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Retrospectivity in *Vǫlsunga saga:* The Brynhildr-Story[1]

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My purpose in this essay is to demonstrate that the Brynhildr-story in *Vǫlsunga saga* is a well-constructed narrative episode. In light of the many pejorative remarks on the saga as narrative art, my thesis verges on a radical program, for while *Vǫlsunga saga* has long held the status of a canonical work, it is generally regarded as a poorly constructed and thinly motivated prose retelling of several works that make up the poetic *Edda*. One reason why the Brynhildr-story fails to satisfy many readers is that, as numerous literary historians have painstakingly shown,[2] the saga seems to combine, without harmonizing, many mutually contradictory stories about Brynhildr. Indeed, one astute reader of narrative in all its guises—and he is not alone in his assessment—has written that '[t]here is something very strange about a central aspect of the Brynhildr-story in *Vǫlsunga saga*'.[3] By no means the least strange aspect is her initial oath—sworn when Óðinn forces her to give up the battlefield and to take a husband (as reported in Chapter 21, 35)[4]—to marry the man who knows no fear. After Sigurðr's appearance inside her shield-rampart, why does she not then announce her engagement and marry him? Instead, in the course of her story she continues, rather like an insurance company hedging its bets by adding complicating stipulations that absolve it of any and all responsibility, to swear additional oaths which the successful suitor must meet. Brynhildr's ideal suitor, finally, is a composite figure, a man who in addition to being fearless is both physically superior to all other men, the most nobly born, able to ride a horse named Grani through a flame wall surrounding her bower, and to do away with those suitors whom she wishes dispatched. In most fairy tale motifs of this ilk, the prospective bridegroom would be deemed worthy of his bride if he simply conquered the flame wall, which, in any event, most readers seem to regard as designed 'zur Aussiebung des tapfersten Freiers'[5] or, put less metaphorically, to guarantee 'that

the right suitor will be identified by his ability to cross the flame wall'.[6] But for some reason Brynhildr never seems satisfied with the form and the substance of her oaths—a consequence of the saga-author's maladroit yoking of sources?—and continues to revise them until her forced marriage to Gunnarr annuls them all.

Most readers find the Brynhildr-story confusing because they assume that she wishes to marry Sigurðr and that her revenge upon him is retaliation for his tricking her into marrying a lesser man. I will argue, however, that Brynhildr neither desires nor intends to marry Sigurðr. In fact, her great passion, even perhaps more intensely felt than her love of battle, is to remain celibate. Her anger originates in being forced into marriage, not in marrying beneath her expectations. The theoretical justification for such a radical reading of the saga is provided by an article by Ruth Waterhouse and John Stephens in which they apply a reading process to *Beowulf* that differs from traditional methods.[7] Adhering to the most common traditional reading process, we all learn early in school that in reading narrative we are obliged to remember what we have read in moving forwards through the succeeding pages of a story. Waterhouse and Stephens call attention, in addition, to a process of looking backward to what we have read and reinterpreting details and episodes already experienced in light of what we read subsequently. The new insights gained through 'the backward look' are then carried over to any matter just read or about to be read.[8] Their (hermeneutical) method is not quite so (for some) dauntingly postmodern as it might at first seem, for how many of us restrict our interpretation of any narrative to one reading or in the case of films one viewing or of plays one performance? In fact, what we teach in classrooms or write about in articles and books are readings based upon numerous backward looks even if we do not think of them in this way. That is, we discover (or invent) new interpretations of any scene we encounter on the second or tenth rereading largely on the basis of what we remember from previous readings as to what lies ahead. Similarly, I will argue here that in the course of our (re)readings or backward looks, it is possible, even desirable, to see these oaths in a different light. Much of the apparent disharmony disappears, leaving in its place a well-conceived narrative device. Looked at with these assumptions in mind, the oaths are not strange at all, but rather part of Brynhildr's efforts to avoid the ever-threatening marriage altar. Before examining these oaths in their context, however, I would like to characterise them with some general remarks.

I count twelve references in the saga to the conditions Brynhildr imposes upon the successful suitor. Until we look at these references in their contexts, the

following observations will give us some working assumptions: (1) what I have been referring to as the *oaths* are in fact Brynhildr's additional qualifications of the original oath—to marry only a fearless man—that her perspective husband must meet; (2) four characters, Brynhildr, Buðli, Heimir, or Sigurðr, report the oath(s) as having been uttered; (3) it follows, therefore, that they are not (illocutionary) speech acts[9]—that is, we never witness Brynhildr actually saying something like, 'I hereby swear to marry a man who knows no fear'—a distinction whose importance will be apparent later;[10] (4) the clauses specify, as stated above, that a successful suitor come equipped with fearlessness, martial superiority and a noble birth, and be able to ride Grani through the flames and be capable of, and willing to, eliminate her unsuccessful suitors; (5) we can think of the oaths as the computer language of the programme that operates the flame wall. That is, we can imagine that Brynhildr invents the flame wall and then specifies by means of the oaths that the suitor who conforms to all of the conditions will get through, but that those who do not will be repelled (and perhaps eliminated). In order to understand the function of these clauses on the plot level we need to see each of them in their narrative contexts, for it is only then that we will come to recognise that their sometimes contradictory character is a result of Brynhildr's adding parts to the oath as the story develops and her inventiveness in avoiding the conjugal bed is further taxed. We will also see that their enigmatic quality is not accidental, for, after all, they are intended to fool the three men (Óðinn, her father Buðli, and her brother Atli) who pressurise her to marry. The difficulty we have in understanding the clauses results also from the saga's indirect method of presenting them. For the narrative is itself a riddle that poses and solves a riddle by providing us with information that culminates in a solution. Let us examine how this complex narrative method is worked out.

