      mælda ek í minn frama  
í Suttungs sölom. (*Hávamál*, 104)

I sought out the old giant, I have come back again; I got little from staying silent there; with many words I spoke to enhance my fame in Suttungr's halls.

Silence is good and necessary some of the time, but it gains one little; through speech, however, one can attain an advantage. In the mythological tales concerning him, Óðinn gains far more from calculated speech than he does from any force of arms. Through disguise, cunning, and dialogue Óðinn almost always gets what he desires.<sup>170</sup>

Despite the often competitive nature of wisdom, the role of the wise in Old English literature was not simply to spout proverbs and challenge each other to verbal duels. *Maxims II* also stresses the importance of being able to resolve problems merely by the application of wisdom and without the use of force:

þing sceal gehegan<sup>171</sup>  
frod wiþ frodne;      biþ hyra ferð gelic,  
hi a sace semað,      sibbe gelærað,  
þa ær wonsælge      awegen habbað.  
Ræd sceal mid snyttro,      ryht mid wisum,  
til sceal mid tilum.      Tu beoð gemæccan;  
sceal wif ond wer      in woruld cennan

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<sup>170</sup> One notable exception is, of course, the woman who deceives him in *Hávamál*.

<sup>171</sup> For a discussion of this phrase and its ambiguous meaning, see Stanley, "Two Old English Poetic Phrases Insufficiently Understood for Literary Criticism: Þing Gehegan and Senoþ Gehegan," 67–90. It would appear from the occurrence of the word "þing" in *Beowulf* referring to the conflict between Beowulf and Grendel, that the phrase "þing gehegan" might extend beyond the verbal sphere to include physical action. This may be one more instance of how wisdom and heroic strength cannot be separated in Old English and Old Norse contexts.

bearn mid gebyrdum. (*Maxims II*, 18–25)

Counsel shall be taken, the wise with the wise, their spirits are alike.  
They always put conflict to right, teach peace, when before unhappy  
ones had carried it off. Counsel shall be with wisdom, right with  
wisdom, good with the good. Two are a match; wife and man shall  
bring children into the world through birth.

This quotation in and of itself is not terribly profound. It makes perfect sense for the wise to argue for peace and bring it about by the sound application of the wisdom they have acquired through knowledge and experience. When we consider the relationship between wisdom and heroism, however, this quotation takes on greater significance: a great warrior, through cultivation of courage, simultaneously cultivates wisdom. What is both interesting and perhaps paradoxical is that those capable of causing the most violence are the ones most often advocating concord. Considering this alongside the above quotation from *Maxims II*, it would seem that the way of the warrior is ultimately one of peace. In the previous chapter, we saw how *Völsunga saga* stressed Sigurðr's ability with words and his gift in persuading others to a particular course of action. The wise, knowing the natural course of events that play out in life, understand the temporality of their own existence, lending them a fearlessness becoming of a hero, yet they do not squander their courage on unnecessary conflicts.

#### *Prophecy –*

The gift of prophecy and the ability to know things before they happen appear to be important components of heroic wisdom in *Völsunga saga*. While prophecy plays an important role in many Old Norse sagas, it often takes the form of dreams rather than an actual gift of foresight. The ambiguity of interpretation related to

prophetic dreams allows for characters to convince themselves of outcomes different—and usually more pleasurable—than the ones staring them in the face. True prophecy, however, does not provide this ambiguity; instead, the only recourse for characters is either to accept their destiny or attempt to alter the fate they know to be immutable.

While prophetic dreams are perhaps more common than true prophecy in the Icelandic Sagas, characters often have a sense of who will live and who will die. In particular, family members tend to know when they will never see kinsmen again. Many wise characters, such as Njáll, possess relatively realistic foresight: Njáll is shrewd and calculating, and can read people well, and so knows which direction certain decisions and actions will take. As he demonstrates, however, a gift of prophecy does not provide any real control over the future: most of his advice either turns out badly or is not taken. While *Völsunga saga* may present prophecy as an essential component of heroic wisdom, other Old Norse texts do not stress the importance of this gift as much. Foresight remains an important aspect of wisdom, but is not necessarily a supernatural ability such as that apparently possessed by Sigurðr's uncle Grípir; rather, it can take the form of a realistic ability to read situations and people and thereby deduce what is most likely to happen.

In the poetic Edda prophecy plays an important role. In the mythological poems, the heroic figures of the Æsir cannot see into the future, but other figures provide the gods with prophecy. In *Völuspá* and *Baldurs Draumar* female figures occupying liminal positions between the living and the dead provide the gods with the information they seek regarding their future. Although *Völuspá* appears as a monologue in the form we possess today, the speaker addresses Óðinn in her audience in the first stanza:

Vildo, at ek, Valföðr vel fyrtelia

forn spiöll fira, þau er fremst um man. (*Völuspá*, 1)

You want, father of the slain, that I relate the ancient tales of men,  
those that I remember best.

Indeed, even from what little evidence we have, it seems that the Hanging God made a habit of seeking answers from *völur*. When the gods take counsel to decide what to do about Baldr's bad dreams, it is Óðinn who rises up and mounts his steed to ride down into hell:

Þá reið Óðinn fyr austan dyrr,  
þar er hann vissi völu leiði:  
nam hann vitugri valgaldr kveða,  
unz nauðig reis... (*Baldrs Draumar*, 4)

Then Óðinn rode to the eastern door, where he knew the tomb of a *völva* to be. He began to perform magic, speak a chant of the slain, until the corpse rose...

The question of what to do cannot be answered by the gods themselves, since even their leader cannot see an appropriate course of action.<sup>172</sup> Óðinn, the wise and clever god, appears to be constantly seeking knowledge of the future from other sources. He ends up knowing the fate of all the gods and all men, yet this knowledge only really helps him in combative wisdom dialogues concerning this mythological information. As all human figures who learn their fate before hand, neither Óðinn nor any of the other gods have any power to alter their fate, no matter how hard they try. Knowledge of the future remains an important weapon in the arsenal of wisdom for divine heroic

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<sup>172</sup> On the nature of the *völva* as a divine, dead, or semi-dead figure of wisdom, see Judy Quinn, "Dialogue with a 'Volva': *Voluspá*, *Baldrs Draumar* and *Hyndluljóð*," 245–74.

figures, such as Óðinn; the source of this knowledge does not appear as important as the knowledge itself. Óðinn himself may not be able to see into the future, but he uses reliable sources to equip himself with this knowledge. And his thirst for wisdom is nearly unparalleled: he will stop at nothing to gain greater sagacity, even sacrificing one of his eyes for a drink from Mímir's well.

In Old English, prophecy is much rarer than in Old Norse.<sup>173</sup> This may, of course, be due to the relative dearth of heroic literature in Old English or to the fact that Old English literature was preserved in manuscripts made by clergymen; the Old Testament repeatedly associates divination with sorcery. At the same time, however, ability to see into the future does occur, mostly in saints' lives, as a gift of God rather than a heroic trait. Prophecy in secular contexts does not appear to have been a popular theme in literary production. While legendary and mythological heroic figures in Old Norse often possess or seek knowledge of fate and its details of circumstance, many sagas present a kind of foresight that appears not so much as an actual prophetic gift, but as a skill developed through experience, reflection, and a calmness of mind that would allow a person to "see" the result of a situation or action before that result were actually to come into fruition.

#### *Fate* –

We come finally to the last and most important component of heroic wisdom: resignation to fate. In heroic literature, where warriors must constantly face not only death, but the struggles of life as well, we might expect fate to play a prominent role; but it also plays a significant part in the wisdom poetry of both Old English and Old

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<sup>173</sup> One possible example of prophecy in *Beowulf* is when Beowulf recounts to Hygelac having seen Freawaru, and proleptically tells about the future feud of the Heaðobeards. But one could argue that Beowulf simply reads the signs of the situation correctly, and that this does not demonstrate a real prophetic gift.



Norse. In Old English, the temporality of existence provides common ground between secular warrior culture and religious culture. One thinks perhaps of the descriptive principle of *wyrd* or perhaps the prescriptive principle of *God*, but the inscrutability of that principle remains the same: we cannot know or control the course of our lives. This theme cannot be classified as solely “Christian,” though it does exist in Christianity; Anglo-Saxon authors exploited this commonality between Christianity and warrior culture. In this section, I will examine the emphasis on fate in Old English and Old Norse wisdom poems, a concentration that strengthens the relationship between so-called “wisdom” literature and heroic literature, focusing on *The Fortunes of Men*, *The Gifts of Men*, and the *Maxims* poems in Old English, and *Hávamál* in Old Norse.

A prominent feature in the wisdom poems in Old English is the forceful repetition of man’s powerlessness before God. *Beowulf* unequivocally expresses his limitations before each fight, placing himself in the hands of God. While the all-powerful nature of God often reduces to simple formula, the persistent reiteration of this formula can hardly be ignored or overlooked. Furthermore, mankind’s limitations before God explicitly form the central focus of such poems as *The Fortunes of Men*, *The Gifts of Men*, and *Maxims II*. Take for instance this line near the beginning of *The Fortunes of Men*:

God ana wat

hwæt him weaxendum      winter bringað! (*Fortunes of Men*, 8–9)

God alone knows what winters will bring him when he grows up. In many contexts, including modern conversational English, the formulaic expression “only God knows” can be easily glossed over as simply a turn of phrase. Here, the formula and its message occupy a central position. The entire force of the poem

concerns the uncertainty of human existence, the fact that death is both inevitable and inherently unpredictable. *The Fortunes of Men* presents a realistic view of how uncertain the time and circumstances of one's death may be. Robert DiNapoli notes how this realistic view does not seek comfort in Christian dogma:

Like Beowulf or the heroes of Maldon, none of us will survive the eventual onset of fate, but how we act, while we are able, is all that matters. *The Fortunes of Men* celebrates no Christian triumph over death, but it dares to stare uncanny fate in the face and comes away the stronger for the encounter...Does such a stance then qualify the poem as a piece of wisdom literature? Only if we allow the genre to extend to meditations, such as this one, that test any rational notion of wisdom to its uttermost reach, to the brink of existence itself where all rational proposition must fall silent and the self must measure itself against all that it is not. If the books of Job or Ecclesiastes are wisdom literature, then the *Fortunes of Men*, which shares a great many of their painfully won revelations, must surely belong in their company.<sup>174</sup>

This stands in sharp contrast to the Old Norse tradition, in which prophecy enables characters to foresee their final moments. Once again, however, the necessity to resign oneself to death's inevitability stands out as a commonality between Old Norse and Old English traditions. Human beings have limited control:

Sumum þæt gegongeð      on geoguðfeore  
þæt se endestæf      earfeðmægum  
wealic weorþeð.      Sceal hine wulf etan,  
har hæðstapa;      hinsip þonne

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<sup>174</sup> Robert DiNapoli, "Close to the Edge: *The Fortunes of Men* and the Limits of Wisdom Literature," in *Text and Transmission in Medieval Europe*, ed. Chris Bishop (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2007) 127–47.

modor bimurneð. Ne bið swylc monnes geweald! (10–14)

To a certain sufferer it happens that the conclusion of life woefully comes in youth. The wolf shall eat him, the hoary heathstepper; then his mother will mourn his journey hence. Such things are not in man's control!

The extensive catalogue in *The Fortunes of Men* detailing numerous ways one might die is a rhetorical device of listing often employed in Old Norse and Old English.<sup>175</sup> The catalogue, with its stark examples, steadily builds a forceful tone, leaving the audience little choice but to accept the poem's discourse concerning the limitations of human control.<sup>176</sup> One interesting feature of this catalogue is that the examples concern both how people die and how people live:

Sumne sceal hungor ahiþan, sumne sceal hreoh fordriþan,  
sumne sceal gar agetan, sumne guð abreotan.  
Sum sceal leomena leas lifes neotan,  
folmum ætfeohþan, sum on feðe lef,  
seonobennum seoc, sar cwanian,  
murnan meotudgesceaft mode gebysgad. (15–20)

Hunger shall destroy a certain one, storm shall drive away a certain one, the spear shall waste a certain one, battle shall kill a certain one.

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<sup>175</sup> See Elizabeth Jackson, “‘Not Simply Lists’: An Eddic Perspective on Short-Item Lists in Old English Poems,” *Speculum* 73 (1998), 338–71.

<sup>176</sup> Karen Swenson demarcates this first catalogue of death as “catalogue I,” extending from line 10–57, and “catalogue II” extending from line 58–92. These two catalogues are prefaced by an introduction and suffixed by conclusion. I do not think such an organization for the poem necessarily exists or was consciously executed by the composer. See Karen Swenson, “Death Appropriated in the *Fates of Men*,” *Studies in Philology* 88 (1991), 123–39.

A certain one shall spend life without the light of his eyes, grope about with his hands, a certain one weak in the foot, sick in the bonds of his sinews, shall lament his pain, mourn his fate, tormented in mind.

The poem shifts rapidly from violent death to miserable and tortured life. Fate, it seems, is not just about death; the trials and tribulations of life itself are out of our control. The first 50 lines or so of the poem give the impression that life is a universally miserable experience. The various circumstances of death presented tend to be violent or gruesome, and the author of this poem seems to have taken some delight in describing particularly brutal ways of dying: the first is eaten by a wolf, one falls out of a tree, and one must hang from the gallows while ravens pick out his eyes. The examples of living figures likewise have tremendous difficulties to overcome, such as the *wineleas hæle* (30). But not all examples are as bleak as the initial ones. Some people work through all their bad fortune in their early days and are able to enjoy comfort and good fortune for the rest of their lives:

Sum sceal on geogube      mid godes meahtum  
his earfoðsiþ      ealne forspildan,  
ond on ylðo eft      eadig weorþan,  
wunian wyndagum      ond welan þicgan,  
maþmas ond meoduful      mægburge on,  
þæs þe ænig fira mæge      forð gehealdan. (*Fortunes of Men*, 58–63)

A certain one in youth shall with God's might completely use up his misfortune, and in age become blessed again, dwell in days of joy and enjoy prosperity, treasures and mead cups in the family home, as much as any of men may hold them perpetually.

Even here, however, the poem does not seem to extol the gladness of good fortune, since it, too, is temporary. Perhaps the best—and most well-known—example of this theme is from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*:

Cuius suasioni uerbisque prudentibus alius optimatum regis tribuens assensum, continuo subdidit: 'Talis,' inquit, 'mihi uidetur, rex, uita hominum praesens in terris, ad conparationem eius, quod nobis incertum est, temporis, quale cum te residente ad caenam cum ducibus ac ministris tuis tempore brumali, accenso quidem foco in medio, et calido effecto caenaculo, furentibus autem foris per omnia turbinibus hiemalium pluuiarum uel niuium, adueniens unus passeium domum citissime peruolauerit; qui cum per unum ostium ingrediens, mox per aliud exierit. Ipso quidem tempore, quo intus est, hiemis tempestate non tangitur, sed tamen paruissimo spatio serenitatis ad momentum excurso, mox de hieme in hiemem regrediens, tuis oculis elabitur. Ita haec uita hominum ad modicum apparet; quid autem sequatur, quidue praecesserit, prorsus ignoramus. Unde si haec noua doctrina certius aliquid attulit, merito esse sequenda uidetur.'<sup>177</sup>

Assenting to his persuasions and prudent words, another of the king's best retainers immediately spoke: "It seems to me thus, King," he said, "the present life of men on earth, in comparison to that time which is uncertain to us, is like the sparrow entering the house and quickly flying through, when you sit at table with your leaders and ministers in winter time, a fire burning in the middle, warming the dining area, and

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<sup>177</sup> Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), Book II, XIII.

the storms of winter rain and snow raging outside; entering through one door, it soon flies out another. During that time, when it is inside, it does not feel the storms of winter, but instead after a brief moment of serenity, leaves, soon returning to the winter from the winter it came, slipping away from your eyes. So this life of men appears for a short time, but of what follows, or what comes before, we are completely ignorant. Therefore if this new doctrine offers anything more certain, it seems to be worth following.”

While the temporality of earthly life takes on a Christian coloring in the context of most Old English poems and often appears in juxtaposition to the eternal life, this theme of impermanence is not limited to a Christian milieu. Christianity may provide some answers as to what form the afterlife may take, but it certainly did not introduce any new concepts of temporality to Germanic societies. These were presumably well-known and well ingrained in the culture and society. Given the harshness of life in medieval Europe in general, as well as the prominence of warfare among Germanic peoples, there were no doubt constant reminders of life’s unpredictability and ephemeral nature.<sup>178</sup> *The Fortunes of Men* begins by cataloging observations of these reminders and then draws a sort of gnomic conclusion about God’s inscrutable cosmic

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<sup>178</sup> Swenson argues for a fusion between Germanic and Christian sensibilities in this poem. She writes, “Old English literature has been celebrated as pluralistically syncretic, as a literature that incorporates—differently in different texts—the Germanic, the Celtic, and the Latinate; the pagan and the Christian. Such a view encourages exploration of the ways a given poem works to contain and present the diverse elements which inform it. The idea of monolithic unity as a driving critical concept is superseded by exploration of the relationships between ideological strands.” Swenson, “Death Appropriated in the *Fates of Men*,” 125. Swenson argues that catalogue I is Germanic, and that catalogue II is a Christian gloss on catalogue I. While I agree with her that the poem expresses a syncretism common in Anglo-Saxon literature, it is difficult to separate *The Fortunes of Men* into two clearly divided components, one secular and Germanic, one religious and Christian.

organization. Despite the subject matter, the poem is not in fact overtly didactic or prescriptive. Nonetheless, I would suggest that the argument is in line with what we have seen portrayed in the heroic narratives of Old English and Old Norse, namely that true wisdom involves an acceptance both of one's own limitations and of the natural workings of the world. Ultimately, the order of the world is beyond our understanding.

In the Christian context in which these poems were written, the mysterious organizing force of the universe is ascribed to God's control.

Swa wrætlice weoroda nergend  
geond middangeard monna cræftas  
sceop ond scyrede ond gesceapo ferede  
æghwylcum on eorþan eormencynnes.  
Forþon him nu ealles þonc æghwa secge,  
þæs þe he fore his miltsum monnum scrifeð. (*Fortunes of Men*,  
93–98)

So skillfully the savior of the hosts shaped and decreed and creating,  
brought the crafts of men throughout middle earth to each of mankind  
on earth. Therefore all shall say thanks to him for that which he on  
account of his mercies allots to men.

