

Postgraduate English

community.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

ISSN 1756-9761

Issue 37

Autumn 2018

Editors:

Gareth Reeves and Olly Teregulova

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Translations of the *Poetic Edda* in the Twentieth and Twenty-First
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‘Ultimately, Guðrún’s portrayal [in the *Poetic Edda*] is ambiguous’, writes David Clark.¹

Guðrún Gjúkadóttir’s ambiguity is the source of her fascination for audiences, and her potential humanity amidst her ‘monstrous’ actions, but it also renders her difficult to present.² Each translation of the Eddic poems affects our understanding of her character, for translators impart a ‘flavour of the contemporary’ in their choices, as well as their own opinions.³ Often victim to how ‘priority [is] given to smoothing the text to mask disconcerting uncertainties,’ Guðrún is not fully understood and often at risk of being simplified.⁴ Placing translations in dialogue with one another, rather than in opposition, reveals the power of words in the hands of translators to create, narrow, or expand Guðrún’s character as: a grieving widow, a victim of fate, a dutiful sister intent on avenging her brothers, or a monstrous woman obsessed with

¹ David Clark, ‘Undermining and En-Gendering Vengeance: Distancing and Anti-Feminism in the *Poetic Edda*’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 77 (2005), 173–200 (p. 197). The *Poetic Edda* refers to a collection of poems, probably composed at different times by different poets, grouped together into the thirteenth-century Codex Regius manuscript. Scholars divide the poems into the sequentially earlier ‘mythological’ poems and the later ‘heroic’ poems, in which Guðrún features.

² Note on spelling: Old Norse nominative spelling conventions are used for names, e.g. Guðrún, not Gudrun or Gúdrun, except in quotations, where the original is reproduced. When quoting Icelandic authors their first names are used, not their patronymic, as is followed in the alphabetising of the bibliography.

³ Clark, p. 197.

⁴ Judy Quinn, ‘The Editing of Eddic Poetry’, in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, ed. by Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn, and Brittany Schorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 58–71 (p. 60).

revenge to the point of destruction. She is one of those characters of the Eddic corpus who appears ‘in multidimensional roles’, because even though Guðrún exists as a wife, sister, and mother, she is also shown to ‘transcend or even subvert [her] relational statuses’ when her individual desires conflict with the expectations of her social role.⁵

The poems concerning Guðrún in the *Poetic Edda* were first presented and framed in a certain way in the Old Norse text, for the manuscript was ‘shaped by one or more compilers, who should perhaps rather be called editors.’⁶ Guðrún’s ‘eventful’ life story—in which she loses one husband, avenges the death of her two brothers by killing her second husband and their two sons, and loses her second set of sons after inciting them to avenge the death of her daughter (their half-sister)—has subsequently been mediated and re-created into English over the years. The aim of this article is not to judge these translations and pick the ‘best’ interpretation of Guðrún but rather to explore the creative possibilities which Guðrún’s ambiguity inspires. I analyse and compare several translations of the *Poetic Edda* into modern English, produced in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in order to offer a new interpretation of how Guðrún is characterised in the original Old Norse poems. Instead of being viewed as a figure who is monstrously uncontrolled in her grief, Guðrún may be seen as a figure of extreme self-control within the context of her society—particularly if we accept that her behaviour parallels the more socially acceptable actions of her brothers, whom Guðrún more closely resembles than one might think.

While bearing textual issues in mind, my focus is on translations, considered, for present purposes, as a narrative whole, despite their occasional inconsistencies of plot. I focus on the seven poems of the *Poetic Edda* in which Guðrún features prominently:

⁵ David Clark and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, ‘The Representation of Gender in Eddic Poetry’, in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry*, pp. 331–48 (p. 331, p. 334).

⁶ Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘The Transmission and Preservation of Eddic Poetry’, in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry*, pp. 12–32 (p. 23).

Guðrúnarkviða I, *Guðrúnarkviða II*, *Guðrúnarkviða III*, *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, and *Hamðismál*.⁷ Primary translations of focus are Henry Adams Bellows (1926), Lee M. Hollander (1928; revised 1962), Carolyne Larrington (1996; revised 2014), and Andy Orchard (2011).⁸ My comparison of these four translations highlights specific areas of significant change between the texts. Where relevant, I also consult Ursula Dronke's translations of *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, and *Hamðismál*.⁹ Patricia Terry (1969; revised 1990), and W. H. Auden and Paul B. Taylor (1983), are also consulted, while bearing in mind that these have a potential for more 'free additions' in, and 'liberties' with, the text.¹⁰ Jackson Crawford (2015) has not been included.¹¹ Crawford's 'loose' translation 'is unfortunately not a translation that can be recommended for academic purposes',¹² and there is not enough space in this article to expand into a consideration of 'freer' translations of the *Poetic Edda*. Similarly, while there are older translations of the *Poetic Edda*, there were

⁷ When quoting the Old Norse text, I use, unless otherwise stated, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, eds, *Eddukvæði: II Hetjukvæði* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 2014), presented, after the first reference, as, e.g., *Guðrúnarkviða II*, st. 4/1. For each quotation of the Old Norse text I offer my own non-tendentious translations in the footnotes, based on: Beatrice La Farge and John Tucker, eds, *Glossary to the Poetic Edda: Based on Hans Kuhn's Kurzes Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1992); Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2010); Richard Cleasby and G. Vigfusson, eds, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957). These translations are included in an attempt to capture the Old Norse meaning, noting any significant alternative translation options where applicable, divided by a forward slash.

⁸ Henry Adams Bellows, trans., *The Poetic Edda* (New York: The American Scandinavian Foundation, 1926); Lee M. Hollander, trans., *The Poetic Edda* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1928); *The Poetic Edda*, rev. edn. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962; repr. 2016); Carolyne Larrington, trans., *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); *The Poetic Edda*, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Andy Orchard, trans., *The Elder Edda* (London: Penguin, 2011). All shortened references note publication dates of any revised editions of translations only when textual revisions have been made, and when listing a number of quotations from different translators in the main body of text, initials for last names are used in parenthesis, e.g., (B), (L), (O), etc. All footnoted references are shortened to last names and stanza numbers.

⁹ Ursula Dronke, trans. and ed., *The Poetic Edda: Heroic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

¹⁰ Patricia Terry, trans., *Poems of the Vikings: The Elder Edda* (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969); *Poems of the Elder Edda* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); W. H. Auden and Paul B. Taylor, trans., *Norse Poems* (London: Faber, 1983); Haukur Þorgeirsson, review of Andy Orchard, *The Elder Edda* (2011), *Saga-Book*, 36 (2012), 149–52 (p. 149).