In order to give a framework to these oaths we need to have the narrative elements of the Brynhildr-story in mind. While not an exhaustive catalogue, the following units comprise this story: (1) Óðinn's curse requiring Brynhildr to marry and retire from the battlefield; (2) her oath describing the conditions to be met by the man she marries; (3) her double-betrothal to Sigurðr; (4) her marriage to Gunnarr; (5) her quarrel with Guðrún in the river; (6) her revenge on Sigurðr; (7) and her suicide after his death. (All of these units are assumed by many readers to have been taken from various sources and analogues, some of them no longer extant, that predated the composition of the saga). Now it is clear that these elements do not in themselves comprise a plot, but it is equally clear that they could form the basis of many different tales. Only (1) and (7) must occupy their

present order, but units (2) through to (6) can be arranged in any way a story-teller wishes. That the plot arranging these elements seems defective to so many readers is another way of explaining why the saga can be read in so many different ways. (Or of explaining why it is really not read carefully at all—that is, with the same attention to detail as readers expend on, say, *Njáls saga* or *Hrafnkels saga*). In an effort to understand the Brynhildr-story, I will examine her oaths in their context as a means of demonstrating how their combined effects achieve coherence.

The first reference to the oath occurs in Brynhildr's explanation of how she came to be in a trance prior to Sigurðr's waking her inside the shield rampart. Accordingly, Óðinn has decreed—because she killed one of his favourites in battle—that she forgo the battlefield and take a husband; in response she stipulates that she will marry only a man who knows no fear; Óðinn then puts her to sleep with a *svefnþorn* ['sleep thorn'].[11] Her oath could be understood as aimed directly at Sigurðr: that is, forced to marry, she decides to make the best of the curse by marrying a man who appeals to her martial character. Thus, when Sigurðr arrives on the scene, her desire is fulfilled. But if we recognise the paradoxical character of her oath and regard fearlessness not as a virtue which her future husband must possess but rather as a condition which no man can fulfil, then she might actually be attempting to nullify Óðinn's curse.[12] After all, if she really desired Sigurðr as a mate, why does she repeatedly dampen his ardour, insist that their marriage will never take place, and not inform her father and brother of their betrothal on the mountain? Thus, the oath possesses an enigmatic character, and the joke's on Óðinn (or so she thinks)![13] Óðinn, himself no slouch at riddles, goes her one better in this test of wits by bringing on stage his great-great-great-grandson, Sigurðr, and by making him fearless by grooming him in a series of heroic exploits that culminate in his killing the hoard-guarding dragon Fáfnir and eating a portion of its heart.[14] By obliging Brynhildr to marry, Óðinn hopes to gain two things: to take revenge on an intractable woman, and, more importantly, to provide Sigurðr with breeding stock that will produce the kind of offspring Óðinn desires, a fierce race of superior warrior-kings that he has been unable to engender up to this point. Therefore, when a suitor who possesses the feature she least expected any man to have wakes her, she recognises that she has posed a riddle that is too simple for the likes of Óðinn, exclaiming, in effect, 'Damn, here is Sigurðr, a completely fearless man—what do I do now?'[15] From this point until her forced marriage to Gunnarr, she attempts to build a better

riddle by adding necessary conditions to the oath which the man she will marry must meet.

The second and the third references to the oath develop two parts of the riddle, why will Brynhildr's intended husband apparently be chosen by the flame wall, and when was it devised? We learn of its existence when (at the beginning of Chapter 29) Sigurðr, Gunnarr and Hǫgni petition Buðli and then Heimir (her brother-in-law and foster father) for Brynhildr's hand in marriage. In the third reference to the oath, Heimir's response to the suitors is reported in indirect speech:

> Heimir kvað hennar kjǫr vera, hvern hon skal eiga. Segir þar sal hennar skammt frá, ok kvazk þat hyggja at þann einn mundi hon eiga vilja er riði eld brennanda er sleginn er um sal hennar. (48)
> [Heimir said it was her choice whom she would marry. He said that her bower was close by and that he thought she wanted to marry the man who rode through the flames which surround it.]

We should notice one enigmatic feature of his statement: he says that she intends to marry the man who rides through the flames, but not that their purpose is to test the suitor—some readers do infer this latter point, perhaps because Sigurðr/Gunnarr does so (as we will see later) and because in some analogues, for example, in *The Merchant of Venice*, such tests really are designed to be overcome by a successful suitor. I will put off discussing until later who constructed the flame wall, but we can, for three reasons, wager that it came into existence sometime between Sigurðr's departure from Heimir's court and his marriage to Guðrún (both events occur in Chapter 28), a period of some 'two and a half years' (*fimm misseri*, 47). First, the flames are not mentioned prior to this point in the saga.[16] Second, if they had existed prior to Sigurðr's waking Brynhildr on the mountain (Chapter 21), why did he not have to contend with them then or later when they meet at Heimir's court during the 'second betrothal' (Chapter 25)? Third, a reader is justified, I think, in believing that when a narrative event, as here, lacks a clear indication as to its position in the time scheme, then its relative chronology might be determined by when it is first mentioned. This reference to the flames occurs in a wooing scene that bridges the two-and-a-half-year gap since Sigurðr left Heimir's and moved on to Gjúki's court, permitting Sigurðr and Guðrún to marry and produce a son, Sigmundr. We wonder about the state of our heroine, left in the lurch (as some readers see things), and (we learn at the end of

Chapter 29) pregnant with Áslaug: is Brynhildr pining away in her bower, or has she returned to the battlefield? The flame wall is one answer to these questions, or rather it is a prolegomenon to that answer.