By the end of the poem the examples of God's decrees have become generally positive, including glory in war, fame, and skill in board games; but one can hardly forget the grim and gruesome instances of death presented in the poem's opening lines. This contrast presents God as a complex and unpredictable figure who controls the fates of men in ways beyond human comprehension. The ordaining force of the universe may not have been God in pre-Christian times, but this does not mean that

the workings of the world were any more comprehensible. The wisdom of such poems as *The Fortunes of Men*, therefore, cannot be deemed either Christian or secular. It may be that knowledge of pre-Christian cultural practices was not as important in Anglo-Saxon society as it was in Icelandic or Old Norse society; but it may also be the case that Anglo-Saxon composers and scribes sought to find common ground by simply presenting sapiential material of ambiguous attribution that was equally applicable in religious and secular contexts.

*The Fortunes of Men*, whatever the precise makeup of its syncretic nature may be, stresses and affirms the lack of control human beings have over their physical well-being, status in life, and manner of death. While the poem certainly contains Christian elements, the notion of powerlessness before fate is critically important to heroic warrior culture. True wisdom comes from accepting one's place within a larger cosmic order, over which one has no control. The fact remains that much of the poem is simply observational; an experienced warrior would no doubt have ample opportunity to observe the temporality of life. *The Fortunes of Men* therefore echoes many of the sentiments found in the heroic narratives of *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga*, doing so in a manner equally palatable to religious audiences.

Much like *The Fortunes of Men*, *The Gifts of Men* presents a catalogue of examples of human experience, this time focused on talent rather than fortune generally. The trajectory of the poem is almost identical to that of *The Fortunes of Men*. The exempla build a sense of the diversity and complexity in the skills of human society, and then these exempla—however varied—fall together under the domain of God himself.<sup>179</sup> Overall the poem appears more positive than *The Fortunes of Men*

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<sup>179</sup> Cross argues that the poem draws its theme from the interpretation (by Gregory) of the scriptural parable of Matt. XXV, 14–30. See J. E. Cross, “The Old English Poetic Theme of ‘The Gifts of Men’,” *Neophilologus* 46 (1962), 66–70. Douglas Short also argues for Christian influence on the poem, suggesting that “leoda leoþocræftas” is an



because the gifts of God are all useful, whereas several fates appear painful or miserable. Like the Lord of an Anglo-Saxon hall, God dispenses his gifts generously and in measure:

Ne bið ænig þæs earfoðsælig  
mon on moldan, ne þæs medspedig,  
lytelhydig, ne þæs læthydig,  
þæt hine se argifa ealles biscyrge  
modes cræfta oþþe mægendæda,<sup>180</sup>  
wis on gewitte oþþe on wordcwidum,  
þy læs ormod sy ealra þinga,  
þara þe he geworhte in woruldlife,  
geofona gehwylcre. Næfre god demed  
þæt ænig eft þæs earm geweorðe.  
Nænig eft þæs swiþe þurh snyttrucræft  
in þeode þrym þisses lifes  
forð gestigeð, þæt him folca weard  
þurh his halige giefe hider onsende  
wise geþohtas ond woruldcræftas,  
under anes meajt ealle forlæte,  
þy læs he for wlence wuldorgeofona ful,  
mon mode swið of gemete hweorfe

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“allusion to the ‘membra corporis’ of the Pauline analogy which defines each of the endowments of mankind as individual members of a unified body—the metaphoric body of Christ, which is the Church.” Douglas D. Short, “Leodocraeftas and the Pauline Analogy of the Body in the Old English *Gifts of Men*,” *Neophilologus* 59 (1975), 465.

<sup>180</sup> For a possible emendation of “oþþe” in this line, see Douglas D. Short, “The Old English *Gifts of Men*, Line 13,” *Modern Philology* 71 (1974), 388–89.

ond þonne forhycge heanspedigran;  
ac he gedæleð, se þe ah domes geweald,  
missenlice geond þisne middangeard  
leoda leopocræftas londbuendum. (*Gifts of Men*, 8–29)

There is no man on earth so wretched, nor so poor, pusillanimous, nor so slow-minded, that the honor-giver denies him all powers of mind or deeds of courage, wisdom in sense or in constructing words, lest he be despairing of all things which he works in worldly life, each of gifts. God never decrees that any be so wretched. No one either rises forth in among the people in the power of this life through strength of wisdom, such that the guardian of peoples through his holy gifts sends hither wise thoughts and worldly powers to be had all under the power of one man, lest he on account of pride, full of worldly gifts, he turns his mind strongly from measure and then despise the ill-fortuned; but he who has control of glory deals out diversely the skills of the people to land-dwellers across this middle earth.

No one on earth is completely devoid of God's favor, and no one possesses it entirely. One might hear echoes of Daniel in this passage, and think of the overbearing pride of Nebuchadnezzar and his subsequent fall from power. Geoffrey Russom, however, argues that *The Gifts of Men* may present a picture of aristocratic accomplishments and pursuits, the kinds of skills cultivated and practiced by noblemen.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> See Geoffrey R. Russom, "A Germanic Concept of Nobility in the *Gifts of Men* and *Beowulf*," *Speculum* 53 (1978), 1–15. Russom disagrees with Cross and asserts, "in view of these inconclusive results, it is reasonable to consider whether, despite its Christian content, *Gifts* might after all be Germanic in form. Nothing in the poem proves that its author was widely read, as Cross himself concedes" (1–2). A very similar notion to the *Gifts of Men* can be found in the Old Norse *Konungs skuggsjá*.

It is surprising that these views have stood so long unchallenged, in view of the ample evidence from Scandinavian literature that such feats were respected, that they were in fact regarded as gentlemanly accomplishments (*íþróttir*). No skill in *Gifts* fails to qualify as an *íþrótt*; moreover, catalogues combining *íþróttir* with other kinds of distinguished attributes play an important role in Norse literature, both in historical writing and in skaldic poetry. These materials make it possible to determine with a high degree of accuracy what was regarded as aristocratic by the aristocrats themselves, and by the poets who praised them.<sup>182</sup>

This suggestion that *The Gifts of Men* portrays not simply gifts but skills cultivated by a noble class has some interesting implications, stressing that while God may dispense talent in certain skills to certain people, this talent must be cultivated and developed through consistent practice and training. Expertise cannot come without effort, nor can one attain expertise in every skill.

When considering these limitations, one might also think of various examples from Old Norse literature that stress the limitation of both physical strength and wisdom. Take for example the proverb uttered by Sigurðr in his dialogue with Fáfnir:

hverr sá, er með mörgum kemr, má þat finna eitthvert sinn, at engi er einna hvatastr. (*Völsunga saga*, XVIII)

Everyone who comes among many people will find one time that no one is the bravest of all.

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The father describes wisdom as a tree with braches and twigs of varying sizes, that are given out to men so that some have a larger store of wisdom than others. See *Konungs skuggsjá: Speculum Regale*, 128.

<sup>182</sup> Russom, “A Germanic Concept of Nobility in the *Gifts of Men* and *Beowulf*,” 5.

Sigurðr demonstrates a certain humility in uttering this statement, but also demonstrates a pragmatism characteristic of Old Norse wisdom literature: though described as the best, Sigurðr refutes the feasibility of surpassing everyone. *The Gifts of Men* explains the source of this moderation as a sort of decree from God to limit the pride and vainglory of those who perform great deeds. It is almost as though God built into his system a mechanism to restrain human beings from sinning:

Nis nu ofer eorþan      ænig monna  
mode þæs cræftig,      ne þæs mægeneacen,  
þæt hi æfre anum      ealle weorþen  
gegearwade,      þy læs him gilp sceððe,  
oþþe fore þære mærþe      mod astige,  
gif he hafap ana      ofer ealle men  
wlite ond wisdom      ond weorca blæd;  
ac he missenlice      monna cynne  
gielpes styreð      ond his giefe bryttað,  
sumum on cystum,      sumum on cræftum,  
sumum on wlite,      sumum on wige,  
sumum he syleð monna      milde heortan,  
þeawfæstne geþoht,      sum biþ þeodne hold. (*Gifts of Men*, 97–109)

There is no one of men now on earth so skilled of mind, nor so blessed in might, that they would ever all be supplied to him, lest arrogance harm him, or on account of fame his heart swell up, if he alone has over all men beauty and wisdom and fame of deeds; but He diversely steers mankind from arrogance and dispenses his gifts, to a certain one in qualities, to a certain one in skills, to a certain one in beauty, to a

certain one in battle, to a certain one he gives a mild heart of men,  
virtuous thought, a certain one is faithful to his lord.

The emphasis in this passage—as well as the agency—largely falls on God, who provides checks to keep us from excess. Once again a nonreligious theme gains Christian coloring by the attribution of ultimate power to God. But the notion of moderation does not necessarily belong to a single tradition, be it Christian or pre-Christian. Moderation and transience seem to be closely linked.

The theme of temporality also appears in *Maxims I*. Like the traveler who has to leave, the human being must prepare to depart from this world:

Fus sceal feran,      fæge sweltan  
ond dogra gehwam      ymb gedal sacan  
middangeardes.      Meotud ana wat  
hwær se cwealm cymeþ,      þe heonan of cyþþe gewiteþ. (*Maxims I*,  
27–30)

The ready shall depart, the doomed shall die and each day struggle  
against his separation from the world. The Creator alone knows where  
slaughter comes when it journeys hence out of ken.

Mortal man does not have a choice and will have to die regardless, not knowing when or how. Nor is it possible for mortal man to know with certainty—except through faith—anything about the afterlife. This echoes many of Beowulf's statements of resignation and humility before his battles with monsters. It indicates that human beings have neither physical control over the world nor the mental perspicacity to understand how the world is ordered and maintained. In the wisdom poems, as in *Beowulf*, the wise man accepts his limitations and does not seek to claim control of that over which only God has power.

While the poem *Maxims I* seems at times a rough or inconsistent compilation of proverbial knowledge, *Maxims II* is far more streamlined, though its factual and proverbial knowledge may seem random and arbitrary. The factual statements presented in the first portion of the poem do not necessarily have to have any particular order to establish a wide and varied body of knowledge readily accessible to any audience member. Towards the end of the poem, however, the subject matter becomes more profound:

God sceal wið yfele,      geogoð sceal wið yldo,  
lif sceal wið deaþe,      leoht sceal wið þystrum,  
fyrd wið fyrde,      feond wið oðrum,  
lað wið laþe      ymb land sacan,  
synne stælan.      A sceal snotor hycgean  
ymb þysse worulde gewinn,      wearh hangian,  
fægere ongildan      þæt he ær facen dyde  
manna cynne. (*Maxims II*, 50–7)

Good shall against evil, youth shall against age, life shall against death, light shall against darkness, troop against troop, enemy against the others, hostile shall contend against the hostile for land, enter into conflict. Always shall the wise ponder on the turmoil of this world, the criminal hang, fairly repay for that he committed a crime against mankind.

Once again, these are not terribly revolutionary ideas, and anyone who stops to consider will recognize that the contention discussed in these lines can—like the

changing seasons—be observed by anyone.<sup>183</sup> But this introduction of the theme of contention sets the stage for the forceful conclusion of the poem:

Meotod ana wat  
hwyder seo sawul sceal      syððan hweorfan,  
and ealle þa gastas      þe for gode hweorfað  
æfter deaðdæge,      domes bidað  
on fæder fæðme.      Is seo forðgesceaft  
digol and dyrne;      drihten ana wat,  
nergende fæder.      Næni eft cymeð  
hider under hrofas,      þe þæt her for soð  
mannum secge      hwylc sy meotodes gesceaft,  
sigefolca gesetu,      þær he sylfa wunað.<sup>184</sup> (*Maxims II*, 57–66)

The Creator alone knows whence the soul shall afterwards depart, and all the spirits who departed to God after their death day await judgement in the embrace of the father. The journey hence is secret and hidden; the Lord alone knows, the saving father. None come back hither under the skies who might truly say to men what the Creator's dispensation is like, the habitation of the victorious people, where He Himself dwells.

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<sup>183</sup> Thomas D. Hill has argued that these lines echo Ecclesiasticus on the natural disorder of the world, and the Augustinian view that disorder and evil exist to illustrate order and good. See Hill, "Notes on the Old English 'Maxims' I and II," 446.

<sup>184</sup> The afterlife remained uncertain, but religious visions apparently lent some clarification. Visions of the afterlife by saints, such as Fursey and others, helped formulate notions of the Christian afterlife early in the Middle Ages and vision literature certainly became popular later on, as evinced by the writings of such figures as Margery Kempe and Bridget of Sweden.

All the factual or observational knowledge contained in the first portion of the poem contrasts here with the complete lack of knowledge concerning the world after death. It is as if to say, we may know all these things about the world around us and how it functions, but human perception is too limited to be able to see beyond the boundaries of life itself. Human beings can therefore enjoy the benefits of their limited worldly knowledge, so long as they are constantly aware that this knowledge is small and infinite in comparison to God's omniscience.

The topic of moderation so prevalent in these Old English poems is also a central theme in the Old Norse wisdom poem *Hávamál*.

erat maðr svá góðr at galli ne fylgi,  
né svá illr, at einugi dugi. (*Hávamál*, 133)

There is no man so good that he is not accompanied by defect, nor one so bad that there is nothing he can accomplish.

These two lines convey essentially the same principle as *The Gifts of Men*. No one is perfect, but no one is so poorly off as to be completely incapable of performing any useful function. The difference here, however, is that *Hávamál* does not ascribe a source or reason for this fact of life. The poem does not express skill as a gift from God, nor does it overtly state that skill comes from practice or training. This creates tension through paradox: one should attempt to be the best one can, but being the best requires a firm knowledge and understanding of one's own limitations.

The concept that no one has everything and no one has nothing can be seen simply as an observation of a fact of life. It is, in a sense, a natural form of moderation. But *Hávamál* stresses the importance of moderation in other ways. Perhaps most curious is the poem's counsel that one should not have too much wisdom, but instead be averagely wise. Three stanzas deal with this concept:



Meðalsnotr skyli manna hverr,  
æva til snotur sé;  
Þeim er fyrða fegrst að lifa  
Er vel mart vito.

Meðalsnotr skyli manna hverr,  
æva til snotur sé;  
Þvíat snotrs mannz hjarta verður sjaldan glatt  
ef sá er alsnotr er á.

Meðalsnotr skyli manna hverr,  
æva til snotur sé;  
Örlög sín viti engi fyrir;  
þeim er sorgalausastr sefi. (*Hávamál*, 54-56)

Middling wise should each man be, he should never be too wise; to him  
is the fairest in life of men, he who well knows many things.

Middling wise should each man be, he should never be too wise; for a  
wise man's heart is seldom glad if he owns it is all-wise.

Middling wise should each man be, he should never be too wise; no  
one may know his fate beforehand if he wants a sorrowless mind.

The anaphoric structure here presents us with only three clues why it is good to be  
moderately wise and not too wise. The first is that it is good to know a fair amount.  
This seems reasonable and simple enough. It furthermore echoes the sentiment

expressed earlier in the poem: *því at óbrigðra vin / fær maðr aldregi / en mannvit mikit* (For one can never get a more constant friend than great understanding) (*Hávamál*, 6). The next two examples have to do with the relationship between wisdom and foresight. As in *Völsunga saga*, the implication is that the wise man is gifted with a certain sense of prophecy and is able to know events before they happen. The poem seems to advocate the bliss of ignorance to a limited degree, since complete knowledge of what is to come can easily overwhelm a person.

Other examples in Old Norse literature express the sentiment that it is good not to have too much wisdom. In *Skaldskaparmál* the dwarves kill Kvasir and give the excuse that he died from suffocation because he was too wise and could not find any one to match him in dialogue:

Sá heitir Kvasir. Hann er svá vitr at engi spyrir hann þeira hluta er eigi kann hann órlausn. Hann fór víða um heim at kenna mönnum fræði, ok þá er hann kom at heimboði til dverga nokkvorra, Fjalars ok Galars, þá kölluðu þeir hann með sér á einmæli ok drápu hann...Dvergarnir sögðu Ásum at Kvasir hefði kafnat í mannviti fyrir því at engi var þar svá fróðr at spyrja kynni hann fróðleiks.<sup>185</sup>

He is called Kvasir. He is so wise that no one asked him about anything that he could not answer. He traveled widely around the world to teach men wisdom, and when he came to visit certain dwarves, Fjalar and Galar, then they called him with them for a private talk and killed him...The dwarves told the Æsir that Kvasir had suffocated in his understanding because no one was wise enough to be able to test his wisdom.

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<sup>185</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skaldskaparmál*, 3.

This passage suggests several interesting points concerning conceptions of knowledge and wisdom in Old Norse society. It reiterates the theme expressed in *Hávamál* that too much wisdom can be a bad thing. But it also suggests that wisdom is dialogic in nature and can be obtained from a teacher. If we view wisdom as the sum of learning and experience, it becomes difficult to separate learning and experience when a teacher is involved. Through dialogue a teacher is capable of passing on not only factual, proverbial, or mythological knowledge, but also life experience. In this passage from *Skaldskaparmál*, the Æsir accept the dwarfs' excuse without question, yet there is no evidence to indicate that Kvasir suffered from his excessive wisdom. If wisdom and prophecy are intimately linked, as suggested by *Völsunga saga* and *Hávamál*, then it seems that Kvasir must have known he was going to be killed by the dwarves. Perhaps strangest here is that despite the profession of wisdom, Kvasir does not appear to have much in the way of street smarts: after all, he is easily duped and killed by two dwarves. Nonetheless one cannot blame him too much because he is also governed by the inescapable bonds of fate. Kvasir may know that the dwarves will kill him, but despite his wisdom, he does not possess the power to alter what has already been pre-destined. Similarly, Sigurðr, a central figure of wisdom, dies when he knows he should be on guard against the rage of Brynhildr and the treachery of his brothers in law. It would seem that Kvasir and Sigurðr and any other figures of extensive wisdom fall prey to the organizational structure of the universe by which no man can be so good that he has no blemish.