¹¹ Jackson Crawford, trans. and ed., *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2015).

¹² Kari Ellen Gade, review of Jackson Crawford, *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Viking Heroes* (2015), *The Medieval Review*, 1 February 2016, <<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/article/view/20902>> [accessed 3 August 2018].

‘many practical difficulties facing early translators, who lacked Icelandic dictionaries’, affecting their translation choices to a large degree, hence their lack of inclusion here.¹³

As each translator approaches the text differently—whether that be due to manuscript restrictions, textual editions used, the time period they were situated in, or their own ideas about Old Norse poetry—these various aspects affect our understanding of Guðrún, as small variations can have powerful consequences.¹⁴ Guðrún’s vengeful actions are what make her so unique, and as ‘lamenting is a crucial element in a revenge sequence’, according to Carol Clover, I have chosen to focus on the two key aspects of Guðrún’s character: her lament scenes, and the resulting revenge scenes.¹⁵

We begin with Guðrún’s ‘stony—or is it fierce?—inability to weep’ at the death of her husband, Sigurðr, in *Guðrúnarkviða I*.¹⁶ Tom Shippey argues that Old Norse poets ‘regarded self-control and self-possession as the highest virtues. They are habitual understaters. They present heroes whose response to disaster is irony or silence’.¹⁷ Guðrún certainly fits this characterisation, as she initially does not weep at Sigurðr’s death:

*Gerðit hon hjúfra
né hǫndum slá
né kveina um
sem konur aðrar.*¹⁸

B: Tears she had not, nor wrung her hands,
Nor ever wailed, as other women.

H: She whimpered not, nor her hands she wrung,
nor wept, either, as do women else.

¹³ Carolyne Larrington, ‘Translating the *Poetic Edda* into English’ in *Old Norse Made New: Essays on the Post-Medieval Reception of Old Norse Literature and Culture*, ed. by David Clark and Carl Phelpstead (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007), pp. 21–42 (p. 23).

¹⁴ Where possible and relevant, I note editorial changes made by the translators, and potential editions which may have suggested these, in a footnote. The editions of the *Poetic Edda* which I have accessed are listed in the bibliography.

¹⁵ Carol J. Clover, ‘Hildigunnr’s Lament’, in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. by John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), 141–83 (p. 156–7).

¹⁶ Tom Shippey, ‘Foreword’, in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. xiii–xix (p. xv).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

¹⁸ *Guðrúnarkviða I*, st. 1/5–8, ‘She did not wail nor beat her hands nor lament like other women.’

L: 'She did not weep or strike her hands together,
or lament like other women.

O: 'She didn't howl or beat her hands
Or keen like other women.¹⁹

These lines describe what Guðrún is not doing, by creating an image of what she is expected to be doing: lamenting, 'a cultural form repeatedly associated with women'.²⁰ Yet this moment of not weeping hints at a different side to Guðrún, suggesting that she 'is exceptional and an outsider'.²¹ While Bellows and Hollander emphasise grief sympathetically, using language conventionally associated with mourning, such as 'tears', 'whimpered', 'wept', and 'wailed', Orchard and Larrington opt for more physical, raw imagery like 'howl', 'strike', and 'beat'. The physical nature of these actions in Orchard and Larrington foreshadows Guðrún's future as the 'monstrous woman', a 'figure of duality', but the fact that the poem begins with her *not* undertaking such actions means that the poem more immediately hints at Guðrún's capacity for self-control.²² Larrington notes that the question is left open as to whether Guðrún here 'is so traumatised that she cannot weep for her husband or whether she deliberately withholds the normal signs of female mourning, alarming the onlookers, who fear her rage and perhaps vengeance'.²³ We can also consider this conflict of possibilities in *Atlakviða*, where Guðrún does not weep: *Guðrún sigtíva / varnaði við tárur, / vaðin í þyshqllu*.²⁴ In the translations of *varnaði við tárur*, Guðrún either 'holds back' tears, or 'fights' against them: 'her tears withheld' (H), 'held back her tears' (A&T), or 'fought back

¹⁹ *Guðrúnarkviða I*: Bellows, st. 1/3-4; Hollander, st. 1/3-4; Larrington, st. 1/3-4; Orchard, st. 1/3-4.

²⁰ Clover, p. 162.

²¹ Clark, p. 176.

²² Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 11.

²³ Larrington (2014), nt. to st. 2, p. 305.

²⁴ *Atlakviða*, st. 30/6-8, 'Guðrún of the (race of?) battle gods/victory gods fought against/abstained from tears, powerless in the tumultuous hall'.

her tears' (D; L (2014)), 'struggled with her tears' (L (1996)).²⁵ The latter translations emphasise more emotional effort on Guðrún's part, while also adding a quasi-heroic tone to her potential self-control.²⁶ Dronke and Larrington's renderings above also suggest ambiguities in a later line in *Atlakviða*, *hon æva grét / bræðr sína berharða / ok buri svása*, which can thus be read as a statement of ruthlessness or as one of heroic control, for Guðrún may not weep, but this does not mean she did not wish to weep.²⁷

Acker and Larrington claim that Guðrún changes 'from prophetic pawn in the patriarchal game of exchange to steely actor on her own account'.²⁸ Yet the above examples suggest that *Guðrúnarkviða I* does not portray Guðrún as a passive 'pawn' but as a figure actively engaged in a process of self-control. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir argues that 'many women in Eddic heroic poetry [...] use various strategies to assert their autonomy and independence, subverting traditional female gender roles and challenging the patriarchal order by taking power for themselves,' referring to the thematic elements of the poems.²⁹ Translators, however, have an additional way of depicting a woman as having power; there are ambiguities in Guðrún's actions and emotions which nuanced translations, taking advantage of certain grammatical features, can portray as active from the beginning. For example, the differing descriptions of Guðrún's eventual weeping in *Guðrúnarkviða I*:

*pá hné Guðrún
høll við bólstri,
haddr losnaði,
hlýr roðnaði.*³⁰

²⁵ *Atlakviða*: Hollander, st. 32/4; Auden and Taylor, p. 122; Dronke, st. 29/7; Larrington (2014), st. 29/4; Larrington (1996), st. 29/4.

²⁶ *varnaði við*, 'to fight against', La Farge and Tucker, p. 280. This rendering is not found in Zoëga, which suggests: 'to withhold from, deny one a thing', 'to abstain from', 'she could not forbear weeping', pp.472–3. Similarly, in Cleasby and Vigfusson: 'to abstain from', 'could not forbear weeping', p. 680.