If Heimir's reference to the flame wall is a means of determining when the flames began to flicker, then Buðli's response (the second reference to the oath) to the three kings' proposal allows us to understand when and why Brynhildr began to specify who would ride through these flames:

> Hann tók því vel, ef hon vill eiga níta, ok segir hana svá stóra at þann einn mann mun hon eiga er hon vill. (48)
> [He responded favourably to their request, on the condition that she would not refuse it, and said that she was so proud that she would marry only the man she desired.]

Buðli implies that Brynhildr has emended her original oath (which I will call the Fearless-Man Clause) so as to marry the man of her choice (the Man-of-Her-Choice Clause). What he does not tell us is why he has agreed to this clause, a procedure unprecedented in the saga.[17] Moreover, he does not explain whether the Man-of-Her-Choice Clause is a corollary of the Fearless-Man Clause. For example, does this mean that if two men of perfect courage appear, then she will be able to choose between them, or does it mean she can choose anyone she wants? As we will see below, there is reason to believe that Buðli's testy remark is not a reference to the Fearless-Man Clause but rather a veiled allusion to the heated dispute with his daughter to which she refers later in Chapter 31 and during which she adds two clauses to the oath.

Without explaining who has invented the flame wall or why, the next scene partially explains how the oath acquires so many parts. Sigurðr disguised as Gunnarr—the latter's mother Grímhildr, a witch, has taught them how to 'shift shapes'—rides through the flames and says to Brynhildr (in the fourth reference to her oath):

> 'Ertu ok ætluð mín kona með jáyrði feðr þíns, ef ek riða þinn vafrloga, ok fóstra þíns með yðru atkvæði'. (49)
> ['You were promised to me as my wife by your father and foster father if I rode through the flames and if you agreed'.]

He, like us readers, has been led to believe that the oath is a straightforward proposition, namely that whoever rides through the fire marries Brynhildr. In response, she explodes this assumption by mentioning (in the fifth reference) two further conditions that the man of destiny must be prepared to fulfil and which we hear about for the first time:

> 'Gunnarr', segir hon, 'rœð ekki slíkt við mik, nema þú sér hverjum manni fremri, ok þá skaltu drepa er mín hafa beðit, ef þú hefir traust til'. (49)
> ['Gunnarr [. . .] do not speak like that to me, unless you are superior to every other man and are prepared to kill those men who have sued for my hand, if you have the courage to do so'.]

That is, the successful suitor, in addition to being able to ride through the flame wall, must now possess (1) exceptional virtue and prowess (the Most-Noble-Man Clause) and (2) the willingness to eliminate previous suitors (the Fastest-Sword Clause). It is possible that she has invented these two additional prerequisites ad hoc when she realises that Gunnarr has unexpectedly met the first two conditions (the Fearless-Man Clause, and the Flame-Wall Clause).[18] But if we assume, as most readers do, that the flame wall is tailored to exclude everybody but Sigurðr (or its corollary to allow only him to pass), then we ought to believe that this proviso predates this scene. After all, he is the surest bet to eliminate other suitors, including any whom Buðli might have forced upon her before Sigurðr finally conquers the wall. But in analysing her further references to her oath, I will provide evidence that while she specified before this scene that the successful suitor would be expected to eliminate all the others, she did not anticipate that Sigurðr would be the man to come through the flames. We are still pretty much in the dark at this point, but Sigurðr/Gunnarr calls her to order by insisting (in the sixth reference to the oath) that the agreement as laid down by Heimir has precedence over all other clauses:

> 'Mǫrg stórvirki hafi þér unnit, en minnizk nú á heit yður, ef þessi eldr væri riðinn, at þér mundið með þeim manni ganga er þetta gerði'. (49)
> ['You have indeed wrought great deeds, but I call your attention to your oath, that if someone rides through this fire, then you would marry the one who accomplishes it'.]

Recognising the force of his argument, Brynhildr stands up and greets him formally. They endure the three 'chaste nights',[19] the three kings return home, and Brynhildr visits Heimir.

Although her meeting with Heimir following the flame wall scene does not yet provide us with the solution to the riddle, it does represent a key point in my argument that she wishes to avoid the institution of marriage, that she does not desire Sigurðr, and that she has fashioned the flame wall to preserve her celibacy. (In other words we can only appreciate what is going on in this scene by reading ahead, taking the additional clues on board, and then rereading or remembering this scene.[20]) She approaches Heimir and tells him in secret that a king appeared in her bower, having ridden through the flame wall, 'ok kvazk kominn til ráða við mik ok nefndisk Gunnarr' (50) ('and said that he had come to marry me and that his name was Gunnarr']. She then utters this revealing remark (in the seventh reference to her oath):

> 'En ek sagða at þat mundi Sigurðr einn gera, er ek vann eiða á fjallinu, ok er hann minn frumverr'. (50)
> ['I said that only Sigurðr, my lover to whom I swore an oath on the mountain, would be able to do that'.][21]

Presumably, her betrothal oath is included among these oaths, and by 'do that' she means *ride through the flame wall* rather than *propose marriage to me*. She might also mean 'would do that', in the sense that she expected that only Sigurðr would in fact get through the fire, as opposed to being the only man capable of doing so, whether he tried or not. Whatever her precise meaning, she did not make any such statement to Sigurðr/Gunnarr in the scene that occurs only some two or three lines previously, a juxtaposition which suggests that we are not meant to regard her remark as an oversight on the author's part but as an important and intended retrospective addition to the narrative. Her puzzlement serves at least four narrative functions: first, to alert us to a feature of the riddle we had not previously known about (i.e., The Only-Sigurðr Clause); second, we are led down the garden path into believing that the Only-Sigurðr Clause entails her desire that he succeed (Hint: this clause is a dummy; she actually does not expect anyone to cross the flames); third, her consternation, and Heimir's muted answer ('Heimir kvað nú svá búit vera mundu' (50) ['he said that things would have to rest there']), make it clear that he is a party to the conspiracy;[22] fourth, the riddle seems to be

doubling back on Brynhildr—how, she must wonder, did Gunnarr figure out how to get through the flames against her expectations that only Sigurðr would be able to accomplish this feat? Brynhildr sets out to answer this question two paragraphs later by staging the quarrel in the river with Guðrún,[23] but let us continue our examination of how Brynhildr programs the flame wall and constructs her riddle.