*Hávamál*, words of wisdom from Óðinn himself, contains much advice useful for everyday life. Indeed, the structure of the poem is similar to the structure of Brynhildr's advice to Sigurðr in *Völsunga saga*, beginning with practical advice for various situations one might encounter, then shifting into more esoteric mythological or magical knowledge, specifically information about runes. The exploits of Óðinn

involve more trickery and cunning than they do wielding of weapons. Óðinn is a divine figure embodying the ideals of a wise warrior. There is, however, something about Óðinn that separates him from many human characters. I have argued extensively that the highest ideal of heroic wisdom is a resignation to fate and death; but Óðinn often seems to lack this quality. He and the rest of the gods obstinately refuse to accept fate on several occasions. Perhaps the most obvious example is what the gods do with Loki's monster children:

...þá sendi Alföðr til goðin at taka börnin ok færa sér. Ok er þau kómu til hans þá kastaði hann orminum í inn djúpa sæ er liggr um öll lönd, ok óx sá ormr svá at hann liggr í miðju hafinu of öll lönd ok bítr í sporð sér. Hel kastaði hann í Niflheim ok gaf henni vald yfir níu heimum at hon skipti öllum vistum með þeim er til hennar váru sendir, þat eru sótt dauðir menn ok ellidauðir...

Úlfinn fæddu æsir heima, ok hafði Týr einn djarfleik at ganga til at ok gefa honum mat. En er goðin sá hversu mikit hann óx hvern dag, ok allar spár sögðu at hann myndi vera lagðr til skaða þeim, þá fengu æsirnir þat ráð at þeir gerðu fjötur allsterkan er þeir kölluðu Leyðing...<sup>186</sup>

...then All-Father sent the gods to take the children and bring them to him. And when they came to him, then he cast the serpent into the deep sea which lies around all lands, and the serpent grew so that it lies in the middle of the ocean around all lands and bites itself in the tail.

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<sup>186</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 27.

He cast Hel into Niflheim, and gave her control over nine worlds, so that she has to provide nourishment for those who are sent to her; those are those who die of sickness or old age...

The Æsir raised the wolf at home, and Týr alone had the courage to go to him and give him food. But when the gods saw how much he grew each day, and all the prophecies told that he would be fated to harm them, then the Æsir took counsel so that they made an all-powerful fetter, which they called Leyðing...

All the gods share the resistance to fate shown in this passage—it is not a quality of Óðinn alone. I would argue that it is possible for a character to be willing to accept death at any moment, but nonetheless strive with all effort and attention toward remaining alive. Even so, it does diminish Óðinn's heroic stature to be so concerned about threats of all kinds. One of the other great examples of the unyielding power of fate in the mythological tales of Old Norse is the story of Baldr. Plagued by bad dreams, Baldr relates them to the Æsir, who then seek to ensure the prophecy of these dreams does not come to pass. In the Eddic poem *Baldr's Dreams*, Óðinn rides down into Hel and wakes a dead prophetess to learn what will happen to Baldr. Although this poem does not specifically state what Óðinn and the rest of the Æsir do to avoid Baldr's death, Baldr's tragic fate receives articulation in the prose *Edda*:

En er hann sagði Ásunum draumana þá báru þeir saman ráð sín, ok var það gert að beiða griða Baldri fyrir allskonar háska, ok Frigg tók svardaga til þess að eira skyldu Baldri eldr og vatn, járn og allskonar málmr, steinar, jörðin, viðirnir, sóttirnar, dýrin, fuglarnir, eitir, ormar.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Gylfaginning*, 45.

And when he told the Æsir of his dreams, then they took counsel together, and it was decided to ask peace for Baldr from all kinds of danger. And Frigg took oaths that fire and water should spare Baldr, iron and all kinds of metals, stones, earth, trees, sicknesses, the animals, the birds, poison, snakes.

As with the binding of Fenrir, the request of all objects to abstain from harming Baldr comes about because of the counsel of all the gods together, rather than simply a decision of Óðinn. Nonetheless, Óðinn's participation in the attempts to avoid the inevitable in regards to Baldr demonstrates a strong desire to be able to direct the course of fate. The question is how much Óðinn's frustration with his lack of control over the events of the future diminishes his stature as a wise and powerful hero. This is difficult to answer, in part because we are looking at several different texts concerning the same character, some of which seem to have been written earlier than others, and also seem to emphasize different purposes of entertainment, instruction, etc. Nonetheless, three factors emerge as important in considering this question of Óðinn's heroic stature. The first is whether we can judge divine heroic figures by the same criteria as humans; the second is whether the mythological tales concerning Óðinn's attempts to alter fate specifically emphasize that no one—not even the gods—can alter the course of the future; and the third is whether any hero can resist the temptation to change the outcome of events he or she knows will be disastrous in some form or another.

In terms of the first issue—whether we can judge the gods by the same criteria as we judge human figures—fate appears to manifest itself differently for gods and humans. The general view in the legendary material of Old Norse is that when human warriors die they go to Valhalla, there to feast and fight until the final battle at Ragnarök. *Sótt dauðir menn ok ellidauðir* (Those who die of sickness or old age) go to

Hel.<sup>188</sup> Life is short, like the flight of the sparrow through the Mead Hall, and warriors have at best a heroic afterlife ahead of them if they can manage to die with glory. The gods, however, appear to have one long lifespan that precedes and extends through the lifespans of all human beings. But once they face the final battle of Ragnarök, that is it. Although *Völuspá* indicates there will be some sort of rebirth after all the destruction of the final battle, it appears that Ragnarök is the end for most of the gods. There is no Valhalla to look forward to, no feasting and sport. The gods came into being and rose to power at the dawn of the world, and they will fall and fade with the apocalyptic conclusion of Ragnarök. Óðinn tries to delay or avoid this end, while Sigurðr merely tries to avoid the catastrophes that play out in his lifetime.

The second point to consider is whether mythological tales in which gods attempt to alter their fate were intended to serve as examples that no one, not even the gods, can do so. While it is inherently impossible to determine the purpose of various myths and narratives from Old Norse, and while I think that determining a purpose or moral to these myths and narratives oversimplifies and potentially demeans them, lessons concerning the inescapability of fate can be drawn from various tales concerning the Norse gods. The gods cannot change their own or anyone else's fate once it has been shaped. It is not a far step from there to stress the futility of a human being—particularly one who knows his or her own fate—attempting to change the future. Therefore I would say that these tales concerning gods attempting to avoid catastrophes that have already been prophesied serve as examples from which lessons for mortal audiences, including those of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland, can be drawn. These lessons probably did not constitute the sole purpose of the mythological narratives from which they can be extracted, and we cannot know either authorial intent or the precise social context in which these myths were shared and interpreted.

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<sup>188</sup> See above, note 186.

It is clear that once the course of life has been determined, it cannot be altered, not even by the gods; but paradoxically, there appears to be some divine power capable of shaping the course of events for those whose lives have not yet been mapped out. The three norns who sit above Urðr's well are perhaps more powerful than the gods themselves, but the prose *Edda*—as well as *Fáfnismál*—specifically mentions that there are other norns—some are related to the Æsir—who shape the course of human lives when those human beings are born:

Þar stendr salr einn fagr undir askinum við brunninn, ok ór þeim sal koma þrjár meyjar þær er svá heita: Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld. Þessar meyjar skapa mönnum aldr. Þær köllum vér nornir. Enn eru fleiri nornir þær er koma til hvers manns er borinn er at skapa aldr, ok eru þessar goðkunnigar, en aðrar álfa ættar, en hinar þriðju dverga ættar.<sup>189</sup>

There stands a fair hall under the ash by the well, and out of the hall come three maidens, who are so called: Fate, Becoming, Shall. These maidens shape the lives of men. We call them norns. There are still more norns who come to each man who is born to shape his life, and these are of the kin of gods, but others are of the family of elves, and the third are from the family of dwarves.

The exact mechanism by which fate is shaped cannot be clearly determined. Indeed, from the evidence we do have, it would seem that a clearly articulated mechanism or system by which fate found creation and expression may never have existed at all. Like the physical description of Grendel in *Beowulf*, some things are best left unsaid. Fate is one topic nearly impossible to understand and certainly impossible to express without some form of paradox. The most a hero could hope for is enough knowledge

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<sup>189</sup> Snorri Sturlus, *Edda: Gylfaginning*, 18.



of fate to be able to determine the course of events in his or her own life or the life of another character. Beyond this, hope of understanding so complex and powerful a force as fate is simply vain. The hero must accept his or her own limitations of strength in comparison to the far stronger organization or forces of the universe; likewise, the hero must accept his or her own limitations of comprehension in the face of so unintelligible a force as fate.

The final issue to consider when comparing evaluations of human and divine characters is whether it is possible at all for a hero to resist the temptation to avoid catastrophe he or she knows is inevitable. It is a common theme in Old Norse literature that prophecy will be fulfilled despite whatever actions characters may take to avoid it. They may expose a child or bury a weapon, but these things always come to light again. Let us consider for a moment, however, how certain figures would appear were they not to work against fate. How heroic would Óðinn seem if he simply let Baldr have his dreams and die without ever riding into the netherworld to wake the dead prophetess? He would appear uncaring and unwilling to dare. And how would Sigurðr seem were he not to speak to Brynhildr and offer to give up Guðrún and all he had to be with her? He would seem complacent and not at all bold. Once again we are met with paradox. The hero must resign himself or herself to the inescapable power of fate; at the same time, the hero must be willing to strive against fate in order to thereby prove the full extent of his or her bravery. What separates the hero from the fool in this context is that the hero strives against fate in order to avoid catastrophe and pain for those he or she holds most dear, knowing all the while that his efforts will accomplish nothing, while the fool strives against fate either for selfish reasons, or simply for the challenge of taking on the impossible.

Óðinn and Brynhildr represent divine figures of wisdom, and their status as divinities means that fate plays an altogether different role in defining their wisdom.

Their wisdom is not the same as that of mortal heroes, whose greatest challenge is overcoming the difficulties fate or fear of death.

*Conclusion –*

Old English and Old Norse “wisdom poems” contain numerous enigmas and difficulties for the modern reader. But if we look at these poems not just as a genre in themselves, but as part of a larger literary tradition that includes heroic literature, the enigmas and obscurities begin to resolve themselves. The components of wisdom evident in heroic works such as *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga* also appear in this wisdom literature. Proverbial, factual, observational, mythological, or other socially constructed forms of knowledge are everywhere important components in the development of the wise hero. The ability to engage in dialogue—competitive or otherwise—is likewise a necessary feature of the wise warrior. He must be able both to question and answer, and through both be able to give counsel. Often, he must be competent in asking and answering riddles as well. Through the power of speech he is able to avoid the use of physical force, either for his own gain or for resolving societal dilemmas. The dialogic nature of wisdom is strongly attested in both Old English and Old Norse. These societal dilemmas, however, will be different in each tradition, so the dialogic proficiency heroes demonstrate will likewise take different forms in each tradition.

Another area in which the characterization of wisdom appears to differ in Old English from Old Norse is that Old English wisdom largely lacks the prophetic value so prominent in Old Norse. In *Beowulf*, Beowulf does not know what will happen to him or how the course of his life will unfold. He places himself in God’s hands, acknowledging his own lack of control over his future at his own lack of knowledge concerning what will happen to him. Those poems typically designated as “wisdom

poems” in Old English also emphasize this inscrutability of the future. Prophecy in Old Norse gives a different tenor to the narratives. In *Völsunga saga*, as in other sagas in which prophecy plays an important role, there is a strange and paradoxical tension between knowledge of the future and the actions of the characters. Characters who know what will happen often either work against their fate, or ignore prophecy until they have seen how it has been fulfilled to the letter. These characters are confronted much more strongly than in the Old English tradition by the inescapability of fate: they are locked in to a complex web of their own and others’ actions. The use of prophecy in narrative is inherently complicated and makes determining motivation and volition nearly impossible. Does Sigurðr ignore Fáfnir when the dragon tells him about the cursed gold because he has already heard the prophecy of his life, and knows this gold will make him famous, or is it because of pride, or is it because of youthful foolishness? All we can know is a character’s actions; rarely can we know the “why” behind such actions.

Both traditions, however, require the hero to resign him- or herself completely both to death and to the difficulties of life itself, whether these difficulties can be known beforehand or not. Death is an inevitability, particularly powerful for the warrior, and so the most important aspect of heroism is an understanding of life’s temporality and a willingness to die. The fearlessness of death found in the heart of the warrior is not the reckless abandon of a fool who throws caution to the wind; rather, it is the calculated and cultivated bravery of someone who has meditated on death, faced the terror of its unknowability, and transcended fear. In this way, the hero can literally face death rather than run from it. In *The Battle of Maldon*, Wulfmær is described: *wælræste geceas*. When a hero has reached a certain level of skill and experience, he limits the effects of chance in the chaos of battle and can, in effect,

choose or discern when it is appropriate to face death.<sup>190</sup> This combination of bravery and discernment is a form of wisdom.

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<sup>190</sup> On the nature of choice in *Beowulf* with reference to this notion of choosing death, see Andrew Galloway, "Beowulf and the Varieties of Choice," *PMLA* 105 (1990), 197–208.

## WISDOM IN THE *NIBELUNGENLIED*?

### CHAPTER 4

The *Nibelungenlied* provides an important juxtaposition to the texts considered thus far in this dissertation. In terms of the narrative, it is remarkably similar to *Völsunga saga*, yet takes place in a drastically different environment, or—as shall be seen—environments. The *Nibelungenlied* presents two worlds opposed by time and space: an older, mythological world located on the fringes of civilization and in remote lands, and a newer, courtly world representing the seat of political power. This chapter will consider the two leading heroes of the *Nibelungenlied*—Siegfried and Hagen—in regard to their relationship or position within these worlds, and what that means for their status as figures of wisdom. Siegfried, primarily based in the mythological world, attempts to use his mythological knowledge in a courtly setting; unfortunately for him, this eventually fails. Hagen, on the other hand, is grounded in the courtly world and possesses courtly wisdom, but also ventures into the mythological world. Ultimately, the mythological and courtly are interwoven both within and through the characters of Siegfried and Hagen.<sup>191</sup> The generic implications of this interweaving are perhaps the most interesting: Siegfried, the mythological character, comes across more in the manner of a romance hero, while Hagen, the courtly character, assumes the role of epic hero. The *Nibelungenlied* author thereby comments on and criticizes the courtly present, the mythological past, romance literature, and epic literature simultaneously in a complex interweaving of discourses. Each social sphere has its own form of wisdom, but the *Nibelungenlied* adheres to the

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<sup>191</sup> Neither Siegfried nor Hagen is the product of one society alone: Siegfried appears primarily mythological, but has had a courtly upbringing; Hagen appears primarily courtly, but has some mythological qualities, demonstrated by his knowledge concerning Siegfried.

older epic model in presenting resignation to fate as the foundation of heroic wisdom: Siegfried lacks this resignation, while Hagen attains it.

*Epic and Romance –*

The *Nibelungenlied* is generally considered an epic, but the influence of romance and other courtly literature is apparent throughout the text. The author consciously plays with the generic expectations of both older heroic and newer courtly literature. Even the form of verse shows an intermixture of earlier Germanic and newer courtly standards: the stress-based meter of long lines divided by a caesura is reminiscent of the Germanic verse form, while the use of rhyming couplets is the preferred medium of romance. The distinction between epic and romance, however, is more thematic than formal. I stand in agreement with Masaki Mori's thematic rather than structural or poetic definition of epic. An epic need not concern itself with battles of large armies, nor must it be written in verse; but it has a recognizable trait or quality, which Mori terms "epic grandeur."<sup>192</sup> Mori explores how: "epic grandeur stems mainly from three thematic elements: the hero's attitude toward his mortality, his communal responsibility, and the dual dimension of time and space he and the entire work must cope with."<sup>193</sup> The hero, however strong, is limited by nature and must at some point succumb to death; before then he struggles in some form, but the struggles are not simply his own—they are his community's as well. This tale of struggle is situated within an expanse of time and space, usually with some connection

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<sup>192</sup> Mori, *Epic Grandeur: Toward a Comparative Poetics of the Epic*, 261.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

to a people's history. All three epics under consideration in this dissertation conform to this thematic definition of epic.<sup>194</sup>

According to Mori's definition, Siegfried is not an epic hero. The previous three chapters established resignation to death as the fundament of heroic wisdom, and Mori identifies the hero's awareness of mortality as central to the epic genre. Indeed, Mori describes the difference between epic and romance specifically in terms of the hero's relationship with death: "The hero's struggle with his mortality is also essential in discussing the tenuous distinction between epic and romance."<sup>195</sup> Mori goes on to explain:

But epic and romance differ markedly in the extent of the hero's concern about mortality. The hero of a romance, greatly endowed with special powers, via a magician and/or personal belongings of miraculous power, survives many seemingly fatal incidents. After foiling death a number of times with such magical helps, he does not appear really concerned about the immediacy of death. In contrast, an epic hero accepts the possibility of death as an important fact of his life. He may survive as many life-threatening situations as the hero of a romance, but every time he navigates successfully through trouble, whether he relies solely on his own merit or receives some external assistance, death remains a grave likelihood. In fact, many epic heroes die by the end of the narrative or soon thereafter, while heroes in the

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<sup>194</sup> Such a thematic definition, however, does not account for formal features; one could explore these themes through verse or prose, or through novels, which some regard as a distinct genre.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

romance, especially good ones, often live to see a happy ending to their story and are guaranteed to have a happy life thereafter.<sup>196</sup>

Siegfried does eventually die, but nonetheless, he largely fits Mori's description of the romance hero: his survival of many life-threatening situations on account of his *Hornhaut* makes him forget his mortality, eliminating the driving force that compels epic characters in their rise to wisdom. Siegfried shows no concern for his death until it is upon him, by which point it is too late to mature as a character.