²⁷ *Atlakviða*, st. 40/6–8, 'she never wept for her brothers, fierce as bears, or her own/beloved sons'.

²⁸ Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, 'Introduction', in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 4.

²⁹ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, "'Gerðit Hon ... sem konor aðrar': Women and Subversion in Eddic Heroic Poetry", in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry*, ed. by Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn, and Brittany Schorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 117–35 (p. 130).

³⁰ *Guðrúnarkviða I*, st. 15/1–4, 'Then, bending, Guðrún sank (down) onto a pillow, her hair came loose, her cheeks reddened.'

B: 'Then Guthrun bent, on her pillow bowed,
Her hair was loosened, her cheek was hot.'

H: 'Then sank Guthrún swooning on the bolster,
her hair loosened, her cheeks grew hot.'

L: 'Then Gudrun knelt, leaning on the pillow; loosened her hair, scratched her cheeks.'

O: 'Leaning, Gudrún bent low to the pillow;
her hair came loose, her cheeks grew red.'³¹

Larrington's grammatical choices are what concern us here, for Guðrún is given power over her physical actions of grief.³² While *haddr* and *hlýr* are in the nominative, Larrington makes Guðrún the subject, saying that she 'loosened her hair', rather than 'her hair came loose'. Though not an absolute mistranslation, as the verbs are active in form, Larrington's interpretation portrays Guðrún as a more active figure in how she experiences her emotions in terms of her own body.

A key choice for the translator to make, then, is whether they depict Guðrún's emotional experience as active or passive. Consider this declaration in *Guðrúnarkviða II*: *máka ek, Grímhildr, / glaumi bella*.³³ This phrase has two opposing translations: 'Not may I, Grímhild, in gladness live' (H), or 'I may not, Grímhild, fling myself into happiness' (L).³⁴ While the former is a simple statement, a rule in the use of 'I may not', the latter fits with the Old Norse *bella*, 'to venture', 'to fling oneself'.³⁵ It emphasises Guðrún's agency of choice in affecting her emotional state, and suggests that the Old Norse worldview easily

³¹ *Guðrúnarkviða I*: Bellows, st. 14/1-2; Hollander, st. 15/1-2; Larrington (1996), st. 15/1-2; Orchard, st. 15/1-2.

³² In Larrington's 1996 edition—in her 2014 revised edition she changes the grammar to a passive voice, in line with the other translations. See *Guðrúnarkviða I*: Larrington (2014), 'her hair came loose', st. 15/2. Regardless of this revision, the 1996 edition opens up alternative potential renderings of the emotional experience.

³³ *Guðrúnarkviða II*, st. 29/1-2, 'I cannot, Grímhildr, fling myself into merriment'.

³⁴ *Guðrúnarkviða II*: Hollander, st. 29/1; Larrington (1996), st. 29/1. Larrington (2014) revises this to 'I cannot, Grímhild, hurtle onwards into happiness', st. 29/1.

³⁵ *bella*, in Zoëga, p. 47; in La Farge and Tucker, p. 20.

conceptualised and understood emotion as not only a mental faculty but also a physical, embodied experience.

If, moreover, emotions can be physical, then grief can be felt and endured like a wound in Old Norse literature, illustrated in *Guðrúnarhvöt*: *svára sára / sákat ek né kunnu*.³⁶ Translations either focus on standard ideas of emotion as intangible ‘sorrow’—‘a greater sorrow I saw not nor knew’ (B), ‘more woeful wife, ween I, never lived’ (H)—or present Guðrún’s woe as a wound, giving it strong, violent physicality: ‘a heavier, more painful wound I have not seen nor felt’ (L), ‘a more heavy wound I haven’t seen or felt’ (O).³⁷ Similarly, when Guðrún recalls the death of her daughter, Svanhildr—*þat er mér harðast / harma minna*—most translations treat ‘woes’ as an intangible emotion: ‘of my heavy woes the hardest it was’ (B), ‘the saddest this of my sorrows all’ (H).³⁸ Larrington, however, translates *harma* as ‘injuries’.³⁹ This implies that Guðrún empathetically felt her daughter’s pain; it is as though, when the horse’s hooves injured and killed Svanhildr, Guðrún felt this as ‘psychological pain’, which Eleonora Pancetti argues is the primary concept contained in *harmr*.⁴⁰ Similarly, Guðrún refers to Sigurðr’s death as the *sárastr*,⁴¹ ‘sores’ (H; O; A&T), ‘most agonizing’ (L),⁴² of her woes, again depicting grief as a physical feeling of pain, and again, she refers to Atli cutting the heart from her brother, Högni, as *hvassastr*.⁴³ This lexical

³⁶ *Guðrúnarhvöt*, st. 11/1-2, ‘[such] heavy/hard/sorrowful wounds I have not seen, nor have they known/experienced [any]’. There are a number of problems with the text here. Jónas and Vésteinn note that something seems to be missing here, and that the ‘a’ endings of *svára sára* are unexplained. While they have *né kunnu* (3rd person plural ‘nor did they experience’), this is emended to *né kunna* (‘nor did I experience’) in Gustav Neckel, *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex regius verwandten Denkmälern: I: Text*, 3rd rev. edn. by Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1962). Neckel and Kuhn (1962) also note that this line can be emended to *svárara, sárara / sákat ek né kunnac* (‘A heavier, more painful thing I have not seen nor experienced’), nt. to st. 11, p. 266.

³⁷ *Guðrúnarhvöt*: Bellows, st. 11/1; Hollander, st. 11/1; Larrington, st. 11/1; Orchard, st. 11/1.

³⁸ *Guðrúnarhvöt*, st. 16/5-6, ‘that was to me the hardest of my sorrows/injuries’. Bellows, st. 16/3; Hollander, st. 17/1.

³⁹ *Guðrúnarhvöt*: Larrington, st. 16/3, ‘that was the cruellest of all my injuries’.

⁴⁰ Eleonora Pancetti, ‘“Sorg að segja”: The Language of Negative Emotions in Eddic Poetry’, MA thesis, available at <<http://hdl.handle.net/1946/29311>> [accessed and downloaded 6 July 2018], pp. 41–47.

⁴¹ *Guðrúnarhvöt*, st. 17/1, ‘sores/most painful’.

⁴² *Guðrúnarhvöt*: Bellows, st. 17/1; Hollander, st. 18/1; Orchard, st. 17/1; Auden and Taylor, p. 138; Larrington (1996), st. 17/1.