The eighth reference to Brynhildr's oath, uttered soon after she has discovered from Guðrún how Sigurðr has tricked her into marrying Gunnarr, makes clear how and when the flame wall came into existence and how she used it to eliminate suitors. This reference occurs in what I have elsewhere called 'Brynhildr's Mousetrap', [24] an exchange she has with Gunnarr in order to discover the nature of his involvement in tricking her into marriage:

> 'Hvat gerðir þú af hring þeim er ek selda þér, er Buðli konungr gaf mér at efsta skilnaði, er þér synir Gjúka konungs kómuð til hans og hétuð at herja eða brenna, nema þér næðið mér? Síðan leiddi hann mik á tal, og spyrr hvern ek køra af þeim sem komnir váru, en ek buðumk til at verja landit og vera hǫfðingi yfir þriðjungi liðs. Váru þá tveir kostir fyrir hendi, at ek munda þeim verða at giptask sem hann vildi, eða vera án alls fjár og hans vináttu; kvað þó sína vináttu mér mundu betr gegna en reiði. Þá hugsaða ek með mér, hvárt ek skylda hlýða hans vilja eða drepa margan mann. Ek þóttumk vanfær til at þreyta við hann, og þar kom at ek hétumsk þeim er riði hestinum Grana með Fáfnis arfi og riði minn vafrloga og dræpi þá menn er ek kvað á'. (53)
>
> ['What did you do with the ring I gave you, the one King Buðli gave me at our last parting when you sons of King Gjúki came to him and threatened to destroy or burn unless you obtained me? Then he spoke to me in private and asked which of those who had come I would choose, but I offered to defend the land and be a commander of a third of the army. He said also that his friendship would serve me better than his anger. Then I considered whether I should accede to his will or kill many a man. I judged myself incapable of contending against him, and so I promised myself to the one who would ride the horse Grani with Fáfnir's legacy, ride through my flame wall, and kill those men I chose'.]

Brynhildr's retrospective account of the visit of the three kings provides the context that allows us to solve the puzzle. That is, she tells a story of the three kings' visit to Buðli's court that differs considerably from the scenes we have witnessed at the beginning of Chapter 29, in which the suitors make their marriage proposals in a straightforward and peaceful manner, first to Buðli and then to Heimir (see above, p. 27). This retrospection causes us to reinterpret not only the exact nature of the wooing but also of the function of the clauses to the oath. And the review makes clear how they came into existence. First, the clause about the successful suitor's riding Grani through the flames (the Faithful-Horse Clause) was added as the result of her father's pressurising her to marry one of the three suitors. (She will repeat this claim in Chapter 32; see below, p. 34). We must assume that prior to their arrival numerous suitors had been showing up and failing to conquer the flames—otherwise where do the suitors come from that she insists must be killed as a condition for marrying her?[25]—and that Buðli, apparently grown impatient for his daughter to marry, had forced her to choose one of the three kings with no further delay. Second, Buðli's acceptance of her promise to marry one of the three qualifies his statement in Chapter 29 that she would marry the man she wishes; the dramatic situation Brynhildr conjures up in the Mousetrap-scene is to be seen as a fuller account of the earlier scene, so that Buðli's bad-tempered acceptance there (in Chapter 29) of her choosing her own husband is here (in Chapter 31) emended to mean that she was permitted to choose among the three kings.[26] Third, Buðli does not seem to understand that the Faithful-Horse Clause points at Sigurðr, for in assuming that all three kings are potential suitors, he appears to be ignorant of Sigurðr's married state, if in fact he even knows who he is. (The saga skilfully manages to make clear that Buðli's grasp of what is happening around him is severely limited). The Faithful-Horse Clause, in its nullifying character, is reminiscent of her first oath (the Fearless-Man Clause) sworn in response to Óðinn's curse (see note 12) that she marry. That is, in agreeing to marry the man who can ride Grani through the flame wall, she is really saying that she will marry no one, because the only man who can ride him, as we learn in Chapter 29, is Sigurðr. Because he is already married, he will not, she assumes, attempt the flames. No one aside from Sigurðr will be able to ride Grani though the flames, and because the only way to get through is on his back, she will remain single. (The joke, or so she once again hopes, is now on Buðli!) She swears this oath, reprogrammes the flames to comply with it, and retreats to her bower to await what she expects will be another failed attempt. In

addition, she adds the proviso that whoever crosses the flames will have to kill all suitors, including Sigurðr. That is, if by accident somebody succeeds, she can insist that he kill Sigurðr (a former suitor), a sure way of eliminating the hapless intruder. Or perhaps this stipulation is designed to thin out the suitors: if word gets around that she might request the successful suitor to kill Sigurðr, many an ardent man will decide to look elsewhere for a bride. Finally, she gives in, perhaps thinking that she can later revert to the Dispatching-of-Suitors Clause, but puts aside this tactic when she learns from Guðrún how she was tricked. Therefore, she expects no one to appear in her bower inside the flames, and probably considers herself home free. She has, of course, not reckoned with the machinations of Grímhildr.[27]

The remaining four references to the oaths cause us further to revise how we interpret the Brynhildr-story as one involving a woman who is not so much disappointed by love as a woman deceived by her lovers. Later in the mousetrap exchange with Gunnarr she repeats her assertion (the ninth reference) that she

> 'strengða [. . .] heit heima at feðr [hennar], at [hon] munda þeim einum unna, er ágæztr væri alinn, en þat er Sigurðr'. (53)
> ['swore an oath at [her] father's that [she] would marry the one most nobly born, and that is Sigurðr'.]