Additionally, as Mori argues, the hero must show concern for his society and the societal implications of his actions. Siegfried, however, appears concerned only with himself, and though his actions do affect a wider community, he does not seem aware of this impact. Therefore, even though Siegfried is arguably the central figure of the epic, he himself is not an epic hero. Instead, this role falls to Hagen in the second half of the epic, primarily a courtly figure, but one who even in his first appearance demonstrates a knowledge of the mythological world. In the second half of the *Nibelungenlied*, Hagen demonstrates fearlessness before death, concern for the impact of his actions on his lord and kingdom, and sagacity in the way he comports himself with authority in deciding the proper course of action for himself and the knights of Burgundy. More so than Siegfried, therefore, Hagen embodies the ideal of *sapientia et fortitudo* and adheres to the generic expectations of epic.

Despite the prudence of both Siegfried and Hagen in their respective contexts, the *Nibelungenlied* is less concerned than either *Beowulf* or *Völsunga saga* with establishing the wisdom of its heroes. The web of qualities that constitutes wisdom therefore appears simpler, essentially comprised of the knowledge and ability to function appropriately within society. The societies presented in the *Nibelungenlied* are drastically different from those in *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga*, and Siegfried's

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<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 54–55.



origins in an older, mythological Germanic past present a caricature or parody of legendary history. There is no conception of a mythological past within the narrative of the *Nibelungenlied* itself, nor even of a worldly past beyond the life memories of the epic's characters. Hagen's knowledge of Siegfried's battle with the dragon is perhaps the closest we come in the *Nibelungenlied* to an example of mythological knowledge, but this is an event that has taken place within Hagen's own lifetime and is carried out by a man visible to Hagen's own eyes. It is actual—rather than socially constructed—knowledge, and therefore appears more concerned with action than lore.

The one exception to this conception of knowledge is, in fact, the narrator, who relates the narrative of the *Nibelungenlied* as it has been related before in stories:

Uns ist in alten mæren    wonders vil geseit  
von helden lobebæren,    von grózer arebeit...

We are told of many wonders in ancient stories, of praiseworthy heroes,  
of great travail...<sup>197</sup>

Not just the narrator, but also the audience is expected to have knowledge about the story of Siegfried and the Burgundians, shared cultural knowledge about semi-legendary figures who lived in what is presented as a border time between a mytho-heroic past and a past accessible by living memory. The *Nibelungenlied*, in dialogue with both the audience and other texts of contemporaneous literary tradition, exhibits an almost dialogic discourse in its juxtaposition of the courtly and mythological worlds. Such juxtaposition creates a conscious commentary on a heroic cultural heritage as compared to a courtlified present. This polyglossia of epic, romantic, and courtly discourses highlights Siegfried's ineptitude in courtly society, the inability to speak the courtly language—as it were—that would allow him to function within a

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<sup>197</sup> All translations of the *Nibelungenlied* are mine.

social sphere that is too refined or even sophisticated for his tastes.<sup>198</sup> Instead, Siegfried understands only mythological customs and practices.

*Siegfried's Mythological Wisdom –*

The consequences of the dragon fights in the *Nibelungenlied* and *Völsunga saga* establish one of the main differences between the Norse and German traditions, and give insight into Siegfried's radically different presentation from Sigurðr. Sigurðr obtains the ability to understand the speech of birds, whereas Siegfried receives his famous *Hornhaut*. Siegfried wins from the dragon external protection, an increase of his already tremendous strength and physical prowess. He now has only one physical weakness, created by the linden leaf that fell between his shoulders while bathing in the dragon's blood. The *Hornhaut* coupled with his strength makes Siegfried a virtually indestructible warrior, and this can account for why Siegfried shows less caution in confrontations than his Norse counterpart. Without having to worry about wounds from weapons, Siegfried can test his strength in a way that other warriors—even those of great power—simply cannot. In such tests, he constantly ups the odds to gain as much possible glory for himself. This means, however, that Siegfried does not need reflection and inner cultivation in order to be successful in both courtly and mythological societies.

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<sup>198</sup> In this manner, the *Nibelungenlied* exhibits the effects of “novelization” discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay “Epic and Novel.” Bakhtin writes of genres undergoing novelization: “They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the ‘novelistic’ layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present).” Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 7.

Siegfried is not invulnerable, however. He merely appears so; but he does not seem to concern himself with his single weakness. He seems to believe in his own indestructibility, making him insensitive to the world around him. McConnell writes:

Siegfried's overbearing self-confidence, his apparent belief that he can master any situation, lead him into a false sense of security which he couples with incredible naïveté. Although he is sincere in his offer of friendship to Gunther (156), and undoubtedly believes that he has always demonstrated fidelity toward the Burgundians (989.3), Siegfried consistently evinces a lack of sensitivity toward others and an incapacity to comprehend the deeper significance of his actions.<sup>199</sup>

Siegfried's near invulnerability prevents him from experiencing many of the emotions that belong to those in the world around him. He is callous to pain and fear, and the need for aid is something he experiences from only one side: that of giving, rather than receiving. Siegfried obtains all his worldly success through sheer military prowess. In contrast to *Völsunga saga*, where Sigurðr and Brynhildr engage in wisdom dialogues, Siegfried and Brunhild engage in purely physical contests. Because Siegfried can win everything he desires by the might of his hand—or by deception—he feels no compunction to develop other, subtler aspects of his being. He certainly lacks the concern with fate demonstrated by both Beowulf and Sigurðr.

Siegfried does not seek wisdom as Sigurðr does, but this is not to say that he knows nothing; in fact, he knows a good deal, but his knowledge is confined to certain social spheres. Several scholars have shown Siegfried to belong to a heroic and mythological world distinct from the courtly setting of the royal house of Burgundy.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Winder McConnell, *The Nibelungenlied* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 31–32.

<sup>200</sup> See Winder McConnell, ed., *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), 293, and Joyce Tally Lionarons, “The Otherworld and its

Joyce Tally Lionarons writes, “The primary point at which the Otherworld intersects with the historical world is in the character of Siegfried. Siegfried belongs equally to both worlds, and in fact, he seems to have had two different upbringings, one in each.”<sup>201</sup> While I would agree that Siegfried *should* be equally well-versed in each world, I do not believe Lionarons is correct in asserting that he is. Throughout the *Nibelungenlied*, he appears much more comfortable in the mythological world than in courtly society, and his knowledge seems more or less confined to this social sphere.

Battle constitutes one of the intersecting points between the courtly and mythological worlds. Fighting and military prowess are valued in each sphere, though each seems to favor its own form of combat. The mythological world values individual contests dominated by single characters of unique ability; individual contests are, of course, characteristic of the romance genre. Courtly combat in the *Nibelungenlied*, on the other hand, esteems large-scale conflicts involving mass armies, such as the battle with the Saxons and Danes, and the final battle at Etzel’s court; these armies are nonetheless headed by individual warriors of renown and strength. While these tactics may not function in a mythological world, a warrior of singular and exceptional strength will always benefit a large army. On account of this, Siegfried is able to prosper as a military man in courtly society. Large-scale battles, however, are more characteristic of epic than of romance.<sup>202</sup> The *Nibelungenlied* author therefore interweaves and manipulates genre expectations in regard to personal and communal martial conflict of courtly and mythological heroes.

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Inhabitants in the *Nibelungenlied*,” in *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied*, ed. Winder McConnell (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), 153–71.

<sup>201</sup> Lionarons, “The Otherworld and its Inhabitants in the *Nibelungenlied*,” 155.

<sup>202</sup> Some generalization is necessary here, as no form of combat—individual or mass army—is unique to either epic or romance. And even in large-scale epic battles, the narrative tends to focus on the actions of particular warriors, such as in Sigurðr’s battle with Lyngvi in *Völsunga saga*.

Siegfried's knowledge of battle in the mythological world translates into military knowledge in the courtly sphere, allowing him to achieve success in this area. Before showing his resourcefulness during the mission to Iceland, Siegfried offers King Gunther counsel twice, both times relating to a military decision. When Gernot suggests in true heroic fashion that the Burgundians meet the Saxons and Danes in battle, Hagen advises against such a course:

Dô sprach von Tronege Hagene: «daz endûnket mich niht guot.  
Liudegast unt Liudegêr die tragent übermuot.  
wir mugen uns niht besenden in sô kurzen tagen.»  
sô sprach der küene recke, «wan múget irz Sîvrîde sagen?» (151)

Then spoke Hagen of Troneck: "That doesn't seem good to me.  
Liudegast and Liudeger are so arrogant. We cannot muster our men in  
so few days." So spoke the brave knight: "Why don't you tell  
Siegfried?"

Gernot's plan to fight—supported by the heroic maxim *dâ sterbent wan die veigen: die lâzen ligen tôt* (150.2, "Only those doomed will die; let them lie dead")—would fail because the Burgundians lack sufficient numbers. Yet the counsel that Siegfried offers is hardly different from Gernot's:

«Daz lât iuch ahten ringe», sprach dô Sîvrîrî,  
«unt senftet iwerem muote. tuot des ich iuch bit:  
lât mich iu erwerben êre unde frumen,  
und bitet iwer degene daz si iu ouch ze helfe kumen.

Swenne iwer starken viende zir helfe möhten hân  
drîzec tûsent degene, sô wold' ich si bestân,

und het ich niwant tûsent: des lât iuch an mich.» (159–60)

“Do not let that trouble you at all,” Siegfried spoke then, “and calm down. Do as I ask you: let me win honor and support for you, and also ask your knights that they also come to your aid. Even if your strong enemies might have thirty thousand knights to help them, and I command only one thousand, I would still contend against them; rely on me.”

In contrast to Gernot, who presumably counts himself amongst those who may be doomed, Siegfried does not show the slightest concern for death or even injury. He appears completely unaware of his own mortality, and arrogantly disregards his weakness. He emphasizes his own agency in the upcoming battle, limiting the number of supporters to one thousand, and using five first-person singular pronouns within seven lines. The use of so many personal pronouns in Siegfried’s speech criticizes the ego-centrism of the mytho-heroic Germanic past perceived in the courtly world. Fighting mere human warriors seems child’s play to the young man from the Netherlands; it does not seem possible to him that he could ever fall at the hands of one of them. Though presented as a mythological hero with an older, mythological knowledge, Siegfried does not possess the Germanic heroic ethos of acceptance of death.

As in the other texts examined so far, dialogic proficiency is certainly important in the *Nibelungenlied*. Male characters make formal verbal challenges, while female characters engage in the most competitive verbal battle of the whole narrative. Nonetheless, dialogic proficiency takes a different form in the *Nibelungenlied* than it does in *Beowulf* or *Völsunga saga*. The courtly setting of the narrative dictates a significant amount of social responsibility, obligation, and stylized

etiquette. Heroes demonstrate their skill in dialogue by the ease and subtlety with which they handle social responsibilities; this requires significant knowledge and understanding of social customs. It also results in specific and action-based counsel that does not rely on formulaic proverbial knowledge or gnomic wisdom in assessing how to solve problems.

Siegfried's speaking ability stems from his ability in battle. He again provides counsel to the Burgundians in the aftermath of the battle with the Saxons and Danes when King Gunther needs to decide what to do with the captives. Gunther explicitly asks Siegfried for advice, telling him that the captive lords have offered a large sum of gold for their release. Without hesitation, Siegfried announces this plan:

dô sprach der starke Sîvrit: «daz wære vil übele getân.

Ir sult si ledeclîchen hinnen lâzen varn,

und daz die recken edele mêre wol bewarn

vîentlîchez rîten her in iuwer lant.

des lât iu geben sicherheit hie der beider herren hant.» (314–15)

Then spoke Siegfried the strong: "That would be badly done. You should let them go hence free, on the condition that the noble knights make sure they never ride hostilely into this land. Let them give you the security of both lords' pledges."

The advice seems more or less obvious, and one may question why Gunther would ask Siegfried for counsel in this matter. Gunther's appeal to Siegfried for advice accords Siegfried a certain degree of honor and respect for having accomplished a great Burgundian victory. It helps strengthen the relationship between the Burgundians and Siegfried, now their most powerful ally. In terms of the narrative, however, Siegfried

provides the counsel that helps lay the foundation for the deceit that ultimately causes his death. Had Liudegast and Liudeger not sworn oaths of peace and friendship to the Burgundians, Hagen would not be able to create the ruse by which he learns the location of Siegfried's vulnerability. The fact that Siegfried is the one who advises Gunther to extract oaths of friendship from the lords of Denmark and Saxony helps account for his anger when the staged fight gets called off in *Âventiure* 16.

When one thinks of Siegfried, one probably does not think of him as a sapiential character of any kind; his provision of counsel to Gunther appears almost anomalous. He is a physical being, prone to action rather than reflection. Some of his greatest exploits, however, are not actually presented in the text of the *Nibelungenlied*. Siegfried has, for example, slain the dragon before the narrative even begins, and we are presented with his further adventures of conquest, success in which is brought about almost entirely by his unparalleled physical strength.<sup>203</sup> Even though the narrator mentions that Siegfried is prodigiously strong, the battle with the Saxons and Danes provides the first real glimpse into the hero's military power. The attack of Liudegast and Liudeger provides a yardstick for measuring Siegfried's strength, especially since the Saxons and Danes are the only human opponents the warrior must face in the epic. Siegfried stacks the odds against himself, but the battle nonetheless seems all too easy for him. He dominates even when grossly outnumbered. After riding off alone into enemy territory and capturing Liudegast—in one-on-one combat like that in romances—Siegfried single-handedly defeats thirty Danish knights:

Er wolde in fûeren dannen, dô wart er an gerant  
von drîzec sînen mannen. dô wërte des hêldes hant

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<sup>203</sup> On the dominant theme of conquest in the *Nibelungenlied*, see Will Hasty, "From Battlefields to Bedchambers: Conquest in the *Nibelungenlied*," in *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied*, ed. Winder McConnell (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), 79–93.



sînen rîchen gîsel mit ungefüegen slegen.  
sît tet scaden mêre der vil zierlîche degen.

Die drîzec er ze tôde vil werlîche sluoc.  
er liez ir leben einen. balde er reit genuoc  
und sagte hin die mære, waz hie was geschehen.  
ouch mohte mans die wârheit an sîme rôtem helme sehen. (190-91)

He was about to lead him away when he was charged by thirty of his men. Then the hero defended his powerful captive with incredible blows. Afterwards the very handsome warrior created more damage: in a most warlike manner, he struck to death the thirty men. He let one of them live. He rode away soon enough and told there the news, about what had happened there. One could also see the truth in his reddened helmet.

This description suggests that the one man who gets away escapes only because Siegfried decides he should. The young warrior from Xanten is in complete control of the situation.

Externally, Siegfried appears remarkably similar to his Norse counterpart, Sigurðr. *Völsunga saga*'s description of Sigurðr that puts him at approximately 7-8 feet tall at the waist seems almost more fitting for Siegfried than it does for his Norse counterpart.<sup>204</sup> Though we are never presented with such a clear measurement of

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<sup>204</sup> See above, note 117. On the tradition of Siegfried as a giant in later narratives of the *Heldenbuch*, see William Layher, "Siegfried the Giant: Heroic Representation and the Amplified Body in the *Heldenbuch* of 1479," in *Kulturen des Manuskriptzeitalters*, eds. Arthur Groos and Hans-Jochen Schiewer (Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2004), 181–215.

Siegfried's size, his stature must have been conceived as similarly out of proportion for him to be able to perform the feats he does among the Saxons and Danes, and for him to be easily able to run down and bind a fully-grown bear. But in contrast to Sigurðr, who shows his prowess early and then goes off in search of wisdom, Siegfried does not appear to seek any mental development or cultivation other than the elevation of his spirits through Minne. Siegfried alternates between his desire for fighting and his desire for love, such that there is no in-between, as seen by the instant shift in his thought from fighting the Burgundians to loving Kriemhilt in *Áventiure 3* when Gunther declares that Siegfried shall stay in Burgundy.

Many of the conflicts in the narrative, such as Siegfried's arrival at Worms, result from the interaction between mythological and courtly spheres. As McConnell writes, "Siegfried is dangerously insensitive to the *modus operandi* of the world to which he returns, and his failure to comprehend fully the significance of his words and actions (many of which are characterized by his overt arrogance) plays a major role in bringing about his own downfall."<sup>205</sup> Although Siegfried appears to straddle two worlds, he is really more at home in the mythological. The narrative, however, situates the audience in the courtly sphere, such that Siegfried seems distant and foreign. A prime example of this alienation is Hagen's description of Siegfried's battle with the dragon. In contrast to Sigurðr's battle with Fáfnir, we get no description of how Siegfried defeats the mythological creature—merely that he has done so. The manner of execution remains a mystery of his prodigious strength. Hagen says:

«daz hât er getân.

alsô grôzer krefte    nie mêr récké gewan.

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<sup>205</sup> McConnell, *The Nibelungenlied*, 28.

Noch weiz ich an im mêre daz mir ist bekant.  
einen lintrachen den sluoc des heldes hant.  
er badet' sich in dem bluote: sîn hût wart hûrnîn  
des snîdet in kein wâfen. daz ist dicke worden scîn.» (99-100)

“He did that. No warrior ever had greater strength. I know still more about him that has been related to me. The hero slew a dragon. He bathed himself in the blood: his skin became like horn, so that no weapon cuts him. That has often been apparent.”

We get no description of the battle, only the consequences of Siegfried's victory. As an audience, we see Siegfried very much from the outside. Even though he has already been introduced and his upbringing apparently explained, it takes the speech of another character to portray Siegfried's heroic prowess. This technique situates the audience in the court of Burgundy—hearing the news for the first time along with Gunther and his vassals—and serves to distance Siegfried, placing him directly in a world apart from the Burgundians and hence also the audience.

Just as Siegfried feels more at home in the mythological world, the knowledge he demonstrates is also confined to the sphere of the mythological. Only in the episode concerning the wooing of Brunhild does Siegfried show leadership of a kind that involves more than simply brute strength. When Gunther decides to woo Brunhild, Siegfried advises strongly against the plan:

«Daz wil ich widerrâten», sprach dô Sîvrit.  
«jâ hât diu küneginne sô vreisliche sit,  
swer umb' ir minne wirbet, daz ez im hôhe stât.  
des muget ir der reise haben wærlîchen rât.» (330)

“I would advise against that,” spoke Siegfried then. “Indeed, the queen has such fearful customs that whoever contends for her love must pay dearly. Therefore you should avoid the journey.”