⁴³ *Guðrúnarhvöt*, st. 17/9, ‘sharpest/most piercing’.

choice certainly ‘has something to do [...] with its associations of knives and cutting’,⁴⁴ a thematic connection that is retained in most translations: ‘keenest’ (T; A&T; B), ‘sharpest’ (L), ‘cutting’ (D).⁴⁵ Hollander, however, chooses ‘hardest’,⁴⁶ which removes the thematic link between Guðrún’s sorrow and Högni’s death, along with ideas of grief as injury.

The physicality of emotion represents a concept of emotional experience, a physical empathy, which is experienced in the battlefield of life, thereby presenting Guðrún as a ‘warrior’ in a heroic light. This interpretation presents the conventional ‘female’ viewpoint of this society—often as a figure of lamentation—as operating in the same heroic discourse as the men who engage in physical fights. Old Norse literary sources ‘consistently depict women’s words as their main tool to achieve their agendas’, and this translates into the descriptions of Guðrún’s grief, which imply that she engages with actions of the ‘heroic’ world through her emotions.⁴⁷ While Hollander and Bellows tend to translate Guðrún’s emotion as an intangible experience, re-creating her as a primarily grief-filled figure, Larrington and Orchard emphasise Guðrún’s potential for heroic endurance and emotional self-control, translating her grief in terms of a physical battle wound.

As the emotional turmoil of her life is made physical, Guðrún displays her heroic heart. In Old Norse literature, ‘the heart and the chest as the site of life and courage have great prominence’.⁴⁸ A common term used to refer to the heart is *hugr*, also translated as ‘mind’; Elena Gurevich argues that *hugr* tends to denote ‘an abstract, non-visual entity [...], and is often the expression of courageous disposition resulting in impulsive brave actions’.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Peter Hallberg, ‘Elements of Imagery in the *Edda*’, in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by R. J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014), pp. 47–85 (pp. 51–2).

⁴⁵ *Guðrúnarhvöt*: Terry, st. 17/5; Auden and Taylor, p. 138; Bellows, st. 18/1; Larrington, st. 17/5; Dronke, st. 17/9.

⁴⁶ *Guðrúnarhvöt*: Hollander, st. 19/1.

⁴⁷ Jóhanna Katrín, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, p. 12.

⁴⁸ Hallberg, p. 66.

⁴⁹ ‘*Hugar heiti ok hjarta*’, ed. by Elena Gurevich, in *Poetry From Treatises On Poetics: Part 2*, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages: III* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), pp. 964–65 (p. 965).

Literally, *hugr* translates to ‘mind’ in English, but in this rendering, we lose the Old Norse concept of the heart and mind being situated in the same place, the breast, a conflation illustrated in the poetic directions of Snorri’s *Edda* for *hjarta* (‘heart’): *Hjarta heitir negg [...] ok kenna við brjóst eða hug*.⁵⁰ As K. T. Kanerva explains, ‘the word for “emotion”, *hugarhræring*, literally meant movement of the *hugr*, that is, movement of the mind. The mind was situated in the chest or, more precisely, in the heart.’⁵¹ The centrality of the heart in Old Norse sources is due to a ‘largely cardiocentric understanding of the mind’, in which, as Hannah Burrows explains, there exists ‘a corresponding closeness between cognition and emotion, thought and feeling’.⁵² The heart also contains character and courage, or the lack thereof, and is often used to describe a character’s motivations and actions by linking these qualities to their emotions. In *Guðrúnarkviða I*, Guðrún is described as *harðhuguð* multiple times.⁵³ Larrington translates this as ‘fierce in mind’, but other translations emphasise the ‘coldness’ of Guðrún’s heart: ‘grim her heart’ (B), ‘cold her heart’ (H), ‘hard-hearted’ (O), ‘numb of heart’ (A&T), ‘her heart like stone’ (T).⁵⁴ Orchard’s ‘hard-hearted’ parallels the Old Norse compound format, translating *harð* literally (as ‘hard, severe’), and the other translations take a similar approach.⁵⁵ Larrington’s choice of ‘fierce’ is unusual in juxtaposition with these ideas of Guðrún’s cold, emotionless heart, but also provokes questions about how to render *harðhuguð* and similar compounds. Another example in *Guðrúnarkviða I* illustrates this, as those around Guðrún try to comfort her:

Gengu jarlar

⁵⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998; rev. repr. 2007), p. 108, ll. 23–33. ‘The heart is called bosom [...] and referring to it in terms of breast or thought.’ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. by Anthony Faulkes (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 154.

⁵¹ K. T. Kanerva, ‘Ógæfa as an Emotion in Thirteenth-Century Iceland’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 84 (2012), 1–26 (p. 7).

⁵² Hannah Burrows, ‘The Mead of Poetry: Old Norse Poetry as a Mind-Altering Substance’, in *The Edinburgh History of Distributed Cognition*, ed. by Miranda Anderson and Mark Wheeler, From Medieval to Renaissance Culture, II (Edinburgh University Press, [forthcoming 2019, cited with author’s permission]).

⁵³ *Guðrúnarkviða I*: st. 5/5, st. 11/5, ‘courageous/hard-hearted’.

⁵⁴ *Guðrúnarkviða I*: Larrington, st. 5/3, st. 11/3; Bellows, st. 5/3, st. 10/3; Hollander, st. 5/3, st. 11/3; Orchard, st. 5/3, st. 11/3; Auden and Taylor, p. 94; Terry, st. 5/3, st. 10/3.

⁵⁵ *harð*, in Zoëga, p. 185.