At first glance this oath seems to be a repetition of the Only-Sigurðr Clause, but given the enigmatic character of all her oaths, an equally plausible interpretation is that the phrase 'and that is Sigurðr' merely acknowledges his noble birth without asserting that she swore to marry him. Her exchange with Gunnarr, we must remember, occurs after she has discovered how she was tricked and in the course of an acrimonious argument that initiates her revenge upon Sigurðr. Many statements that she makes after Chapter 31 must be seen in this context and must be used very carefully as evidence as to her motives before the 'false wooing' scene, Sigurðr's ride through the flames. Space prohibits my discussing them here.

Of the remaining three references she makes to her oath only one (the twelfth) requires much comment.[28] After Sigurðr has been betrayed and killed, she reproves Gunnarr by revisiting the scene in which the three kings rode into Buðli's court to woo her:

> 'Síðan leiddi Atli mik á tal ok spyrr ef ek vilda þann eiga er riði Grana. Sá var yðr ekki líkr, ok þá hétumk ek syni Sigmundar konungs ok engum qðrum, ok eigi mun yðr farask, þótt ek deyja'. (59-60)
>
> ['Then Atli spoke to me in private and asked whether I wanted to marry the one riding Grani. He was not like you, and then I was betrothed to the son of Sigmundr and no one else, and things do not augur well for you, although I die'.]

It is easy to see why readers might understand this passage to mean that she became betrothed to Sigurðr at her own request or that she expressed such a desire. That is, she seems to be telling Gunnarr that she had said at that time, in response to Atli's query, 'I hereby betroth myself to the son of Sigmundr'. But actually her reference only adds a narrative detail that allows us to reconstruct the scene with more precision: the three kings appear in Buðli's court, petition for Brynhildr's hand, and threaten Buðli; he in turn takes her aside and orders her to marry the man he chooses or face his displeasure; she then placates him by devising the Faithful-Horse Clause; he goes back to the three kings and tells them that she will marry the man of her choice; in the meantime she has spoken to Atli and retreated to her bower surrounded by the flames, and the false wooing follows. This retrospective reconstruction allows us to understand that what she actually said was something like, 'Yes, I will marry the man riding Grani [. . .]' in response to Atli's question, not 'I want Sigurðr'. In other words she is telling Gunnarr how the Faithful-Horse Clause came about, not repeating her exact words. She adds as a further goad to Gunnarr the phrase, 'and he was not like you, and then I was betrothed to the son of Sigmundr', simply as a way of identifying the man who was riding Grani, of making it clear that she knows that Gunnarr was not that man, and of contrasting Sigurðr's nobility with Gunnarr's cowardice.

I have argued that we learn from the references to Brynhildr's oath that she changes its character in response to the increasing pressure put upon her to embrace matrimony. These references are neither ill-formed nor indicative of the author's failure to harmonise his sources; on the contrary, they develop a rigid narrative logic that dramatises Brynhildr's mounting desperation in her attempts to escape from the threat that the man-made law—a woman will marry the man chosen by her father—represents to her sense of self. Each of the clauses begins life as a necessary condition—in order to be a successful suitor a man must have feature x, y, or z—and at the end they form a catalogue of sufficient conditions.

For Brynhildr, of course, they are insincere promises, because she constructs them in the expectation that no man will meet them. Nevertheless, as Searle observes, 'insincere promises are promises nevertheless';[29] the bitterness of Brynhildr's defeat is that these conditions are met by means of Sigurðr's deception. Óðinn's medicine proves stronger than hers, but only up to the point where she discovers Sigurðr's treachery and then plots his death.

The order in which these references are presented to us by the plot is as follows: 1. the Fearless-Man Clause ['I swore the oath in return to marry no one who knew fear', Chapter 21]; 2. the Man-of-Her-Choice Clause ['[Buðli] said that she was so proud that she would marry only the man she desired', Chapter 29]; 3. the Flame-Wall Clause ['[Heimir] said that she would want to marry the man who rode through the flames which surrounds her bower', Chapter 29]; 4. the Flame-Wall Clause ['you were promised to me as my wife by your father and foster-father if I rode through the flames and if you agreed', Chapter 29]; 5. the Fastest-Sword Clause ['Gunnarr [. . .] do not speak like that to me, unless you are superior to every other man and are prepared to kill those men who have sued for my hand, if you have the courage to do so', Chapter 29]; 6. the Flame-Wall Clause ['You have indeed wrought great deeds, but I call your attention to your oath, that if someone rides through this fire, then you would marry the one who accomplished it', Chapter 29]; 7. the Only-Sigurðr Clause ['I said that only Sigurðr, my lover to whom I swore an oath on the mountain, would be able to do that', Chapter 29]; 8. the Faithful-Horse Clause/the Flame-Wall Clause/the Fastest-Sword Clause ['and so I promised myself to the one who would ride the horse Grani with Fáfnir's legacy, ride through my flame wall, and kill those men I chose', Chapter 31]; 9. the Only-Sigurðr Clause ['I swore an oath at my father's that I would marry the man most nobly born, and that is Sigurðr', Chapter 31]; 10. the Fastest-Sword Clause ['Gunnarr did not ride through the fire to me, nor did he pay me as a bride price the executed dead', Chapter 31]; 11. the Flame-Wall Clause ['I swore an oath to marry the man who rode my flame wall, and I will keep that oath or die', Chapter 31]; 12. the Faithful-Horse Clause/the Only-Sigurðr Clause ['Then Atli spoke to me and asked whether I wanted to marry the one riding Grani. He was not like you, and then I was betrothed to the son of Sigmundr and no one else [. . .]', Chapter 32].