Siegfried knows that Gunther cannot contend with Brunhild. After all, she belongs to the sphere of mythological strength and fortitude to which he himself also belongs. And whatever may be argued about conflated traditions or previous relationships between Siegfried and Brunhild, it is clear from the text that Siegfried has at least been to Iceland before, suggesting that he may also have witnessed Brunhild’s immense physical power.

When it comes to wooing the lovely queen, Gunther does not have the slightest idea of how to go about it properly. He suggests bringing a great force to Iceland:

«Nu sag’ mir, degen Sîvrit, ê das mîn vart ergê,  
daz wir mit vollen êren kômen an den sê,  
suln wir iht recken fûeren in Prûnhilde lant?  
drîzec tûsent degene die werdent scieré besant.» (339)

“Now tell me, warrior Siegfried, before my journey begins, should we lead any warriors into Brunhild’s land so that we go to sea with full honors? Thirty thousand warriors: these could quickly be called up.”

This seems like the appropriate chivalrous action in wooing a lady: march in high style with as many warriors as possible. Indeed, this is how Siegmund suggests Siegfried woo Kriemhilt. But this would not bring greatest honor to Gunther. Siegfried advises:

«Wir suln in recken wîse varn ze tal den Rîn.  
die wil ich dir nennen, die daz sulen sîn.  
selbe vierde degene varn an den sê.  
so erwerben wir die frouwen, swî ez uns dar nâch ergê.» (341)

“We should travel down the Rhine in the manner of warriors. Those I will name for you, who they should be. We four warriors should go to sea; so shall we woo the lady, however it may go for us after that.”

Gunther asks if they should bring any *recken*, then refers to the army he can muster; Siegfried, however, suggests that they themselves travel as *recken*, or lone warriors. Here we see a reversal of the counsel Siegmund offers Siegfried in the second *Âventiure* of bringing a vast retinue to Worms to woo Kriemhilt. Individual characters of great strength, without the aid of armies, dominate the mythological world. As Lionarons writes of Siegfried : “He advises Gunther to leave at home his warriors and courtly retainers, symbols of the king’s purely political strength, for he knows that in Isenstein only personal strength will matter.”<sup>206</sup> This importance of physical strength and limited numbers of combatants holds not just for Isenstein, but for the whole of the mythological sphere, conceived as an older Germanic heroic society. We have already seen by this point in the narrative how Siegfried stacks the odds against himself by limiting his number of comrades: only eleven men accompany him to Worms, where he threatens to take the Burgundian kingdom by force; and in the battle with the Saxons and Danes, only one thousand knights go with him against an army of nearly forty thousand. Likewise, when he travels off to gather his warriors in the land of the Nibelungs, he goes expressly alone:

Der helt der fuor aleine    ûf einen wert vil breit.  
daz schif gebant vil balde    der ritter vil gemeit.  
er gie zuo einem berge,    dar ûf ein burc stuont,  
unt suochte herberge,    sô die wegemüeden tuont. (485)

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<sup>206</sup> Lionarons, “The Otherworld and its Inhabitants in the *Nibelungenlied*,” 165.

The hero then traveled alone to a very broad island. The very spirited knight tied up the ship very quickly. He went to a mountain, whereon stood a fortress, and sought shelter as the way-weary do.

Siegfried, however, does not act like a traveler, and proceeds to challenge the occupants of the castle with fighting words. The challenge is unnecessary, as he has already conquered the Nibelungs, but it provides Siegfried an opportunity to test the loyalty and strength of his vassals. These examples make clear that if Gunther is to win Brunhild, he must do so alone, or at least seemingly alone. His suggestion to bring a large retinue demonstrates his own ignorance of the mythological world.

Siegfried seems most at home during the expedition to Iceland. Not only is he able to offer counsel for how to go about winning Brunhild, he also guides every action the four men take during the journey until their return to Worms. When Gunther asks who will captain the ship, Siegfried boldly replies:

«Dáz wil ich», sprach Sîvrit: «ich kan iuch ûf der fluot  
hinnen wol gefüeren, daz wizzet, helde guot.  
die rehten wazzerstrâzen die sint mir wol bekant.» (378)<sup>207</sup>

“I want to,” spoke Siegfried. “I know well how to lead you there on the ocean, good warriors. The right waterways are well known to me.”

This is one of the few instances in the epic where we see Siegfried actually know anything.<sup>208</sup> Furthermore, it is obvious that Siegfried assumes agency for Gunther’s

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<sup>207</sup> This strongly parallels the passage in which Gunther asks who will lead the Burgundians through the unknown territory to Etzel’s land. See below, pg. 231.

<sup>208</sup> Of the 26 occurrences of the first and third person singular form *wëiz*, only one can be attributed to Siegfried and it is used in the negative form *ine wëiz* (923.2). Only twice is an adjective related to *wizzen* used to describe Siegfried (470.1, 470.4). A few things are *bekant* to Siegfried as well (49.2, 108.4, 384.1), but given the length of the portion of narrative concerned with Siegfried, there is scant verbal evidence to

actions when he uses the *Tarnkappe*; but here, he also appears to usurp Hagen's role as well-traveled counselor. Siegfried is the knowledgeable one, and the others must rely on his expertise. The court of Isenstein, however, is as foreign to the audience as it is to the three Burgundians. As Jan-Dirk Müller writes:

Hagen's replacement [of Sîvrit] seems less conspicuous. The most important character between *Âventiure* 6 and *Âventiure* 12 is Sîvrit, not Hagen. Sîvrit speaks decisively in council, has an answer to every question, and takes on everything. Hagen, in contrast, seems unsure of himself in Isenstein, is fearful and unseemly, is lectured by Sîvrit on the customs there (406,4), is afraid of the outcome (430,4; 447–48), and makes pointless demands (446–47).<sup>209</sup>

Siegfried's knowledge and tact come as surprises, especially since he has shown so little of either up until this point in the narrative. His mind is whetted to the customs and unusual dangers such distant shores as Iceland present.

Not only does Siegfried know this heroic mythological world, he also shows knowledge of deceit and how to practice deception. His plan for winning Brunhild is filled with trickery from its very inception, and the text seems to indicate that this trickery forms a sort of wisdom:<sup>210</sup>

Sîfrit der snelle wîse was er genuoc.  
sîne tarnkappen er aber behalten truoc.  
dô gie er hin widere dâ manic vrouwe saz.

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describe him as a wise warrior. See Franz H. Bäuml and Eva-Maria Fallone, *A Concordance to the Nibelungenlied (Bartsch-De Boor Text)*, Vol. 7 (Leeds: W. S. Maney and Son Ltd., 1976), 901.

<sup>209</sup> Jan-Dirk Müller, *Rules for the Endgame: The World of the Nibelungenlied*, trans. William T. Whobrey (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 63–4.

<sup>210</sup> Even his travelling in disguise to fetch the Nibelungs and his deceptive fights with the watchman and Alberich seem to receive endorsement for their prudence. See above, pg. 206.

er sprach zuo dem künige, unt tet vil wîslîche daz:

«Wes bîtet ir, mîn herre? wan beginnet ir der spil,  
der iu die küneginne teilet alsô vil?  
unt lât uns balde schouwen wie diu sîn getân»  
sam ers niht enwesse, gebârte derr listige man. (470–71)

Siegfried the brave was very wise. He carried his magic cloak in concealment, then went back to where many ladies sat. He spoke to the king, and did that very wisely: “What are you waiting for, my lord? Why do you not begin the contest, of which the queen is setting out so many for you? Let us soon see how they are set up.” The cunning man acted as though he did not know.

Siegfried’s playacting here presents the hero’s subtlest moment. The poet could, however, also use the word *wîslîche* ironically. Lynn Thelen argues that this pretence represents some of Siegfried’s foolish pride: “It is not Siegfried, but rather the quick-witted Hagen who supplies the explanation [for Siegfried’s absence] (473). The hero, unaware of the blunder he has committed, further aggravates the situation with his expression of joy upon ‘learning’ of Gunther’s victory. These words suggest Siegfried’s *superbia* and a barely hidden taunt.”<sup>211</sup> If we give Siegfried the benefit of the doubt and agree on his prudence in this moment, he ironically plays a role he elsewhere shows to be quite natural for him: that of unassuming naïveté. Siegfried does not demonstrate an awareness of mortality, but he does possess knowledge of social customs and prudence within the mythological world.

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<sup>211</sup> Lynn D. Thelen, “The Vassalage Deception, or Siegfried’s Folly,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 87 (1988), 476.



*Hagen's Wisdom at Court –*

In the first half of the epic, the *Nibelungenlied* poet establishes Hagen as an experienced and widely traveled warrior, a wise counselor who nonetheless places great trust in his own strength. Jan-Dirk Müller describes Hagen's knowledge:

Hagen's knowledge is "legend knowledge," a collective knowledge of things that are important to everyone. Hagen therefore soon transitions from *ich* to *wir*. Hagen's knowledge does not need to be "explained" in a logical way. The fact that Hagen's narrative is injected as an erratic segment, and not narratively linked with what preceded it, calls for attention...Hagen's knowledge contrasts sharply with the knowledge of the narrator, who has just recounted something quite different about Sivrit's youth: his courtly upbringing by his parents and others at court, the celebration of his knighthood, and the renunciation of his own claims on rule in favor of his father's.<sup>212</sup>

Hagen knows details of Siegfried's youth the poet has not mentioned, and he therefore appears to possess a form of otherworldly knowledge.<sup>213</sup> Hagen is rooted in the

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<sup>212</sup> Müller, *Rules for the Endgame: The World of the Nibelungenlied*, 104.

<sup>213</sup> Volker Mertens associates Hagen's knowledge with his dangerous nature: "Hagen ist gefährlich, weil er Außenkenntnisse besitzt, die die anderen Burgunden nicht haben." Volker Mertens, "Hagens Wissen—Siegfrieds Tod: zu Hagens Erzählung von Jungsiegfrieds Abenteuern," in *Erzählungen in Erzählungen: Phänomene der Narration in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, eds. Harald Haferland and Michael Mecklenburg (Munich, Germany: Fink, 1996), 64. "Hagen is dangerous because he has external knowledge that the other Burgundians don't have." Ingeborg Robles has also noted the connection between knowledge and physical as well as political power: "So zeigt sich also eine Verbindung von Wissen und Stärke auf der einen und von Nicht-Wissen und Schwäche auf der anderen Seite." Ingeborg Robles, "Subversives weibliches Wissen im *Nibelungenlied*," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 124 (2005), 362. "So there appears a coalescence of knowledge and strength on the one hand and lack of knowledge and weakness on the other." While this is partly true, Siegfried

courtly world, but stands apart from the other Burgundians on account of his experience and the fact that he appears to have some connection with the mythological world. The mysterious quality and unexplained source of his knowledge foreshadows his partial transformation to a mythological hero later in the *Nibelungenlied*.

Hagen represents the well-traveled old knight who knows the customs and ways of all lands. Ortwin of Metz, when trying to identify the strange knights who have come to Worms, says:

«sît wir ir niht erkennen, nu sult ir heizen gân  
nâch minem œheim Hagenen; den sult ir si sehen lân.

Dem sint kunt diu rîche und ouch dîu vremen lant.  
sint im die herren kûnde, daz tuot er uns bekant.» (81–82)

“Since we do not know any of them, you should send for my uncle Hagen; you should let him see them. To him are known the kingdoms and the foreign lands. If the lords are known to him, he will let us know.”

Hagen’s travels and adventures may have been familiar to the audience, as they are preserved in other texts, such as the Latin *Waltharius* and the Middle High German poems of the *Heldenbuch*. This element of heroic wisdom closely resembles the age and experience required of Old English figures of wisdom. In many respects, Hagen appears similar to the Old English *Widsið*.

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remains a figure of strength in Burgundy, despite his lack of knowledge in the courtly setting.

As Ortwin of Metz mentions, Hagen is supposed to know foreign lands and countries; but he does not know the way to Iceland. The poet explicitly tells us that he has never been there:

An dem zwelften morgen, sô wir hoeren sagen,  
heten si di winde verre dan getragen  
gegen Îsensteine in Prûnhilde lant.  
daz was ir deheinem niwan Sîvrîde erkant. (382)

By the twelfth morning, as we hear told, the winds had carried them far from there towards Isenstein in Brunhild's land. That was known to none of them except Siegfried.

In contrast to Siegfried, the other three men who travel to Iceland, all heroes of great renown within the courtly world, appear emasculated in the strange otherworld that Iceland presents. Gunther has no notion of how he should act as a king, Hagen's position as counselor has been usurped, and Dancwart—as well as Hagen—feels naked and exposed without his weapons:

Dô si diu swert gewonnen, alsô diu maget gebôt,  
der vil küene Dancwart von vréudén wart rô.   
«nu spilen swes si wellen», sprach der vil snelle man:  
«Gúnther ist úmbetwungen, sît daz wir unser wâfen hân.» (448)

When they had got their swords back, as the maiden commanded, Dancwart the very bold blushed with joy. “Now they can begin the contest as they choose,” spoke the very brave man: “Gunther will be undefeated now that we have our weapons.”

Danwart's response is rather old-fashioned: he relies for his safety on his own prowess in battle rather than the rules of courtly etiquette and hospitality. Once again, however, courtly warriors are bringing courtly trappings into a mythological fight. As Siegfried will show twice later, heroic dominance should be demonstrable even without weapons. He conquers both Alberich and Brunhild through wrestling matches. Hagen, however, remains a courtly hero until killing Siegfried, at which point he is initiated into the mythological and uses his newfound mythological status to dominate the courtly world in a manner similar to Siegfried earlier in the narrative.

*The Courtly Siegfried –*

Our first introduction to Siegfried is through his courtly upbringing in Xanten, but this courtly training does not appear as important to characterizing the young warrior as his days of adventure during his youth.<sup>214</sup> Aside from battle, Siegfried often acts inappropriately in courtly settings. For instance, despite his ability to give counsel in matters of war, he seems thoroughly incapable of receiving counsel of any kind. When first intending to woo Kriemhilt, Siegfried's father, Siegmund, advises him against such a course:

Disiu selben mære    gehôrte Sigmunt.  
ez reiten sîne liute,    dâ von wart im kunt  
der wille sînes Kindes    was im harte leit,  
daz er werben wolde    die vil hêrlîchen meit.

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<sup>214</sup> Siegfried appears as a vagabond youth, as described by Georges Duby in *The Chivalrous Society*. Such youths had already completed knightly training, but were not settled, and often sought adventure and wreaked havoc wherever they went. Siegfried seems to have had two childhoods: the courtly upbringing of his initial introduction, but also—and perhaps more importantly—the wandering adventurous youth we as the audience learn about from Hagen's narrative concerning Siegfried's slaying of the Nibelungs and the dragon.

Ez gevriesc ouch Siglint, des edelen küneges wîp.  
si hete grôze sorge um ir kindes lîp,  
wan si wol erkande Gúnthern und sîne man.  
den gewérp mán dem degene sêre léidén began. (50–1)

Siegmund heard this same news—his people talked about it—and thus was the desire of his child known to him. It was a great sorrow to him that he wanted to contend for the very noble lady. Sieglinde, the noble king's wife, also found out and was deeply concerned for her child's life, for she knew well Gunther and his vassals. They began to be upset at the warrior's mission.

Siegfried's parents consider more than simply the maiden their son desires: they are concerned about the wider social and political implications of such a union. But when their son expresses his resolve, they agree to aid him in whatever way they can. Siegmund, distressed by Siegfried's words about taking the kingdom of Burgundy by force, offers to send a large retinue along with Siegfried to accompany him on his mission of love, similar to Gunther's proposal to bring a large retinue to Iceland. But Siegfried denies this counsel as well:

«Des enist mir niht ze muote», sprach aber Sîvrit,  
«daz mir sulen recken ze Rîne volgen mit  
durh deine hervart (daz wære mir vil leit),  
dâ mit ich solde ertwingen die vil wætlichen meit.

Si mac wol sus erwerben dâ mîn eines hant.  
ich wil selbe zwelfte in Gúnthéres lant.

dar sult ir mir helfen, vater Sigmunt.» (58–9)

“It is not my intention,” spoke Siegfried in response, “that knights should follow me to the Rhine on military campaign—that would be very grievous to me—so that with them I could win the beautiful maiden. I can win her by myself. I will go to Gunther’s land as one of twelve. You should help me with this, father Siegmund.”

Siegfried views courting Kriemhilt as a heroic undertaking for which he needs only his own strength. In contrast to other Germanic heroes, such as Beowulf or Sigurðr, Siegfried never takes the counsel of his elders. He resolves firmly to stick to his own course and direction, and confidence in his physical strength replaces the customary need for tactful strategy and worldly know-how. His refusal of counsel sets him apart from the other Germanic heroes in this study, and significantly undermines his status as a figure of wisdom.

In other Germanic cultures, one’s elders—particularly one’s father—represent important figures of authority whose counsel is not to be taken lightly. But older and more experienced men are not the only counselors in other Germanic traditions: women also play an important role as figures of wisdom and as royal advisers. The Old English *Maxims I* explicitly states:

ond wif geþeon  
leof mid hyre leodum, leohtmod wesan,  
rune healdan, rumheort beon  
mearum ond maðmum, meodorædenne  
for gesiðmægen symle æghwær  
eodor æþelinga ærest gegretan,  
forman fulle to frean hond

ricene geræcan,      ond him ræd witan  
boldagendum      bæm ætsomne. (*Maxims I*, 84–92)

And a woman should prosper, dear among her people; she should be light-hearted, hold counsel, be open of heart with horses and treasures, should always greet the lord of the nobles first in dispensing drink before the court, richly present a cup first to the lord's hand, and give him and the homestead owners counsel both at the same time.

Women also appear frequently as figures of wisdom in Old Norse sagas, and often use words to goad and incite their male kinsmen into action. The social structures presented in Old English and Old Norse narratives are markedly different from those presented in the *Nibelungenlied*, where women are confined to their own quarters and are brought out as chattel only at opportune moments, often for political gain. But despite the more limited role women play in the courtly society of the *Nibelungenlied*, women nonetheless possess a certain amount of power through their ability to give gifts and their ability to speak. The second half of the *Nibelungenlied* testifies to the potential power a woman could wield. Therefore, Kriemhilt's warning to Siegfried before the hunting trip should be taken as serious counsel.