*alsnotrir fram,
þeir er harðs hugar
hana lottu.*⁵⁶

Different translations are chosen for *harðs hugar* compared to *harðhuguð* above: ‘heavy woe’ (B), ‘heavy heart’ (H), ‘soothe her heart’ (T), ‘harshness of heart’ (O).⁵⁷ In her 2014 revised edition, Larrington reconciled this phrase in st. 2 with the similar one in st. 5 and 11, where she changed ‘terrible grief’, to ‘fierceness of mind’, and smoothed the ambiguity of Guðrún’s emotions in the poem.⁵⁸ Larrington’s choice to retain ‘fierce’ throughout presents Guðrún not as an unfeeling figure, but as one who feels the emotional strength of the moment, and ‘fiercely’ contains it. In comparison, the other translations, by altering their renderings of *harð* as the poem develops, implicitly portray Guðrún as a more malleable character, transforming from a figure of grief to a figure of coldness. Depending on the translation, this is, therefore, either the moment when Guðrún ‘metamorphoses from the traumatized and grieving woman [...] into a terrifying, even monstrous, wife and mother’, or a chance to introduce her from the outset as a figure of extreme self-control.⁵⁹

Larrington’s choice to consistently use ‘mind’, rather than ‘heart’, however, alters the location of Guðrún’s emotion, distancing it from the ‘cardiocentric psychology of Old Norse narrative’ noted by Leslie Lockett.⁶⁰ The term ‘mind’ also has modern connotations of being logical and methodical, in opposition to emotional desires, and raises the question of whether Guðrún is motivated by an ‘emotional’ heart or a ‘logical’ mind. It also removes the repeated imagery of hearts in descriptions of Guðrún and her kinsmen, therefore downplaying her thematic relationship to her brother, Hǫgni. There is a gender difference in our understanding

⁵⁶ *Guðrúnarkviða I*, st. 2/1-3, ‘Very clever noblemen stepped forward, they who held her back from a hard heart/mind’. La Farge and Tucker suggest: ‘the earls came forward (i.e. to her), they who would dissuade her from rigidity’, p. 308.

⁵⁷ *Guðrúnarkviða I*: Bellows, st. 2/2; Hollander, st. 2/2; Terry, st. 2/2; Orchard, st. 2/2.

⁵⁸ *Guðrúnarkviða I*: Larrington (1996), st. 2/2; Larrington (2014), st. 2/2. Larrington (2014) states that this is her reasoning behind this editorial change in nt. to st. 2, p. 305.

⁵⁹ Acker and Larrington, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

⁶⁰ Leslie Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Traditions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 148.

of sister and brother, for it appears that, if Guðrún's heart is full of, or hardened to, emotion, then Hogni's heart is full of courage, and hardened against fear. In *Atlakviða*, Hogni is described as laughing as his heart is cut from him: *Hló þá Hogni / er til hjarta skáru*.⁶¹ This scene is paralleled in *Atlamál*, though in *Atlakviða* we are also told *klekkva hann sízt hugði*.⁶² Like Guðrún, Hogni does not succumb to tears when suffering. This is a striking parallel of character between brother and sister, one which is further cemented in *Atlamál*'s description of Hogni enduring physical suffering: *Keppa hann svá kunni, / kvöl hann vel þolði*.⁶³ These lines recall the imagery, discussed above, of Guðrún bearing emotion like a wound, re-enforcing the parallel between the two figures, and enabling us further to view Guðrún's endurance of suffering as a heroic act itself.

Similarly, not all translations maintain the parallels, present in the Old Norse text, between Guðrún and her son, Hamðir:

Describing Guðrún:
ströng var stórhuguð (Atlamál)
 B: 'thus bitterly planned she'
 H: 'hard-hearted'
 L: 'fierce was her strong temperament'
 O: 'the strong woman was mighty-hearted'.⁶⁴

Describing Hamðir:
inn hugumstóri (Guðrúnarhvöt)
 B: 'the high of heart'
 H: 'the hardy-minded'
 L: 'the strong-minded one'
 O: 'the stout-hearted'.⁶⁵

Guðrún is portrayed as either bitter, hard-hearted, and void of emotion, or mighty, yet Hamðir is consistently depicted as strong and 'heroic'. Hollander and Bellows present

⁶¹ *Atlakviða*, st. 24/1-2, 'Hogni laughed when they cut to the heart'.

⁶² *Atlakviða*, st. 24/4, 'he thought not at all to yield/cry out'.

⁶³ *Atlamál*, st. 64/7-8, 'he knew how to prove himself a champion, he endured the torture well'.

⁶⁴ *Atlamál*, st. 75/5, 'strong/harsh was the stout-hearted/high-minded one'. Bellows, st. 72/1; Hollander st. 71/1; Larrington, st. 76/3; Orchard, st. 76/3.

⁶⁵ *Guðrúnarhvöt*, st. 4/2, st. 8/2, 'stout-hearted/courageous'. Bellows, st. 4/1, st. 8/1; Hollander (1928), st. 4.1 (the similar st. 8/1 is missing); Larrington, st. 4/1, st. 8/1; Orchard, st. 4/1, st. 8/1.

significantly different character traits in their renderings of *stórhuguð* and *hugumstóri*, appearing to differentiate along gendered lines the ways in which a heart should be depicted. In fact, the similarities between the terms are clear in the Old Norse (*stór*- and *-stóri*, *-huguð* and *hugum*-), as they are in Larrington and Orchard, and these gendered differences significantly affect our understanding of Guðrún. Hollander's 'hard-hearted' and Bellows's 'bitterly', which connotes cold, harsh weather, imply that Guðrún carries out her actions because she has become hardened to emotion. Yet Larrington's use of 'fierce' and 'strong' conversely suggests that Guðrún is motivated by the force of her emotions, as though she gains heroic power through the strength of feeling she is forced to bear, an interpretation also present in Orchard's 'mighty-hearted'.

Guðrún's similarities to her male kinsmen in heroic acts of the heart, demonstrated in these examples, are maintained when she takes on staggeringly violent actions. Guðrún may arguably provide a 'strong counter-example of female action' to the 'binary dynamic of male action and female lamentation',⁶⁶ but the presentation of this action can affect our assessment of Guðrún. While female characters may behave 'just as "badly"—cunningly, deceitfully—as male ones', these women are often 'seen simply to be privileging their own desires above the wishes of others', despite their actions not differing significantly.⁶⁷ How Guðrún's actions are 'seen' by the translator is our focus here, as while the sources 'consistently depict women's words as their main tool to achieve their agendas', translators make similar use of the power of words when describing Guðrún's exceptional, norm-defying actions, and implied motivations.⁶⁸ When Dronke characterises Guðrún's vengeful actions as 'systematic', her choice of words is clearly loaded, yet it is unclear whether Guðrún's revenge is simply 'systematic', or whether it is a result of uncontrolled (or uncontrollable) emotions.⁶⁹ In fact,

⁶⁶ Clark and Jóhanna Katrín, p. 337.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 336–37.

⁶⁸ Jóhanna Katrín, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, p. 12.

⁶⁹ Dronke, *Poetic Edda: Heroic Poems*, p. 29.

Guðrún is presented as a horrific monster obsessed with slaughter as often as she is a righteous heroic figure in control of her emotions.