Assigning each of the references a relative chronology will clarify the carefully structured character of the Brynhildr-story: the Fearless-Man Clause (1) is the earliest version of the oath, occurring when Óðinn cursed Brynhildr, followed by numbers (3) and (11), which refer to the Flame-Wall Clause and

which were sworn either immediately after Sigurðr left Brynhildr or following the news that he had married Guðrún. Next come (2), (8), (9), and (12), all of which invoke a variety of clauses that were sworn in response to the appearance of the three kings at Buðli's court. It is at this point in the narrative that she is at her most inventive, reacting to Buðli's panicked demand to choose one of the three kings. The final group of references, (4), (5), (6), (7), and (10), occur during the false wooing. Again, they comprise a variety of clauses, and four of them (numbers 4 through to 7), are the only references to the oath that occur in a dramatised scene rather than a recollection of it; (10) is Brynhildr's retrospective reference to this scene. The ultimate test of the validity and usefulness of the above scheme must be that in rereading the saga, one will understand things that heretofore were unclear. Naturally, my explication does not eliminate all the structural difficulties inherent in the text—as I warned at the outset. Perhaps an interesting exercise might consist in assigning to a group of students the task of pointing out the apparent inconsistencies in the text, even assuming that the readings I propose here have a certain force. My suggestion would be to look at all the things Brynhildr says to Sigurðr and Gunnarr after she discovers the deception, where not everything can be explained away. For modern narrative tastes, the text requires a good editor, who could advise the author on how to harmonise the saga as we have it. But after all the revisions are carried out, it might then lose some of its 'eerie charm'.[30] Brynhildr is thus a tragic heroine not because she is cheated out of the man she desires—a decidedly non-feminist reading of the saga—but because she is cheated out of her wish to remain celibate. This radical conclusion presupposes that the anti-feminism of the middle ages had its contemporary opponents, and that *Vǫlsunga saga* can be read as a marriage manual directed at kings, advising them that women married against their will make bad bed-fellows.

NOTES

[1] This essay is an extensively revised, expanded and reconfigured version of a paper which originally appeared as '*Völsunga saga*: The Brynhild-Story', in *Gladly Lerne and Gladly Teche: A Festschrift by Students, Colleagues and Friends of Thomas Jay Garbáty in Honor of his Retirement*, ed. by Adam Brooke, www-personal.umich.edu/~tgarbaty/schrift.html.

[2] Most fully by Theodore M. Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980).

[3] Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth* (London: Grafton, 1992), p. 275. He adds that '[i]t is impossible for this part of the *Völsunga saga* to make sense', p. 276.

[4] Arabic numerals in parentheses after quotations in the text are page references to R. G. Finch's edition, *The Saga of the Volsungs*. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1965). Since this work has long been out of print, readers might wish to consult the recent diplomatic edition by Kaaren Grimstad, *Vǫlsunga saga: The Saga of the Volsungs* (Saarbrücken: AQ-Verlag, 2000) and her excellent translation, but to help readers unused to diplomatic texts, I quote from Finch's normalised version. Translations of the Icelandic are my own.

[5] Andreas Heusler, 'Die Lieder der Lücke im Codex Regius der Edda', in *Germanistische Abhandlungen Hermann Paul dargebracht* (Strasbourg: Trübner. 1902), pp. 1-98. Rpt. in *Kleine Schriften*, ed. by Stefan Sonderegger, 2 vols (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969), I 223-91, at p. 235.

[6] Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild*, p. 240.

[7] 'The Backward Look: Retrospectivity in Medieval Literature', *Southern Review*, 16 (1983), 356-373, at 357.

[8] See also Stanley Fish, who calls the reading process *retroactive*, in 'How To Do Things with Austin and Searle: Speech-Act Theory and Literary Criticism', in his *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 197-245, at pp. 166, 202, 205, 221.

[9] For definitions and discussions of this term, see J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 98-108; John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 54-71; John Lyons, *Semantics*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), II 725-745; Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics*. [Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 227-243.

[10] According to Lyons, *Semantics*, p. 730, 'An illocutionary act is an act performed in saying something: making a statement or promise, issuing a command or request, asking a question, christening a ship, etc.'. If we saw Brynhildr in the process of performing such an

illocutionary act, then we would have to take her oath at face value, as a promise to marry the man who satisfies the necessary conditions she imposes upon the successful suitor. That is, the illocutionary force of her oaths (their status as promises) would be unmistakable and no longer subject to ambiguity. She could hardly claim later, after we observe her saying 'I promise to marry the man who knows no fear', that she had made no such promise. When her oaths are reported, however, even when Brynhildr herself tells someone else what she said, the character of the utterances is always potentially enigmatic, because we can never be sure of their exact wording or their 'perlocutionary effect', that is, what her hearers believed she had said. Readers may regard her reported utterance of the oath to marry the man who rides through the flames on Grani's back both as a promise to marry the man who does so and as a stated preference for Sigurðr (which is, of course, what she hoped her hearers in the saga would think), but so long as we do not witness Brynhildr making this statement, its ambiguous character as a sincere promise remains open to interpretation. I am arguing, of course, that such oaths may be regarded not as promises to marry the man who accomplishes the acts or fulfills the conditions but, on the contrary, as unfulfillable necessary conditions that preclude her marrying any man. The subject of Speech Acts in literature, of course, is complex and requires a more extended treatment than space allows here. For an example of how such an analysis might proceed, see Stanley Fish, 'How To Do Things with Austin and Searle: Speech-Act Theory and Literary Criticism', pp. 197-245.