Siegfried, however, appears incapable of comprehending any potential danger coming from within the courtly world, and does not heed Kriemhilt's advice:

Er sprach: «mîn triutinne,    ich kum in kurzen tagen.  
ine wéiz hie niht der liute,    die mir iht hazzes tragen.  
alle dîne mâge    sint mir gemeine holt,  
ouch hân ich an den degenen    hie niht ándérs versolt.» (923)

He spoke: “My dear, I will return in a few days. I do not know any of the people here who bear me any hatred. All of your kinsmen are equally kind to me; I have also not earned any other treatment from the warriors.”

Whatever the reason Kriemhilt does not wish to tell Siegfried about her divulgence of his weakness to Hagen, her attempts to warn her husband take a form that appears inherently incomprehensible to him. The prophetic dreams, which one could argue are otherworldly in nature, couch in subtle symbolism the reality of the danger Siegfried will soon encounter. As a mythological character himself, Siegfried should be able to understand this prophecy; but he seems to ignore completely the possibility of danger. He does not even respond to her second plea:

Er umbevie mit armen daz tugentrîche wîp.  
mit minneclîchem küssen trût' er irr schœnen lîp.  
mit urloube er dannen schiet in kurzer stunt.  
si gesach in leider dar nâch nimmer mêt gesunt. (925)

He embraced the noble woman with his arms. With loving kisses he showered her with affection. He then took leave quickly. She unfortunately never saw him alive again.

It is unclear from the text whether Kriemhilt actually has these dreams or whether she makes them up once she reflects on what she has told Hagen. For the audience, however, these are the second prophetic dreams we have seen from Kriemhilt, and we know from both the plot and authorial interjections that her first dream in *Âventiure 1* about the falcon and eagles is about to come true. In contrast to the Norse tradition,



Siegfried does not even attempt to interpret the prophetic dreams; he simply ignores them and stays his own course.<sup>215</sup>

Siegfried's death speech further shows that he has not understood his wife's warnings. When Hagen rejoices over the dying man, claiming that the Burgundians' worries are at an end, Siegfried replies:

«Ir muget iuch lîhte rüemen», sprach dô Sifrit.  
«het ich an iu erkennet den mortlîchen sit,  
ich hete wol behalten vor iu mînen lîp. (994)

“You may easily gloat,” Siegfried spoke then. “Had I known your murderous intent I would have well guarded my life from you.”

The only reason Siegfried does not know about Hagen's plan of murder is because he has not listened to his wife. Siegfried assumes that everyone else plays by the same rules as he, and therefore cannot see how anyone could possibly bear him ill will. Siegfried trusts the Burgundians blindly, but he even more blindly trusts in his own strength and invulnerability. Even at the very end, he shows no conception of the inevitability of his death. Death, instead, takes the form of his final opponent: *dô rang er mit dem tôde. unlange tet er daz, / want des tôdes wâfen ie ze sêre sneit* (998.2–3, “Siegfried wrestled then with death; he did not do that long, for the weapons of death always cut too deep”).<sup>216</sup> A warrior's struggle against death is an internal battle waged

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<sup>215</sup> In *Völsunga saga*, Högni and Gunnar interpret their wives' dreams incorrectly before departing for Atli's court.

<sup>216</sup> Claude Lecouteux has argued on the basis of parallels in the Norse tradition that the curse of the Nibelungenhort, and therefore also Siegfried's fate, have been subverted in the *Nibelungenlied*: “Die wichtigste ‘Person’ der Siegfried-Gesta ist der verfluchte Hort, der den Tod aller illegitimen Besitzer, selbst des vortrefflichsten Helden, bewirkt. Im *Nibelungenlied*, dessen anonymer genialer Autor Siegfrieds Schattenseite und des Schicksals Walten fast völlig getilgt hat, und wo der Held nur zum Teil höfisiert ist, finden wir wieder diese Verstrickung in widersprüchlichen Pflichten, doch ist das alles hinter einem Machtkonflikt—einer passenden und zeitgemäßen

throughout his life—a battle for resignation to one’s loss. By the time Hagen stabs him, it is too late for Siegfried to begin wrestling with the fact of death.

Siegfried assumes military knowledge and success are the only requirements necessary to be able to prosper in the courtly world. Because of his *Hornhaut*, he shows a recklessness when storming into battle; but he also appears—and rather foolishly—to show less caution in other social arenas.<sup>217</sup> Hagen does not mention Siegfried’s weakness when first describing the hero, but by the fourteenth *Âventiure* he knows of its existence. Hagen says «*sô ervar ich uns diu mære ab des küenen recken wîp*» (875, “So shall I learn the story for us from the brave warrior’s wife”), *diu mære* presumably referring to some news or story concerning Siegfried’s weakness. Even though Hagen does not know where it is, the fact that he is aware that Siegfried *has* a weakness suggests that Siegfried has not held his tongue.<sup>218</sup> It would seem a simple matter of discretion not to divulge the secret of even possessing this weakness to anyone, though his confidence in his wife Kriemhilt is perhaps understandable. Caution with speech is a skill Siegfried does not possess; he does not separate the

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Erklärung—mit den burgundischen Königen versteckt.” Claude Lecouteux, “Siegfrieds Jugend: Überlegungen zum mythischen Hintergrund,” *Euphorion* 89 (1995), 227. “The most important ‘person’ in the Siegfried saga is the cursed hoard, that brings about the death of all illegitimate owners, including the most splendid heroes. In the *Nibelungenlied*, whose anonymous brilliant author has almost completely eradicated Siegfried’s dark side and control of destiny, and where the hero is only partially courtlified, we find again this entanglement in conflicting obligations, yet it is the case that everything is hidden behind a power struggle—concerning a fitting and timely explanation—with the Burgundian kings.”

<sup>217</sup> His rashness in battle is, after all, what makes Kriemhilt afraid for him.

<sup>218</sup> It could be, however, that knowledge of Siegfried’s weakness belongs to the same ambiguous body of mythological knowledge as his fight with the Nibelungs and the dragon. The text never makes clear how Hagen comes into possession of this knowledge, but Hagen is considered wise for having it, and probably also for having the ability to procure it. It may be that Hagen has known about this weakness all along, from the time he tells the story of Siegfried’s fight with the dragon, but he does not mention it until this point in the narrative.

sphere of war from the sphere of words, and therefore maintains the same domineering attitude of indestructibility in social interactions as he does on the battlefield.

This domineering attitude is perhaps best demonstrated by Siegfried's actions leading up to his arrival in Worms. He shows an astonishing lack of understanding of social norms and expectations upon his arrival at the Burgundian court. Though apparently versed in proper manners of the court, Siegfried violates courtly custom through his arrogant and abrasive speech. After explaining that he has come to Burgundy because he has heard about the bravery of the knights there, Siegfried challenges:

«Ich bin ouch ein recke und solde krône tragen.  
ich wil daz gerne füegen daz si von mir sagen  
daz ich habe von rehte liute unde lant.  
dar umbe sol mîn êre und ouch mîn houbet wesen pfant.

Nu ir sît sô küene, als mir ist geseit,  
sone rúoch' ich, ist daz iemen liep óder leit:  
ich wil an iu ertwingen swaz ir muget hân:  
lánt únde bürge, daz sol mir werden undertân.» (109–10)

“I am also a warrior, and have right to wear a crown. I eagerly want to bring it about that they say of me, that I have people and land by right. To that end shall my reputation and also my head serve as wager. Now if you are so brave, as it is said to me, I do not care if anyone likes or dislikes it: I want to wrest from you by force whatever you might have, land and castles, that shall all become under my control.”

Siegfried identifies himself as a *recke*, a wandering warrior in pursuit of adventure, rather than as a courtly knight. He presumes (wrongly) that Gunther is as well. Siegfried assumes he accords Gunther proper honor: it is the privilege of the strong to take challenges.<sup>219</sup> Siegfried treats Gunther no differently than he himself should wish to be treated as king. He does not understand that this behavior has no place in the courtly world he has—perhaps unknowingly—entered. He operates on the basis of an older Germanic system of rulership, in which individual strength and combat largely determined authority, showing no awareness of the newer, twelfth-century system by which lands pass to children by right of descent. Siegfried’s dialogic proficiency in this royal greeting is compromised by his violation of adjacency pairs, failing to provide the expected courtly response to Gunther’s question. The tension created by the interaction between these figures from chronologically different social spheres, each assuming to be observing the social customs of the other, borders on the carnivalesque.

Despite the knowledge and facility Siegfried demonstrates in otherworldly situations, he chooses to take up his primary abode in courtly society. While *Völsunga saga* paints Sigurðr as a figure of wisdom and deflects blame away from him for the deceit of Brynhildr, the *Nibelungenlied* highlights Siegfried’s lack of foresight and discretion in the whole series of events concerning the wooing of Brunhild. The *Nibelungenlied*, for example, contains no Ale of Forgetfulness that magically transforms Sigurðr into an unwitting agent of treachery and fate, instead portraying Siegfried’s deceit of Brunhild as both conscious and calculated, even though the warrior does not have the awareness to consider its consequences. Before they even leave for Iceland, Siegfried demonstrates his disregard for the consequences of his

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<sup>219</sup> Such a notion can be seen in the Old High German *Hildabrandslied*.

plan, saying they will win Brunhild no matter what happens afterwards: *swí ez uns dar nâch ergê*.<sup>220</sup>

While Siegfried's loyalty to Gunther is praiseworthy, his pretending to render service to the Burgundian king demonstrates an astonishing lack of foresight: as a future king himself, at least raised in a courtly and aristocratic society, one might expect Siegfried to show more understanding of social customs, hierarchy, and status.<sup>221</sup> The vassalage-deception has attracted significant scholarly attention, and numerous scholars have offered interpretations for the purpose and effect of this scene.<sup>222</sup> Lynn Thelen, for example, argues that the scene is necessary to establish a basis for Brunhild's subsequent suspicion:

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<sup>220</sup> See above, pg. 204.

<sup>221</sup> On the complexity of social structure in the *Nibelungenlied*, see Edward R. Haymes, "Heroic, Chivalric, and Aristocratic Ethos in the *Nibelungenlied*," in *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied*, ed. Winder McConnell (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), 94–104. Haymes argues for a complex interplay between courtly and heroic societies in the epic. He claims that the *Nibelungenlied* in some ways presents a more courtly society than romances generally do, though notes that Hagen and Volker appear to belong to a more heroic culture. Haymes suggests the term "chivalric" for the middle ground the Burgundians seem to occupy between courtly and heroic.

<sup>222</sup> Indeed, Jens Haustein has claimed that all arguments have been inconclusive: "Über den Sinn und die Funktion dieser Vasallitätsfiktion ist viel diskutiert worden. Man hat sie als einen Ausdruck von Siegfrieds *übermüete* interpretiert, ohne diesen Befund so recht in eine Deutung der Siegfriedgestalt integrieren zu können, man hat sie für einen belanglosen Scherz gehalten oder für eine folgenreiche Verfehlung genommen, was sie tatsächlich auch ist. Aber einen richtigen Grund für das Vorhandensein dieser Szene, die vom Nibelungenlieddichter neu eingeführt worden ist, hat man bislang nicht gefunden." Jens Haustein, "Siegfrieds Schuld," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 122 (1993), 380–81. "Much has been discussed concerning the sense and the function of this vassalage fiction. One has interpreted it as an expression of Siegfried's *übermüete*, without being able to integrate this finding into an understanding of Siegfried's character; one has held it as an irrelevant joke, or taken it as a consequential offence, which it indeed also is. But no one has yet found a correct basis for the presence of this scene, which has been newly introduced by the *Nibelungenlied* poet."

It is my contention that the *Nibelungenlied* author, with his penchant for the theatrical, purposefully used the vassalage deception as a vehicle of psychological motivation and factual revelation. It is Brynhild herself who, realizing the improbability of Siegfried's alleged servitude to Gunther, grows increasingly suspicious and begins to question the ruse. In so doing, she makes crucial use of her knowledge of the vassalage deception to expose Siegfried's further guile in Gunther's wooing quest. Seen in this light, the vassalage deception is a primary motivational device, for without it Brynhild might have forever remained duped.<sup>223</sup>

Just as the Ale of Forgetfulness serves the necessary function of deflecting blame away from Sigurðr in *Völsunga saga*, the vassalage-deception serves the necessary functions of arousing suspicion in Brunhild and crediting Siegfried with the deceit involved in wooing her. Siegfried does not think far enough ahead to plan for the consequences of his actions, particularly the consequences once he has returned to the courtly world.<sup>224</sup> He lives too much in the present moment, and his habit of rashness

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<sup>223</sup> Lynn D. Thelen, "The Vassalage Deception, or Siegfried's Folly," 472.

<sup>224</sup> Mary Fleet has astutely pointed out, however, the hero's subtlety in knowing he will not be able to sneak away during the contest if he is honored as a king and therefore in a prominent public position visible to all onlookers. As a vassal, Siegfried can stay in the back and watch, and thereby slip away to fetch his *Tarnkappe* and return to aid Gunther. See Mary Fleet, "Siegfried as Günther's Vassal," *Oxford German Studies* 14 (1983), 2–3. Perhaps Siegfried displays some foresight here, but certainly not much—he does not think further ahead than his immediate objective. As Fleet herself concludes: "The results of Siegfried's plan to win Kriemhild are therefore the rape of Brünhild by Gunther, the murder or, more accurately, since he makes no attempt to conceal the body, the slaying or manslaughter of Siegfried by Hagen and the monstrous vengeance on her own kinsmen by Kriemhild for the death of her husband. This, in turn, brings about her own death, the annihilation of all the Burgundian officers and men and the deaths of Etzel's followers. It is, in every respect a complete tragedy: the only survivors are, besides Brünhild and Etzel, Dietrich and Hildebrand, two children, one in Worms and one in Xanten and a host of weeping women" (6).

finally returns to harm him. He is blinded by his love for Kriemhilt, and the thought of obtaining her through aiding Gunther keeps Siegfried from realizing the eventual foolishness of his plan.

*Hagen's Mythological Transformation –*

Once Brunhild catches Siegfried's treachery and he dies, Hagen rises to dominate the second half of the epic. Although his prowess stands out most sharply in the episodes concerning Etzel and the fall of the Burgundians, Hagen's exceptional mental acuity and command over the lords of Burgundy can be seen in his vehement insistence on carrying out his plan for Siegfried's death. Like Siegfried earlier in the narrative when he commands efforts to obtain Brunhild, Hagen assumes all agency—though not all responsibility—in Siegfried's murder. Gunther simply follows Hagen's orders, while Gernot and Giselher assume a passive compliance in the whole affair. Passivity does not deflect blame, but it does serve to portray Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher as relatively weak-minded figures when compared to Hagen. Hagen moves significantly deeper into the mythological world through his murder of Siegfried, which serves almost as an initiation, much like Siegfried's slaying of the dragon. Given the narrative similarities between Hagen's murder of Siegfried and Sigurðr's slaying of the dragon in *Völsunga saga*, this seems a particularly striking parallel.

To the mythological world belong supernatural strength and fairytale creatures, such as the dragon and the Nibelungs; even the *Hornhaut* itself as a magical protection belongs there. Given the preponderance of supernatural qualities and abilities in the mythological world, one might expect the gift of prophecy to also have its place in this world rather than in the courtly sphere. Instead, the initial examples of prophecy in the epic are those of prophetic dreams by central female characters fixed firmly in the courtly sphere of society. Prophecy does, however, also belong to the mythological

world, as demonstrated by the nixies Hagen meets; their prophecy does not require the medium of dream. Hagen is the only character in the epic to listen to prophecy, foregrounding his status as the central figure of wisdom.

The first prophetic dream is Kriemhilt's at the beginning of the *Nibelungenlied*, which her mother Uote interprets accurately:

«der valke den du ziuhest, daz ist ein edel man.

In welle got behüeten, du muost in sciere vloren hân.» (14)

The falcon whom you raise, that is a noble man. Unless God protects him, you must quickly lose him.

Kriemhilt refuses to hear any truth in this prophecy, and the matter is dropped for the time. In the same way, Siegfried does not heed Kriemhilt's warnings after she has prophetic dreams of his death. In Kriemhilt's warning to Siegfried, more than just prophetic dreams make Kriemhilt nervous about Siegfried's hunting expedition: she herself has told Hagen the location of Siegfried's weak spot. Rather than accepting his wife's prophecy and facing death, Siegfried ignores an important warning altogether. Both Kriemhilt and Siegfried, therefore, ignore prophecy.

The only other example of prophetic dream in the epic is that of Uote, who has already demonstrated a capability of accurately interpreting such dreams. She dreams before the Burgundians set out for Etzel's court:

Dô sprach zuo zir kinden diu edel Uote:

«ir soldet hie belîben, helde guote.

mir ist getroumet hînte von angestlîcher nôt,

wie allez daz gefügele in diesem lande wære tôt.»

«Swer sich an troume wendet», sprach dô Hagene,



«der enwêiz der rehten mære niht ze sagene,  
wenn' ez im ze êren volleclîchen stê.  
ich will daz mîn herre ze hóve nâch úrlóube gê.» (1509–10)

Then the noble Uote spoke to her children: “you should stay here, good heroes. I dreamed last night of terrible strife, that all the birds in this land were dead.”

“Whoever turns to dreams,” Hagen spoke then, “does not know how to rightly give counsel when the matter is completely to their honor. I wish that my lord goes to court for permission to depart.”

Hagen, the one so greatly opposed to the expedition, discredits Uote’s prophecy immediately, which has particular narrative impact since one of Uote’s prophetic interpretations has already come to pass. The fact that this dream also depicts warriors as birds further connects the two prophecies. The parties implicated by prophetic dreams seem always to ignore not just the prophecy itself, but even the possibility of truth in the warning. Hagen, though discounting the dream, knows already that dangers lie ahead.