In *Atlakviða*, Guðrún's vengeful actions are inspired by her brothers' deaths, but there are two key ways of conceptualising wrongs and the motivation for vengeance: as an emotional desire, expressing personal grief, or as a duty, motivated by a sense of social responsibility and conventions. The various renderings of *sakar at bæta*, in *Guðrúnarkviða II*, illustrate these two mindsets: 'give amends for my hurt' (B), 'to heal my sorrows' (H), or 'to settle the matter' (L), 'to settle the case' (O).⁷⁰ The former translations emphasise Guðrún's personal emotional experience in 'my', 'hurt', and 'sorrows', contrasting with the legalistic mindset in 'matter', 'case', made impersonal by 'the'. This conflict, when it comes to vengeance, between desire and duty is significant in *Hamðismál*, when we question whether Guðrún incites her sons to vengeance to fulfil personal desires or out of her duty to her daughter. While Bellows maintains an emphasis on the personal experience of 'having' vengeance, translating *morðs at hefna* as 'death's vengeance to have', other translators present vengeance as a more impersonal action, 'to avenge the murder' (L).⁷¹ The latter choice literally translates the original *hefna* but also presents vengeance as an action carried out primarily for the deceased, emphasised further in Hollander's rendering: 'Svanhild to avenge.'⁷² Similarly, in *Guðrúnarhvöt*, Bellows renders *hennar mynduð it / hefna leita*, as 'vengeance for her ye soon would have', rather than 'you would have tried to avenge her' (L).⁷³ These contrasting interpretations may be explained in reference to William Ian Miller's work on the relation between the victim and the avenger: 'It is the corpse itself that is understood to do the talking, with the grievant acting merely as a vehicle to convey the

⁷⁰ *Guðrúnarkviða II*, st. 18/3, 'to settle the case'. Bellows, st. 19/1-2; Hollander, st. 18/2; Larrington, st. 18/2; Orchard, st. 18/2.

⁷¹ *Hamðismál*, st. 11/6, 'to avenge the murder/death'. Bellows, st. 12/3; Larrington, st. 11/3.

⁷² *Hamðismál*: Hollander (1928), st. 12/4. Hollander (1962) revises this to 'their harm to avenge', inserting the ambiguous 'they', st. 12/4.

⁷³ *Guðrúnarhvöt*, st. 3/5-6, 'you would seek to avenge her'. Bellows, st. 3/3; Larrington, st. 3/3.

corpse's words. [...] [O]nce embarked on the ritual she [the avenger] ceases to be self-referential.⁷⁴ When vengeance is seen as a necessary process, the avenger ceases to emphasise their personal investment in the feud, and instead refers to their external social obligations to the deceased. Miller's dynamic between the corpse and the grievant parallels the conflict of vengeance as duty or desire, and as vengeance becomes a duty, Guðrún's motivations are located within a wider societal context, rather than being restricted to a personal vendetta.

These wider societal aspects are part of Guðrún's 'relational statuses', emphasised at the end of *Atlakviða*, although Bellows continues to present vengeance as a personal object of Guðrún's, ignoring the *bræðra* in *pau lét hon gjöld bræðra*:

B: So vengeance she had
 H: Thus her brothers avenged
 L: That bride made them pay for her brothers
 O: She paid them back for her brothers.⁷⁵

Clark argues that 'Guðrún is not acting on her own behalf, but avenging her brothers'.⁷⁶ Yet Larrington's addition of 'that bride' (she moves *brúðr* 'bride' from the previous line) is a poignant choice.⁷⁷ Even if 'female lives are conceivable only with reference to men—whether lover, husband, brothers, friend, or enemy,'⁷⁸ Larrington's translation emphasises Guðrún's complicated situation of entangled duties; Guðrún shows her loyalty is with her brothers, rather than her husband, even as she remains defined by her relationship to her husband as a *brúðr*. As Zoe Borovsky argues, women were 'concerned with their own personal honor', just as they 'were responsible for maintaining the honor of the household to

⁷⁴ William Ian Miller, 'Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England', *Law and History Review*, 1/2 (1983), 159–204 (pp. 187–88).

⁷⁵ *Atlakviða*, st. 43/8, 'she did these things as vengeance for her brothers'. Bellows, st. 44/4; Holander, st. 44/4; Larrington (1996), st. 41/4; Orchard, st. 42/4. Larrington (2014) only revises 'that' to 'the'.

⁷⁶ Clark, p. 192.

⁷⁷ *Atlakviða*, st. 43/7.

⁷⁸ Clark, p. 192.

which they belonged’—and here, Guðrún decides that either her personal honour or her ‘household’ lies with her brothers, not Atli.⁷⁹

Thus, we turn to Guðrún’s vengeful actions against Atli. According to Clover, ‘not affection but duty obliged a man to take action over a kin killing, and it was no less the duty of women to remember and remind’.⁸⁰ This duty was generally fulfilled through a ‘*hvøt* or incitement’, but Guðrún fulfills both ‘male’ and ‘female’ roles, as she takes on the actions of vengeance herself in *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál*.⁸¹ As Guðrún completes the ‘male duty’ of vengeance, translators respond differently. In *Atlamál*, Guðrún fights alongside her brothers against Atli: *Hugði á harðræði / ok hrazk ór skikkju / [...] / hæg varat hjaldri / hvars hon hendr festi*.⁸² Hollander explicitly presents Guðrún’s subversion of gender expectations in his translation of *hugði á harðræði* as ‘took courage unwomanish’, compared with ‘she resolved on a hard course’ (L).⁸³ He reveals the bias of his day by using a negative to present Guðrún subverting the ‘norm’. Yet bias can also be found when presenting Guðrún in a positive, strong light, for ‘scholars looking for evidence of strong, autonomous women—characteristic of the 1970s to ’90s feminist scholarship—have focussed on figures such as [...] Guðrún [...] in their more heroic moments as whetting women or female combatants’.⁸⁴ For example, Terry’s 1969 rendering: ‘calling on all her courage, she cast aside her cloak, [...] laid her hand where the fight was hottest’.⁸⁵ Conversely, Orchard downplays gendered aspects of the phrase *hæg varat hjaldri* in ‘she was skilful’ (O), reversing the logic of the original in which Guðrún is said not to embody more conventionally feminine characteristics, e.g., ‘her hands

⁷⁹ Zoe Borovsky, ‘Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature’, *The Journal of American Folklore*, 112 (1999), 6–39 (p. 32).

⁸⁰ Clover, p. 144.

⁸¹ Clover, pp. 143–4.