[11] Brynhildr as Sleeping Beauty is an example of a motif taken from *Sigrdrífumál*, which itself considerably varies this fairy tale motif. For a brief introduction to the poem, see Joseph Harris, '*Sigrdrífumál*', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), pp. 581-82. For the saga's additional transformations of the fairy tale motif, see Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild*, pp. 81-84.

[12] Why Brynhildr is permitted to counter Óðinn's curse with her oath is not clear. Perhaps her gambit partakes of the principle in classical mythology that while one god or goddess cannot undo another's curse, it can be ameliorated with countermanding stipulations.

[13] What, a sceptical reader might ask, justifies my assumption that Brynhildr is reluctant to embrace matrimony? One reason is that Óðinn, a god capable of preparing some pretty nasty bits of revenge, chooses marriage as part of her double punishment. That is, he takes away something she clearly wants (battle) and forces upon her something that she, it seems reasonable to assume, does not want (marriage). More directly, after exchanging betrothal vows with Sigurðr the first time, she abjures marriage by telling him at Heimir's: 'Eigi er þat skipat at vit búim saman. Ek em skjaldmær, ok á ek með herkonungum hjálm, ok þeim mun ek at liði verða, ok ekki er mér leitt at berjask' (43) ('it is not fated that we will marry. I am a shield-maiden, and I wear a helm in the company of battle-kings. I will continue to give them aid, and I am not tired of battle'). When he tries to turn her round, she repeats her desire to 'kanna lið

hermanna' (43) ('command the troops'). Moreover, when Sigurðr/Gunnarr proposes to end her celibate days, she repeats her reluctance to renounce the battlefield: 'Ek var í orrostu með Garðakonungi, ok váru vápn vár lituð í mannablóði, ok þess girnumk vér enn' (49) ('I was in battle with the King of Gardar, and my weapons were stained with blood, and I long for this yet'). Finally, she tells Gunnarr after marrying him that her marriage was undesired: '... þá er ek var heima með feðr mínum, ok hafða ek allt þat er ek vilda, ok ætlaða ek engan yðarn minn skyldu verða, þá er þér riðuð þar at garði þrír konungar' (59) ('when I was home with my father and had everything that I wanted ... I did not intend that any of you should be mine when you three kings rode into his court'). The lady's not for turning.

[14] At the time he eats a piece of Fáfnir's heart we are not told that it makes him fearless, but we learn later (Chapter 28) that when he gives his wife Guðrún a portion of the dragon's heart, its makes her both wiser and fiercer (*miklu grimmari*). Sigurðr, still virtually a boy, was more than ordinarily courageous even before facing the dragon, and if eating a piece of its heart makes his wife more resolute, then I assume that his repast equips him with perfect fearlessness. In any event, Brynhildr's acceptance of him entails his fearless condition.

[15] Her exact words are: ... 'Ok brá mínum svefni, eða mun hér kominn Sigurðr Sigmundarson er hefir hjálm Fáfnis ok hans bana í hendi?' (35) ('... And disturbed my sleep. And has Sigurðr Sigmundarson arrived, bearing Fáfnir's helm and the instrument of his death in his hand'?) In *Sigrdrífumál*, she does not know who wakes her, nor does he know who she is. The differences suggest, perhaps, that in the saga Óðinn has planned their encounter and that Brynhildr expects, even dreads, Sigurðr's appearance; after all she is pretty good at predicting the future. What Brynhildr does next is to betroth herself anew to Sigurðr in the next betrothal scene (at Heimir's court, Chapter 25), and bide her time before he wends his way to Gjúki's court where (as she has correctly predicted) he marries Guðrún. From this point on in the saga, I assume, Brynhildr was always confident—because of her second-sight—that she would never have to regard Sigurðr as a serious threat to her celibate state. Her entire plan from this point on was based upon this—accurately predicted—postulate.

[16] But see Anne Heinrichs, 'Brynhild als Typ der präpatriarchalen Frau', in *Arbeiten zur Skandinavistik: 6. Arbeitstagung der Skandinavisten des deutschen Sprachgebiets: 26.9-1.10, 1983 in Bonn,* ed. by Heinrich Beck (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1985), pp. 45-66, at p. 48; '*Annat er várt eðli:* the type of the prepatriachal Woman in Old Norse Literature', in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, ed. by John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), pp. 110-140, at p. 116: she believes that when Sigurðr happens upon Brynhildr inside the shield rampart, it 'is apparently surrounded by a blazing fire'.

[17] In the ten betrothal scenes in the saga—(1) Signý-Siggeirr, Chapter 3; (2) Sigrún-Helgi, Chapter 9; (3) Hjǫrdís-Sigmundr, Chapter 11; (4) Hjǫrdís-Álfr, Chapter 12; (5)

Brynhildr-Sigurðr, Chapter 21; (6) Brynhildr-Sigurðr, Chapter 25; (7) Guðrún-Sigurðr, Chapter 28; (8) Brynhildr-Sigurðr/Gunnarr, Chapter 29; (9) Guðrún-Atli, Chapter 34; (10) Svanhildr-Jǫrmunrekr, Chapter 42—only one woman (Hjǫrdís) besides Brynhildr is given a choice of husband, and that is only between two rival suitors. Fathers in *Vǫlsunga saga* repeatedly force their daughters into disastrous marriages.