Hagen is the only member of the Burgundian court to read Kriemhilt’s intentions correctly when she invites the Burgundian royals to Hungary for the feast. Gunther naïvely states that Kriemhilt has renounced her enmity toward all those in Burgundy, save perhaps Hagen. Hagen knows better, but his sound advice gets misinterpreted as a form of cowardice:

«Nu lâit iuch niht betriegen», sprach Hagenen, «swes si jehen,  
die boten von den Hiunen. welt ir Kriemhilde sehen,  
ir muget dâ wol verliesen die êre und ouch den lîp:  
jâ ist vil lan cræche des künec Ezzelen wîp.»

Dô sprach zuo dem râte der fürste Gêrnot:  
«sît daz ir von schulden fürhtet dâ den tôt  
in hiunischen rîchen, solde wîrz dar umbe lân  
wir ensæhen unser swester, daz wære vil übele getân.»

Dô sprach der fürste Gîselher zuo dem degene:  
«sît ir iuch schuldec wizzet, friunt Hâgene,  
sô sult ir hie belîben unt iuch wol bewarn,  
und lâzet, die getürren, zuo mîner swester mit uns varn.»

Dô begonde zürnen von Tronege der degen:  
«ine wil daz ir iemen fûeret ûf den wegen,  
der getürre rîten mit iu ze hove baz.  
sît ir niht welt erwinden, ich sol iu wol erzeigen daz.» (1461–64)

“Do not let yourselves be deceived now,” spoke Hagen, “by what they assert, the messengers from the Huns. If you want to see Kriemhilt, you may well lose your reputation and also your life: indeed, king Etzel’s wife will long hold out for vengeance.”

Then lord Gernot spoke up in the council: “Just because you justifiably fear death in Hunnish kingdoms, that would be done badly if we were to neglect seeing our sister.”

Then prince Giselher spoke to the warrior: “Since you know yourself to be guilty, friend Hagen, you should stay here and take care of yourself, and let those who dare travel with us to my sister.”

Then the warrior from Troneck began to grow angry: “I do not want you to take anyone on the way who would better dare ride to court with you. And since you will not desist, I shall show you that.”

As Hagen later proves, he is ever willing to do whatever it takes to protect his lords and king with a complete disregard for his own life. Challenging this willingness proves effective in getting Hagen to endorse the journey, though one could also argue that Hagen shows a weakness here—and neglect of his duty to serve—since he is so easily goaded into providing Gunther poor counsel. Nonetheless, Hagen cannot be blamed for advising the journey to Hungary; the three lords appear bent on going, and Hagen’s absence from such a journey would be a discredit both to his reputation as Gunther’s vassal, and also to the reputation of the Burgundians in general.

Given Hagen’s reluctance to travel to Etzel’s court, his dismissal of Uote’s prophecy seems significant, but he will soon have another opportunity to consider foresight of the future. In the second half of the epic, Hagen parallels Siegfried in many ways, including his refusal to heed a prophetic warning. Other, more striking parallels abound, however: just as Siegfried travels off alone to help Gunther while he is in Iceland, so Hagen travels off alone to look for a ferry on the expedition to Etzel’s court. There he learns his fate from two nixies after cleverly stealing their clothes. The nixies’ prophecies stand apart from the prophetic dreams in the *Nibelungenlied* as a different form of prophecy from distinctly mythological sources. After one nixie foretells that he will win great glory—which turns out to be true—another nixie makes Hagen’s fate more explicit:

«durch der wæte liebe    hât mîn múome dir gelogen.  
kúmostu hin zen Hiunen,    sô bistu sêré betrogen.

Jâ soltu kêren widere;    daz ist an der zît,

wand' ir helde küene alsô geladet sît,  
daz ir sterben müezet in Etzelen lant.  
swelhe dar gerîtent, die hábent den tôt an der hant.» (1539–40)

“My cousin lied to you out of desire for the clothes. If you come to the Huns, you will be greatly deceived. Indeed, you should turn back, there is still time, for you brave heroes have been invited so that you must die in Etzel’s land. Whoever rides there, they have death at hand.”

Once Hagen learns his fate, he does not consider a change of course. Rather he simply asks: *«nu zeige uns überz wazzer, daz aller wîséste wîp»* (“Now show us the way over the water, wisest woman of all”). Hagen has learned his fate, but he does not fully believe the words of the supernaturally gifted nixies without first putting them to the test. Hagen’s reflection on the prophecies demonstrates his inner faculties of wisdom. Externally, he appears ever more like Siegfried by showing a fearless disregard for the consequences of killing the ferryman, not unlike Siegfried’s recklessness earlier in the epic (e.g., upon arrival in Worms, or in the battle with the Danes). And as in Siegfried’s solo venture to Nibelungenland to fetch his men, the poet paints a picture of Hagen as an immensely powerful oarsmen:

dô zôh vil krefteclîche des küneec Guntheres man.  
Mit zügen harte swinden kért ez der gast,  
unz im daz starke ruoder an sîner hende brast. (1563–64)

Gunther’s vassal then pulled powerfully. With hard and violent pulls he turned it round, so that the strong oar broke in his hands.

Though Hagen ferries more than ten thousand people across the river, the explicit number of warriors—as in Siegfried’s venture—is placed at one thousand:

Hagene was dâ meister: des fuort’ er ûf den sant  
vil manigen rîchen recken in daz unkunde lant.

Zem êrsten brâht’ er über tûsent ritter hêr,  
dar nâch die sînen recken. danoch was ir mêr.  
niun tûsent knehte die fuort’ er an daz lant.  
des tages was unmûezec des kûenen Tronegæres hant. (1572–73)

Hagen was then master: for he led onto the shore a great many noble warriors in the unknown land. He first brought over a thousand splendid knights, then his own warriors. Then there were still more of them. He brought nine thousands squires into the land. The brave lord of Troneck was untiring that day.

Hagen shows his capability for discretion by not telling anyone about either the ferryman or the nixies. Instead of speaking, Hagen shows a tremendous physical strength heretofore not demonstrated by any character other than Siegfried. And as in the case of Siegfried’s orchestration of the events in Iceland, only Hagen accurately perceives events as they unfold.

The audience is already certain that the Burgundians travel to their death: the nixies’ warning only confirms the premonition of Queen Uote’s dream. But Hagen is still unsure what will happen, expressly discounting Uote’s dream and hoping to catch the nixies in a lie; they prove themselves not necessarily untruthful, but certainly not completely straightforward in their honesty. Both Hagen and Siegfried discount prophecy immediately, but Hagen differs from Siegfried in secretly considering the

possibility of this prophecy's truth, showing a caution and foresight not seen in the hero from the Netherlands. Hagen puts the nixies' prophecy to the test by trying to drown the chaplain:

Dô der arme pfaffe der helfe niht ensach,  
dô kért' er wider übere: des leid er ungemach.  
swi er niht swimmen kunde, im half diu gotes hant  
daz er wol kom gesunder hin wider ûz án daz lant.

Dô stuont der arme priester unde schutte sîne wât.  
dâ bî sach wol Hagene daz sîn niht wære rât,  
daz im für mære sageten diu wilden merewîp.  
er dâhte: «dise degene müezen verliesén den lîp.» (1579–80)

When the poor cleric saw no help, then he turned back: he suffered discomfort on that account. As he did not know how to swim, God's hand helped him so that he might come safely back out onto land. Then the poor priest stood and shook his clothes. Thereby Hagen saw that nothing could help them in regard to what the nixies had told him as prophecy. He thought, "These warriors must lose their lives."

Hagen does not think of turning back; rather, he destroys the ferry so that no one can return. He appears resigned to the fact that he will die; he thinks of his warrior companions rather than himself (*dise degene*). Hagen parallels Siegfried, but aside from the clear intelligence that Hagen demonstrates, the two warriors are distinguished by the relationship they maintain with those around them, as well as their relationship with death. Whereas Siegfried speaks using numerous first-person pronouns and explicitly tells Gunther he is only helping him win Brunhild for his own personal gain

of Kriemhilt, Hagen devotes himself to the service of his king, and in such service understands the relative insignificance of his own life. Thus, when confronted with the imminence of his own doom, he appears accepting of his own death.

As a further parallel between the journey to Iceland and the journey to Hungary, King Gunther asks his company once they have crossed the river who will lead the expedition:

«wer sol uns durch daz lant  
die rehten wege wîsen, daz wir niht irre varn?»  
dô sprach der starke Volkêr: «daz sol ich éiné bewarn.»  
  
«Nu enthaltet iuch», sprach Hagene, «ritter unde kneht.  
man sol friunden volgen: jâ dunket ez mich reht.  
vil ungefüegiu mære diu tuon ich iu bekant:  
wir enkomen nimmer wider in der Burgonden lant.» (1586–87)

“Who shall show us the right paths through the land so that we do not travel astray?” Then spoke Volker the strong: “That duty shall I alone assume.”

“Now hold on you all,” spoke Hagen, “knights and squires. One should follow friends: indeed, it seems only right to me. I shall make known to you some very distressing news: we will never come back to the land of Burgundy.”

Just as the right paths across the sea are well known to Siegfried, so are the paths to Hungary well known to Volker. This helps to establish Volker—alongside Hagen—as the tremendous warrior he will soon prove himself to be. But in contrast to the journey to Iceland, during which Hagen’s role as a knowledgeable counselor gets

usurped because of his ignorance of otherworldly customs, here Hagen asserts himself with knowledge no one else in the company possesses—he has obtained it from distinctly mythological figures. Hagen’s use of the word *friunden* echoes Giselher’s use of the word *friunt* (1463.2) when taunting him into accepting the journey. Hagen, in his friendship, will demonstrate that his counsel was right all along.

Hagen continues to act out of his own volition, keeping his actions hidden from his king. When they journey off into enemy territory, Hagen knows they are about to face a brutal attack. He arranges and executes the defense without Gunther even knowing that a battle takes place:

Dô hete von Tronege Hagene wol gefüezet daz,  
(wie möhte sîner mâge ein helt gehüeten baz?)  
er pflac der nâchhuote mit den sînen man,  
und Dancwart sîn bruoder. daz was vil wîslîch getân.

In was des tages zerunnen, des enhéten si niht mêr.  
er vorhte an sînen vriunden léit ûnde sêr.  
si riten under schilden durch der Beyer lant.  
dar nâch in kurzer wîle die helde wurden an gerant. (1599–1600)

Then Hagen of Troneck had arranged—how might a hero better protect his kinsmen?— that he had care of the rearguard with his vassals and his brother Dancwart. That was done very wisely. The day had run its course for them, so that they didn’t have light any more. He feared sorrow and wounds for his friends. They rode under shields through Bavaria. A short time thereafter the heroes were attacked.



Although King Gunther later chastises Hagen for having literally left him in the dark, the poet praises Hagen, emphasizing the wisdom of his actions, the pragmatism of his discretion—a quality that Siegfried grievously lacked—and the fortunate nature of his ability to guard his kinsmen. Hagen’s action contrasts with Gunther’s inaction; at this point in the narrative, Gunther has not yet demonstrated any warlike manner. He stays at home during the battle with the Saxons and Danes, he merely performs the motions during the contests with Brunhild, he passively submits to Hagen’s murder plot, and he is kept from fighting because of the silence of his vassal. While he will no doubt receive some praise as a warrior during the final battle, Gunther’s passivity serves to enhance the status of Hagen as a knight of both enormous physical prowess and profound mental acuity.

When the Burgundians arrive in Hungary, Hagen’s reputation, like that of Siegfried’s in Worms, precedes him:

Durch daz man sagete mære (des was im genuoc),  
daz er von Niderlande Sifriden sluoc,  
sterkest aller recken, den Kriemhilde man.  
des wart michel vrâgen ze hove nâh Hagene getân.

Der helt was wol gewahsen, dâz ist âlwâr,  
grôz was er zen brusten, gemischet was sîn hâr  
mit einer grîsen varwe. diu bân wâren im lanc  
und eislich sîn gesihene. er hete hêrlîchen ganc. (1733–34)

Because of that, they told stories—there were enough about him—that he killed Siegfried from the Netherlands, the strongest of all warriors, the husband of Kriemhilt. On account of that many questions were

asked at court about Hagen. The hero was well built, that is certainly true; he was big in the chest, his hair was mixed with a gray color, his legs were long, and his gaze was terrible. He had a lordly stride.

Rather than receiving blame for his deception, Hagen receives fame for his accomplishment, similar to Siegfried's fame for having slain the dragon. Lionarons argues that Hagen's experience with the nixies forms a kind of initiation rite into the mythological world, like killing the dragon for Siegfried.<sup>225</sup> But I would disagree, since the passage above seems to indicate that Hagen's slaying of Siegfried—a mythological figure—serves more as an initiation rite than his dialogue with the nixies. Hagen has had at least some knowledge of the mythological world since the beginning of the poem, but only after killing Siegfried does he assume the role of epic hero. Siegfried is Hagen's dragon.

We also receive in the above passage (1733–34) a more complete description of Hagen's physical appearance than we ever receive for Siegfried. The lack of physical description of Siegfried serves to further distance the hero from the audience; the picture of Hagen given here makes him immediate and tangible. The most complete description we ever get of Siegfried's appearance characterizes him as handsome and courtly, but portrays him as something artificial:

Dô stuont sô minneclîche daz Sigmundes kint,  
sam er entworfen wære an ein pémínt  
von guotes meisters listen, áls mán im jach,  
daz man helt deheinen nie sô scœnén gesach. (286)

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<sup>225</sup> Lionarons, "The Otherworld and its Inhabitants in the *Nibelungenlied*," 169.

Then Siegmund's child stood in such a lovely manner as though he were painted on a piece of parchment by a good master's skill, as they asserted about him that none had ever seen a hero so beautiful.

The closest Siegfried can come to the world of the audience is as an illustration, an image of the Germanic past, completely devoid of specificity or depth.<sup>226</sup> Although we cannot see him in three dimensions, we know even his superficial image is fantastic, almost cartoonish. Miller writes of this type of hero:

Again we should remember the ambiguity of heroism: the hero's exterior persona either reflects an interior, ontogenetic reality, or is the essential collection of characteristics that constitute their subject totally: whereupon there is no interior to reflect. The very peak of drama seen in the presentation of the hero, with emphasis on surface, pose, costume, and act (terms taken, advisedly, from the world of the stage), causes us to ask, though perhaps too soon, if there will be ever found any 'deep' purpose to this invention of human society. Is the hero only an actor? Is he only a man painted, or sculpted, drawn as merely larger than life? And to what end?<sup>227</sup>

Siegfried appears to be just such a painted hero; despite the superhuman strengths of Beowulf and Sigurðr, they both display inner qualities through their wisdom and

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<sup>226</sup> Jan Dirk Müller writes about this superficiality: "The characters in the *Nibelungenlied* have no depth, something that is 'behind' their appearance. Even their physicality is flat and reduced to the visible exterior. What remains the same under all these exteriors is something general, the exorbitant strength of the hero. Whether in hunting attire, under the *tarnhût*, even under the armor of the dragon blood, Sivrit remains *der starke Sivrit*, the hero superior to all. His skins make him invulnerable, invisible, or a splendid courtly knight. He appears different in every case, thanks to these layers." Müller, *Rules for the Endgame: The World of the Nibelungenlied*, 222. While Müller may be right in asserting that no character has profound depth, we at least see Hagen in three dimensions as opposed to Siegfried's two.

<sup>227</sup> Miller, *The Epic Hero*, 193.

concern for their societies. Siegfried, as an image or idea of a hero, lacks the depth to relate with his community. Hagen, on the other hand, receives fuller depiction as a human character, even if his feats of strength in the second half of the epic appear to exceed those of normal men. And in contrast to Siegfried's opponents, Hagen's—with the possible exception of Siegfried himself—are expressly human warriors of the courtly world. Hagen also keeps his community, not his personal glory, as his highest priority.

When the Burgundians arrive at the Hunnish court, Hagen shows more awareness of the imminent danger than any other character. In his desire to serve his lords, he keeps watch at night. Volker offers to share the guard:

der helt vil minneclîche    dancte Volkêre duo.

«Nu lôn' iu got von himele,    vil lieber Volkêr.

z'allen mînen sorgen    son' gerte ich niemens mêr,

niwan iuch aleine,    swâ ich hete nôt.

ich sol ez wol verdienen,    mich enwendes der tôt.» (1830–31)

The hero then thanked Volker very warmly. “Now God in Heaven repay you, very dear Volker. In all my troubles I should wish for no one more than you alone if I should be in need. I shall repay you well for it, if death does not keep me from it.”

Hagen shows not only a graciousness for the aid of a fellow warrior, but also an awareness of the imminence of his own death. At this point, he knows he will die in Hungary, and that death is now near. Yet his concern remains to protect his lords and to fight the battle until the end. The almost formulaic statement *mich enwendes der tôt*

contrasts markedly with the use of a similar formula earlier in the epic. Before traveling to Iceland, Siegfried says to Kriemhilt:

Dô sprach der degen rîche: «ob mir mîn lében bestât,  
sô sult ir aller sorgen, frouwe, haben rât.  
ich bringe'n iu gesunden her wider an den Rîn,  
daz wizzet sicherlîchen.» (375)

Then spoke the powerful warrior: “If my life remains mine, so, lady, shall all your troubles be solved. I will bring him back safely to you here on the Rhine: know that for certain.”

Though the use of first person singular pronouns in Siegfried’s speech should come as no surprise, it is here employed in a telling manner. Siegfried shows a cursory awareness of his own mortality, yet control over his life remains in his own possession, hence the *mir*. He accords death no agency. Hagen, on the other hand, says, *mich enwendes der tôt*, demonstrating an awareness of his own limitations before a higher power. Siegfried, though afforded the opportunity by his wife’s dreams to know and understand the nearness of death, remains ignorant of his fate; Hagen, though he also discounts a prophetic dream, listens to the words of the nixies, and his certain knowledge of his fate renders his fearless service to the Burgundian lords more heroic than Siegfried’s death by the spear of his own ignorance.