⁸² *Atlamál*, st. 48/3–4, 7–8, ‘She had a harsh deed in mind/heart and threw her cloak off [...] she was not docile in battle wherever she set her hands’. Many renderings are possible for *hægr*, e.g. comfortable, docile, affable, skillful, agile, masterly. Moreover, as *varat* is negative, the reading ‘she was not skilful in battle’ is also possible. Dronke emends the text to *høg [...] at hialdri* (‘skilled in war’), discussed on the next page.

⁸³ *Atlamál*: Hollander, st. 45/2; Larrington, st. 49/2.

⁸⁴ Clark and Jóhanna Katrín, p. 341.

⁸⁵ *Atlamál*: Terry, st. 47/2, 4.

were not gentle' (B).⁸⁶ The Old Norse text is part of the cause of this ambiguity regarding the positive or negative descriptions of Guðrún's actions, for while Dronke amends *hæg varat hjaldri*, meaning 'she was not gentle in war', to '*hög [...] at hialdri* "skilled in war"', she notes that 'Kuhn retains the MS *hæg*'.⁸⁷ Hence the different renderings, causing the translators to 're-create' Guðrún, either positively or negatively.

Our judgement of Guðrún is further affected by the descriptions used for those who suffer at her hands—her 'victims', we might say—and, in doing so, they illustrate the power of one word to imply guilt. Are they innocent and therefore undeserving of Guðrún's violence, or are they themselves guilty of unforgivable actions against her? When rendering *pá er í holl saman / Húnar tölðusk, / gumar gransiðir, / gengu inn hvárir*,⁸⁸ Larrington and Orchard remain neutral in this respect, translating *Húnar* as 'the huns', but Hollander and Bellows add descriptions not found in the Old Norse: 'Hunnish youths' (B), 'Hunnish heroes' (H).⁸⁹ With innocence implied by 'youth', harking back to Guðrún's murder of her young sons, and positive attributes implied by 'heroes', Guðrún is presented as killing undeserving men, an example that demonstrates the ability of translators to condemn a character through their choices. It is also difficult to reconcile Guðrún's extremely violent actions with a character who is 'systematic', considering the concept of equal compensation in vengeance: 'Taking ten lives for one was not feud; it was either war or anarchy.'⁹⁰ Atli kills Guðrún's two brothers, but Guðrún kills Atli, their sons, and all of Atli's men, before she burns down his hall. Yet in Guðrún's view, her revenge is 'just'; while the number of people killed is vastly different, what Guðrún is so galled by is that *all* of the men of her race have been

⁸⁶ *Atlamál*: Bellows, st. 46/4; Orchard, st. 49/4.

⁸⁷ Dronke, nt. to st. 47/7, pp. 125–26.

⁸⁸ *Atlakviða*, st. 36/3–6, 'As the Huns gathered together in the hall, men with long, hanging moustaches, both groups walked in.'

⁸⁹ *Atlakviða*: Larrington, st. 34/2; Orchard, st. 35/2; Bellows, st. 37/2; Hollander, st. 37/2.

⁹⁰ Miller, p. 160.

killed, leaving her to fend for herself when it comes to vengeance.⁹¹ In *Atlamál*, Guðrún's plans for vengeance are referred to as *ofrhefndir*.⁹² This 'can be translated neutrally' or with 'the sense that the revenge is [...] "too great"'.⁹³ Most follow this rendering in 'terrible vengeance' (B), 'most fearful vengeance' (H), 'dreadful revenge' (O), but Larrington chooses 'all-encompassing revenge', implying that Guðrún's revenge 'encompasses all' of her griefs in return.⁹⁴ Thus, 'Guðrún's murderous actions in *Atlakviða* are represented as those of a woman taking control of her destiny', but it is left unclear 'whether this is an approved course of action or rather one to be feared and stigmatized'.⁹⁵

We may ask whether Guðrún's revenge is 'just', but we must also consider if it was ever in her control, for the Old Norse world was 'saturated with the effects of the belief in an all-powerful destiny', creating a paradoxical ambiguity when we attempt to understand an individual's actions and responsibilities.⁹⁶ For example, *skop lét hon vaxa* is translated as: 'the fate she let grow' (B), 'to fulfill their fate' (H), 'she let fate culminate' (L), 'she brought events to a head' (O).⁹⁷ These differences are due to an ambiguity regarding the translation of *lét*, from *láta*, as 'to let, make, cause'.⁹⁸ While 'let' implies a passive acceptance, Orchard's 'brought events to a head' creates a dialogue between Guðrún and fate, which she may view as governing her actions. The use of 'fulfill' is similar but implies more that Guðrún is following pre-ordained 'rules', i.e., fate. Thus, how this singular word is translated can alter

⁹¹ See Guðrún's accusation to Atli in *Guðrúnarkviða III*, st. 5/5-8: *hrinktu mik at bræðrum / ok at brynjuðum, / hrinktu mik at ǫllum / hófuðniðjum* ('You robbed me of my brothers and mail-clad men, / you robbed me of all my next of kin'). There are textual issues here concerning *hrinktu*, with La Farge and Tucker noting that, for this instance, it is 'otherwise unknown and phonologically unlike West Norse', p. 120. La Farge and Tucker suggest that it may be a form of *hnöggva* 'to rob', p. 117.

⁹² *Atlamál*, st. 75/8. La Farge and Tucker offer 'utmost or terrible vengeance', p. 202. See also their gloss of *of-*, 'over-, very, too (much, great); emphatic prefix, indicating a high degree or excess', p. 201. Zoëga suggests 'fearful vengeance', p. 320.

⁹³ Clark, p. 188.

⁹⁴ *Atlamál*: Bellows, st. 72/2; Hollander, st. 71/2; Orchard, st. 76/4; Larrington, st. 76/4.

⁹⁵ Clark, p. 197.

⁹⁶ Anthony Winterbourne, *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism* (Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), p. 11.

⁹⁷ *Atlakviða*, st. 41/5, 'she caused/let fate grow'. Bellows, st. 42/3; Hollander, st. 42/3; Larrington, st. 39/3; Orchard, st. 40/3.

⁹⁸ *láta* (5), in Zoëga, p. 263.

our understanding of the multifaceted nature of ‘fate’ as a concept in Old Norse societies and consequently affect our assessment of Guðrún’s responsibility for ‘her’ actions.