[18] This development is reminiscent of Sigurðr's unforeseen fulfilment of Brynhildr's first oath (The Fearless-Man Clause) when he wakes her on the mountain. Her requirement that he kill previous suitors is also similar to an earlier scene in which Sigrún demands that before she marry Helgi, he kill Hoddbroddr, a suitor urged on her by her father (Chapter 9, 15-17). We might term this motif 'The Breaking of Betrothals Volsung-Style'.

[19] Heinrich's artful phrase, *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, p. 119.

[20] This is another example of retrospectivity that the saga employs to provide us with multiple narrative perspectives. Another obvious example is that in the two betrothal scenes involving Brynhildr and Sigurðr (the one on the mountain, Chapters 21-22, and the one at Heimir's court, Chapter 25), there is little or no indication that the contact between the two could have produced Áslaug, a retrospective detail we learn of first in Chapter 29. In a conference paper some ten years ago ('The Post-Scenic Element in the Icelandic Saga', in *Contemporary Sagas* (preprints from the Ninth International Saga Conference, Akureyri, Iceland, 31.7.-6.8.1994), pp. 323-44), I discussed the sagas' habit of reporting actions said to have occurred in an earlier scene but which in fact never happen there. I suggested that in all cases the saga author has most likely not forgotten what he had written earlier but simply retells the scene, usually by adding details that shift the narrative focus. The additions are examples of what I am now calling (after Waterhouse and Stephens) *retrospectivity*.

[21] This passage could also be translated, 'I said when I swore an oath on the mountain [*er ek vann eiða á fjallinu*] that only my lover Sigurðr could do that'. Grimstad's text resolves the ambiguity by offering the reading 'en ek sagþa at þat munðe sigurdr einn giora ok ek vann eiða afiallenu ok er hann minn frumverr' (174) ('but I said that only Sigurðr would do that *and* I swore an oath on the mountain and he is my lover').

[22] Because Heimir shows no surprise at the mention of Áslaug, he obviously has shared his foster daughter's secret all along; moreover, we can assume he is a complicit party to her plan to remain celibate, for otherwise he would have revealed Áslaug's existence to Buðli or made this information public, necessitating that Sigurðr be called to account. (Calling Sigurðr to account is tantamount to committing suicide).

[23] That is, in order to discover how Gunnarr has penetrated the flames, Brynhildr stages an argument with Guðrún in order to trick her into revealing what she knows. Klaus von See, on the other hand, believes that Brynhildr's behaviour makes no sense ('... daß die Haltungs weise Brünhilds hier jeden sinn verloren hat'). See his 'Freierprobe und Königinnenzank in der

Sigfridsage', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, 88 (1957), 163-172, at p. 171. Rpt. in his *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung: Aufsätze zur skandinavischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1981), pp. 214-223, at p. 222.

[24] Fredrik J. Heinemann, 'Saga Dialogue and Brynhildr's Mouse Trap', alvíss*mál*, 8 (1998), 51-66.

[25] The Sigmundr-Lyngi competition for Hjǫrdís (see Chapter 11) shows how dangerous it can be to let defeated suitors wander about at will, because, a touchy lot, they do sometimes come back to seek revenge. Even accepted suitors, such as Siggeirr, can be dangerous.

[26] See the scene (number 3) mentioned in note 17 in which Eylimi requested that his daughter Hjǫrdís choose between Sigmundr and Lyngvi, a wise decision on the father's part in contrast to other fathers who insist on choosing their daughters' husbands against the women's wishes.

[27] In the terms of Waterhouse and Stephens ('The Backward Look: Retrospectivity in Medieval Literature') the kind of retrospectivity I am alleging as occurring in the Brynhildr-story seems to belong to their second type, 'in which the effect of retrospectivity is to make us adjust emphasis amongst the relative weightings we have given to various aspects of the work, and by which an apparently minor element may become major ...' (360). That is, when we experience in the retrospective wooing scene the eighth reference (and subsequent references) to Brynhildr's oath we are led to look back at the other oaths no longer as promises to marry the successful suitor but as unachievable specifications designed to preclude her marriage. On the other hand, their comments on *Beowulf* (which they see as an example of the third type of retrospectivity) might also apply to the Brynhildr-story: 'It [retrospectivity operating on larger narrative units widely separated from each other] is operative in the poet's repetition of the information about Beowulf's battles with Grendel and his mother; each time the battle is narrated we are forced to juxtapose what we already know against what we now hear ...' (366). Likewise in the Brynhildr-story, each time we hear the oath mentioned, especially as the cumulative effect of the various clauses causes us to remember the earlier versions, we increasingly become aware of their ambiguity as ruses to ward off marriage and not as conditions which the successful suitor must fulfill. I wish to thank George Clark for the reference to this valuable article.

[28] The tenth and the eleventh references can be dealt with briefly. When she says to Sigurðr (the tenth reference) that 'eigi reið Gunnarr eldinn til vár, ok eigi galt hann mér at mundi felldan val' (55) ('Gunnarr did not ride through the fire to me, nor did he pay me as a bride price the required dead'), she merely denies his assertion that she had chosen Gunnarr as her husband and alludes to the Dispatching-the-Suitors Clause. Likewise, when she says (the eleventh reference) 'Ek vann eið at eiga þann mann er riði minn vafrloga, en þann eið vilda ek halda eða deyja ella' (56) ('I swore an oath to marry the man who rode through my flame wall,

and that oath I will keep or die'), she dashes Sigurðr's hopes that they might resume their relationship he enjoyed, and she endured, before she married Gunnarr.

[29] Searle, *Speech Act*, p. 62.

[30] Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth*, p. 275.