#### *Conclusion –*

Of dominant themes in the *Nibelungenlied*, there are many that would top the list before wisdom came to mind. The didacticism and gnomic or proverbial wisdom of *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga* are absent from the Middle High German epic, and appear replaced by a hero’s ability to handle the complexities of society with grace

and fluidity, according honor where honor is due, and not incurring the ill will of members at court. As Claudia Brinker-von der Heyde writes: “Ehre manifestiert sich nicht zwangsläufig in todesverachtender Zerstörungswut, sondern in der Fähigkeit, im richtigen Augenblick die versöhnende Geste zu machen.”<sup>228</sup> The *Nibelungenlied* presents two social spheres—one mythological, one courtly—which overlap, but are not always mutually intelligible. Knowledge of one sphere by no means guarantees success in the other. Siegfried’s knowledge remains confined primarily to the mythological world, and because Siegfried is nearly invulnerable—and aware of this invulnerability—he does not reap the mental and spiritual benefits an awareness of mortality provides, his bravery resulting primarily from his *Hornhaut*.<sup>229</sup> Instead, Siegfried demonstrates pragmatic wisdom. He knows the way to, and customs of, Isenstein; how to practice deceit; and the proper individualistic conduct for a mythological hero, in terms of both speech and action. In addition to lacking courtly knowledge, however, he lacks the fundamental component of heroic wisdom defined in the previous three chapters: resignation to fate or death.

Resignation remains foundational to heroic wisdom in the *Nibelungenlied*, even though the social and political environments dictate other drastically different components than those found in Old English or Old Norse texts. Hagen emerges in the second half of the epic as the more dominantly heroic character precisely because he knowingly travels to certain death, yet fights bravely until the bitter end. Hagen is also the poem’s greatest figure of wisdom; the connection is not merely coincidental. Hagen’s readiness to face death defines the quality that helps him surpass Siegfried in heroic appeal, and gives Hagen the necessary perspective to attain heroic wisdom. If

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<sup>228</sup> Claudia Brinker-von der Heyde, “Hagen—Ein Held mit vielen Gesichtern!” *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 51 (1999), 122.

<sup>229</sup> Perhaps one exception to his dismissal of mortality is when wrestling Brunhild in the bedchamber.

Jeremy Ingalls is correct in asserting that epic depicts the hero's growth from knowledge to wisdom, Hagen is much more of an epic hero than Siegfried.<sup>230</sup>

In Hagen alone, wisdom and resignation to fate coincide. The Middle High German epic seems more concerned with the tension between old and new, mythological and courtly, epic and romance than with the wisdom of central heroes. Epic remains the best classification of the *Nibelungenlied*, but the author's intermixture of discourses presents a narrative in which genre is dialogized. Through the intermixture of epic and romance conventions—both within the narrative at large and within individual characters—the author brings into relief aspects of each. Because the intermixture of genre and generic expectations is so thorough, however, nothing is as simple as it seems. Siegfried's *Hornhaut* is like the magical protection heroes receive in romances; but he nevertheless dies, and his death impacts a large community. Hagen, condemned for his disloyalty, appears brave and wise in a manner worthy of emulation in the second half of the epic; yet he is a courtly knight and one cannot forget his discomfort and near cowardice at Isenstein. The characters of the *Nibelungenlied* initially appear straightforward, but further analysis reveals their complexities; in the same way, the *Nibelungenlied* itself appears epic initially, but in fact toys with various generic discourses such that it largely defies classification.

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<sup>230</sup> Hagen's courage can also be seen as intimately associated with his wisdom on account of his traditional status as a traveler and battle-hardened advisor. He knows so much because he has seen so much, as depicted in the Latin *Waltharius*.

## CONCLUSION

In my introduction I mentioned a conversation with Jens-Peter Schjødt concerning the merits of comparative scholarship and research. Schjødt pinpointed one of the key benefits of comparison: only through such analysis can we arrive at the contrast necessary to create categories. Category is essential to scholarship, for without it we have no foundation or vocabulary with which to discuss texts and history. This dissertation has analyzed the portrayal of wisdom in prominent texts from three traditions; its analysis has resulted in a narrower definition of *sapientia* in each respective text and tradition. While wisdom is expected of the hero in Old English, Old Norse, and Middle High German, the components that constitute this wisdom are mildly or even drastically different in each case.

From the analysis of *Beowulf* in Old English, it became clear that a combination of word and deed comprised Beowulf's wisdom. The hero must be able to engage in dialogue of various kinds: social, formal, and combative. Proficiency in dialogue is intimately linked to the warrior's ability to perform feats of courage physically. Beowulf's counsel to Hrothgar is to allow him to engage in single combat with Grendel; likewise, Beowulf's feats in combating sea monsters serve as the material necessary to overcome Unferð in combative dialogue. Words and deeds are inseparable, both finding their source and motivation within the faculty that governs bravery and wisdom simultaneously: the heart. Beowulf demonstrates some knowledge of proverbs and gnomic lore, but his wisdom does not appear to be defined by any form of worldly knowledge. Rather, he is wise because he demonstrates a persistent awareness of his own mortality and limited power before God. No matter how strong he may be, no matter how skilled a fighter he is, he cannot control his own destiny, and only God will determine who is victorious in battle.



*Völsunga saga* presents a similar view of this foundation principle of heroic wisdom, celebrating Sigurðr's fearlessness and humility before inescapable death. Yet the saga's depiction of other aspects of wisdom appears more complicated than in *Beowulf*. Like Beowulf, Sigurðr must engage in dialogue, but these dialogues are not simply based on the abstraction of physical feats, deeds becoming words; instead, the hero is expected to be well versed in socially constructed knowledge, including proverbial, gnomic, and mythological material. This knowledge borders on the magical, and the wise hero must also demonstrate proficiency in the ability to prophesy. This gift of foresight, which Sigurðr explicitly possesses, is absent from the Old English hero's sapience—only God knows Beowulf's fate beforehand. At the same time, the lengthy formal speeches that characterize important figures in *Beowulf* are not represented in *Völsunga saga*. While aspects of wisdom in the Old English and Old Norse epics may be categorized under the same broad headings, such as “dialogic proficiency,” the actual form these aspects take has distinctive formal, stylistic, and thematic features in each text and tradition.

The wisdom poetry of Old English and Old Norse mirrors the presentation of wisdom found in *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga*. Proverbial and gnomic knowledge, as well as ability in dialogue of various kinds, remains important in both Old English and Old Norse texts. As in the saga, Old Norse wisdom poetry also espouses knowledge of mythological lore, though it does not appear as concerned with prophecy. The Old English poems present a view of destiny similar to that of Beowulf in his speeches: only God knows of events beforehand, and only God knows what will happen to a soul after life. Old English wisdom poems are particularly forceful in their message that one must be humble before God, cognizant of one's own limitations, and ever aware of mortality. In contrast to *Beowulf*, however, *wyrd* has little place among the wisdom poems, and God reigns supreme.

The Old English and Old Norse wisdom poems concern social knowledge and facility. Many of the maxims contained therein deal with appropriate modes of functioning within society. This form of wisdom—wisdom as social maneuverability—is present in Old English and Old Norse, but takes center stage in the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*. Despite significant temporal and geographic distance between Anglo-Saxon and Old Icelandic cultures, the two societies had a more similar structure to each other than to Middle High German courtly society; the *Nibelungenlied* instantly stands out in this study because of its courtly setting. Heroic wisdom—though not as foregrounded as in *Beowulf* or *Völsunga saga*—nonetheless remains important to the narrative. On account of the juxtaposition of courtly and mythological worlds, the *Nibelungenlied*'s more pragmatic forms of sapience appear drastically different from several components of wisdom in the Old English and Old Norse epics. Siegfried's wisdom is confined to his ability to function within the heroic and mythological world, but this wisdom does not translate into the courtly setting of Burgundy. We see something of a mirror image to Siegfried in the character of Hagen, who knows all the social customs of many lands, and can function in courtly society with ease, but feels uncomfortable and out of his element in the mythological world he confronts in Isenstein.

If courtliness was a social phenomenon that evolved out of a preexistent Latin tradition, as C. Stephen Jaeger argues, rather than out of a literary tradition, then it would make sense for the *Nibelungenlied* to present a distinctly courtly view of wisdom in contrast to the conception found in Old English or even Old Norse.<sup>231</sup> Old Norse literature was heavily influenced by courtly romance, and this influence can even be seen in *Völsunga saga*, but the text nonetheless presents the Germanic society

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<sup>231</sup> C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939–1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 326.

of its own own cultural and societal heritage. The *Nibelungenlied* therefore stands apart from the Old English and Old Norse texts considered in this study, despite the narrative similarities between it and *Völsunga saga*. Though the storyline may be derived from a common cultural heritage, it is a literary production of a markedly different society with different conceptions of social wisdom. At the same time, however, the *Nibelungenlied*, as *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga*, presents resignation to death as the linchpin between fortitude and wisdom; Hagen may mirror Siegfried in many respects, but his resolution in the face of certain death establishes him not only as the more dominantly heroic character, but also as the epic's only real figure of wisdom.

This dissertation has shown that even though heroic wisdom may be integral to medieval Germanic epic, different textual traditions have their own conceptions and expressions of it. By carefully examining the contexts in which the hero's wisdom is discussed and used within epic narratives, it has been possible to obtain a sense of what actually comprises that wisdom in each context. The wisdom demonstrated by each of the heroes discussed in this dissertation, as well as in the wisdom poems, differs significantly, particularly in its expression within social circumstances that would have been unique to each culture. An important constant, however, has emerged: the hero's acceptance of his limitations and his resignation to a higher power constitute the fundament of heroic wisdom. While the name of that higher power may differ, the process of resignation remains consistent. Most significantly in exploring the theme of *sapientia et fortitudo*, this acceptance comprises both qualities simultaneously: awareness of mortality, itself a form of wisdom, imbues the epic hero with the fearlessness necessary to perform the feats of strength and courage he must to protect his lands or people. In resignation to fate, a hero's bravery and wisdom can hardly be separated.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: WORDS OF WISDOM IN *BEOWULF*

*Mod* –

#### AS A NOUN

- 50 murnende mod
- 67 Him on mod bearn
- 171 modes brecða
- 436 modes bliðe
- 549 mod onhrered
- 604 mode geþungen
- 730 þa his mod ahlog
- 753 He on mode wearð
- 810 modes myrðe
- 1057 ond ðæs mannes mod
- 1150 ne meahhte wæfre mod
- 1167 þæt he hæfde mod micel
- 1229 modes milde
- 1307 on hreon mode
- 1418 weorce on mode
- 1603 modes seoce
- 1706 mægen mid modes snyttrum
- 1843 ond on mode frod
- 1931 Mod þryðo wæg
- 2100 modes geomor

2281 mon on mode  
2527 Ic eom on mode from  
2581 on hreoum mode  
3011 meltan mid þam modigan

#### IN COMPOUNDS

180 in modsefan  
233 modgehygdum  
306 guþmod grimmon  
349 modsefa  
385 for his modþræce  
709 bad bolgenmod  
726 eode yrremod  
844 hu he werigmod  
1277 gifre ond galgmod  
1543 oferwearp þa werigmod  
1624 swiðmod swymman  
1637 felamodigra  
1713 breat bolgenmod  
1729 monnes modgeþonc  
1778 modceare micle  
1785 Geat wæs glædmod  
1823 þinre modlufan  
1853 Me þin modsefa  
1888 felamodigra  
1992 Ic ðæs modceare

2012 syððan he modsefan  
2044 onginneð geomormod  
2132 healsode hreohmod  
2267 Swa giomormod  
2296 hat ond hreohmod  
2566 Stiðmod gestod  
2628 Ne gemealt him se modsefa  
2894 modgiomor sæt  
2942 sarigmodum  
3018 ac sceal geomormod  
3149 modceare mændon

#### AS AN ADJECTIVE

312 hof modigra  
337 modiglicran  
502 modges merefaran  
604 to medo modig  
670 modgan mægnes  
813 ac hine se modega  
855 fram mere modge  
1508 no he þæs modig wæs  
1643 modig on gemonge  
1812 þæt wæs modig secg  
1876 modige on meþle  
2698 modiges mannes  
2757 magoþegn modig

IN PROPER NOUNS

901 siððan Heremodes

1709 Ne wearð Heremod swa

*Frod –*

279 hu he frod ond god

1306 þa wæs frod cyning

1366 No þæs frod leofað

1724 awræc wintrum frod

1844 ond on mode frod

1874 ealdum infrodum

2114 þonne he wintrum frod

2123 frodan fyrnwitan

2209 wæs ða frod cyning

2277 warað wintrum frod

2449 eald ond infrod

2513 frod folces weard

2625 frod on forðweg

2800 frode feorhlege

2821 guman unfrodum

2928 Sona him se froda

2950 frod, felageomor

IN PROPER NOUNS

2025 gladum suna Frodan

*Snotor* –

190 ne mihte snotor hæleð

202 snotere ceorlas

416 snotere ceorlas

826 snotor ond swyðferhð

872 snyttrum styrian

908 snotor ceorl monig

942 snyttrum besyrwan

1313 þær se snotera bad

1384 Ne sorga, snotor guma

1475 snottra fengel

1591 snottre ceorlas

1706 mægen mid modes snyttrum

1726 snyttru bryttað

1734 for his unsnyttrum

1786 swa se snottra heht

1842 ne hyrde ic snotorlicor

2156 snotra fengel

3120 Huru se snotra

3162 foresnotre men



APPENDIX B: WORDS OF WISDOM IN *VÖLSUNGA SAGA*

<i>fróð-</i>	<i>horsk-</i>	<i>snotr</i>	<i>snjall-</i>	<i>speki-</i>
I	XIX	XX	IX	XIX
II	XX		XIX	XXI
XVIII			XXII	

*vita*

1st sg	2nd sg	3rd sg	1st pl	2nd pl	3rd pl
I	XIX	III	XII		
IV		VIII	XXIV		
VII					
XIII					
XVIII					
XX					
XXV					
XXV					
XXVII					
XXVIII					
XXXIII					
XXXIII					
XXXIII					
XXXIII					
XXXIII					
XXXIV					
XXXVII					

XXXX

*vita* (cont.)

Infinitive	Subj	Imperative	present part	past part	past
II	XVII	XXIX	XXX	XXX	XVI
V	XVIII				XVII
VI	XX				XXII
VI	XXII				XXIV
VII	XXIII				XXVIII
VIII	XXVI				XXVIII
VIII	XXVIII				XXX
VIII	XXIX				XXX
XI	XXXVIII				XXXII
XI					
XXII					
XXV					
XXV					
XXVIII					
XXIX					
XXX					
XXI					
XXXX					

*vitr* (adj.)

Positive	Negative	Superlative	Comparative	Noun
				wisdom

VIII	V	XI	XIX	XX
XI	XXI		XIX	XX
XIX			XXI	XXI
XXII			XXI	XXV
XXXIII			XXIV	XXXIV
XXXIV			XXVI	XXXVI
XXXVI			XXVIII	XXXVIII

<i>vit</i>	<i>framviss</i>	<i>vís</i>
Noun ( <i>wits</i> )	N. (foresight)	Adj. (wise)
XXI	IV	XX
XXIX	XVI	XXXXII

WORDS DENOTING FATE:

<i>skap-</i>	<i>hamingja</i>	<i>lög</i>	<i>feig</i>
VIII	XXIX	XVI	XX
VIII	XXXIV	XVI	XXX
XIV	XXXX	XXXV	XXXIII
XIX			
XXX			
XXX			
XXXIII			
XXXIV			

XXXVI

XXXVII

APPENDIX C: FORMULAIC PHRASES CONCERNING FATE IN *VÖLSUNGA SAGA*

V.

*Því at eitt sinn skal hverr deyja, en engi má undan komast at deyja um sinn.*

For one time shall each man die, but no one can escape dying that one time.

IX.

*reyna skulum vit áðr, hvárr af öðrum berr, ok hér skal lífit á leggja.*

We shall first test out which of us overcomes the other, and here I shall lay my life on the line.

XI.

*Nú er sem mælt, at eigi má við margnum.*

Now it is as is said, that no one can prevail against many.

XII.

*Margr lifnar ór litlum vánum, en horfin eru mér heill.*

Many live from little hope, but my luck has vanished.

XVIII.

*Hverr vill fé hafa allt til ins eina dags, en eitt sinn skal hverr deyja.*

Everyone wants to have wealth until that one day, but everyone shall die one time.

*drukna muntu, ef þú ferr um sjá óvarliga, ok bíð heldr á landi, unz lofn er.*

You will drown if you travel uncautiously at sea, and rather stay on land until it is calm.

*hverr sá, er með mörgum kemr, má þat finna eitthvert sinn, at engi er einna hvatastr.*

Everyone who comes among many people will find one time that no one is the bravest of all.

*þat hendir opt, at sá, er banasár fær, hefnir sín sjálfr.*

It happens often that he who receives a mortal wound avenges himself.

*Heim munda ek ríða, þótt ek missta þessa ins mikla fjár, ef ek víska, at ek skylda aldri deyja, en hverr frækn maðr vill fé ráða allt til ins eina dags.*

I would ride home, though I would lose this great wealth, if I knew that I should never die, but every brave man wants to have wealth until that one day.

XIX.

*Þá er menn koma til vígs, þá er manni betra gott hjarta en hvasst sverð.*

When men come to battle, then a good heart is better for a man than a sharp sword

XXI.

*Berst heldr við óvini þína en þú sér brenndr.*

Fight rather with your enemies than be burned at home.

XXIV.

*háttung er í, hverja giftu menn bera til síns endadags.*

There is danger in such good luck men carry to their final day.

XXX.

*Mátti hann ok eigi við sköpum vinna né sínu aldrlag.*

He could also not contend against his fates or his death

*engi má við sköpum vinna.*

No one can contend against fate.

XXXIII.

*Veit ek minn hestinn beztan ok sverðit hvassast, gullit ágætast.*

I know my horse to be the best and my sword the sharpest, my gold the most outstanding.

*mátti ok eigi við sköpum vinna.*

He could also not contend against fate.

XXXV.

*Þar skiljast þau með sínum forlögum.*

They parted there with their own destinies.

XXXVI.

*engi má við sköpum vinna.*

But no one can contend against fate.

XL.

*Valt er hamingjunní at treystast, at eigi bresti hún.*

Fortune is an unstable thing to trust that it not break.



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