We can also consider the related question of Guðrún’s potential ‘guilt’, influenced by her unsuccessful suicide attempt, between the events of *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál* and those of *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál*.⁹⁹ Clark argues that in *Atlamál*, ‘Guðrún is far from being the heroine of this poem, and the poet designates her decision to attempt suicide as *fróð* (st. 102) [wise].’¹⁰⁰ In fact, *fróð* is an adjective describing Guðrún, in *fróð vildi Guðrún / fara sér at spilla*, not an adverb describing her action, but the meaning is likely implied by describing Guðrún as *fróð* at the moment of her decision.¹⁰¹ Hollander, however, removes the reference to ‘wise’, and appears to emend the text, changing *fróð* to *flóð* (‘flood’): ‘to the flood she fared then’.¹⁰² Orchard offers an alternative translation: ‘Guðrún, who had seen too much, wished to do away with herself’.¹⁰³ He suggests a new understanding of *fróð*, derived from our secondary understanding of wisdom, meaning to have experience. Orchard’s addition of the superlative ‘too’ is not explicitly present in the Old Norse, but it gives us pause for thought in understanding Guðrún’s motivations in this scene, in turn encouraging us to re-evaluate our assessment of her actions. In Clark’s argument, the narrator views Guðrún as guilty in her actions, and she is therefore ‘wise’ to think about killing herself. Orchard, however, emphasises the difficulties of Guðrún’s previous experience as a motivating factor, which implies sympathy rather than condemnation on the narrator’s part. Guðrún’s suicide attempt is also described in *Guðrúnarhvöt*:

gekk ek til strandar,

⁹⁹ There was no word for the *feeling* of guilt in Old Norse, only as a ‘state of affairs, i.e., being guilty before the law’, noted by Kanerva (p. 3), making this an implied judgement on the part of the reader, influenced by the translator.

¹⁰⁰ Clark, p. 189.

¹⁰¹ *Atlamál*, st. 103/5-8, ‘Guðrún, wise (one), tried to destroy herself’.

¹⁰² *Atlamál*: Hollander, st. 98/3. In all editions of the Old Norse text of the *Edda* cited in my bibliography this emendation is not used. It may, of course, have been his own decision, but he has not noted this in either edition, and has not put this line in brackets or parentheses to signify an interpolation or an emendation, as is his editorial style noted in his introduction (p. xxviii).

¹⁰³ *Atlamál*: Orchard, st. 104/3.

*grōm vark nornum,
vilda ek hrinda
strið grið þeira.*¹⁰⁴

Translators vary widely here in their presentations of how Guðrún expresses the feelings that motivated her suicide attempt.¹⁰⁵ While Bellows and Hollander depict Guðrún with a ‘heart full sore’ (B), or ‘weary of life’ (H), implying that Guðrún may feel grief due to guilt, Larrington and Orchard present her as still retaining her ‘fierce’ spirit, describing her as ‘enraged’ (L), or ‘angry with the norns’ (O).¹⁰⁶ Orchard’s translation is closest to the literal meaning which, while difficult to translate in its obscurity, certainly contains a sense of Guðrún wanting to ‘push away/against’ something relating to the norns.¹⁰⁷

Given Guðrún’s reputation in the later poems as the inciter of her sons, Hamðir and Sǫrli, to avenge their sister, Svanhildr, it is also important to consider how translations of the incitement scenes can affect our general impression of Guðrún. As Else Mundal argues, the ‘impression of strong and independent women in Old Norse society depends very heavily on a literary motif, the goading scene’, and our impression of Guðrún depends upon how her ‘goading scene’ is translated.¹⁰⁸ In *Guðrúnarhvot*, Guðrún is shown ‘not only as the murderess of *Atlakviða*, but also as a victim of heroic society’s treatment of women’—and she is also a victim of the translator’s choices, because, while a *hvot* is within her traditional ‘female’ role, its presentation is not always positive. In *Hamðismál*, Guðrún *hvatti* her sons to avenge Svanhildr, translated as ‘whetted’ (B), ‘egged on’ (H), or ‘urged’ (L; O).¹⁰⁹ While

¹⁰⁴ *Guðrúnarhvot*, st. 13/1-4, ‘I went to the shore, I was angry with the norns, I wanted to thrust/push away their affliction, (their) mercy/peace treaty’. There are manuscript issues here, discussed below. Various options include ‘To the sea I wended, weary of life, / the hateful norns I hoped to thwart’ (Hollander, st. 13/1-2), ‘I went to the sea-shore, I was angry with the norns, / I wanted to rid myself of their painful plans’ (Orchard, st. 13/1-2).

¹⁰⁵ There are, again, textual issues at work here. See: Dronke, nt. 13/3-4, p. 156, where she ‘tentatively’ suggests her own emendation. Also: *strið*, in La Farge and Tucker, ‘Ghv. 13, in an obscure context’, p. 250.

¹⁰⁶ *Guðrúnarhvot*: Bellows, st. 13/1; Hollander, st. 13/1; Larrington, st. 13/1; Orchard, st. 13/1.

¹⁰⁷ The norns were female figures in the Old Norse mythological schema who were associated primarily with shaping the fates of humans, although our understanding of them is ambiguous. For more information, see: Karen Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Press, 2011).

¹⁰⁸ Else Mundal, ‘The Position of Women in Old Norse Society and the Basis for their Power’, *Nora: Nordic Journal of Women’s Studies*, 2 (1994), 3–11 (p. 3).

¹⁰⁹ *Hamðismál*: Bellows, st. 1/4; Hollander (1928), st. 2/4; Larrington, st. 2/4; Orchard, st. 2/4.

similar in meaning, Hollander's 'egged on' has a subtle nuance of provocation—potentially to do something foolish or dangerous—that is not so apparent in the terms 'whetted' and 'urged', which may imply a more controlled decision on the part of Guðrún. This subtly illustrates the alternative argument made by Clark and Jóhanna Katrín that 'audiences may have considered whetting an appropriate female role', for 'women are [...] expected to impart some of their wisdom to male recipients' in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and 'if whetting also functions as a type of advice [...], then women do have an important part to play in this aspect of heroic life'.¹¹⁰ Thus it is possible to translate Guðrún's *hvot* in more positive terms, in which she is seen to advise her sons to undertake the heroic action required of them, rather than viewing her incitement as a self-referential desire for bloody vengeance.

Yet not all the translators are consistent when we turn to the similar example in *Guðrúnarhvot*: *Hvatti at vígi / grimmum orðum / Guðrún sonu*.¹¹¹ Bellows and Hollander maintain their translation of *hvatti* as 'whet' (B) and 'egged' (H), but Larrington and Orchard do not, instead choosing 'whetted' (L) and 'incited' (O).¹¹² These differing choices for the translation of *hvatti* illustrate two possible viewpoints of Guðrún. *Guðrúnarhvot* and *Hamðismál* begin with similar material, but, while *Guðrúnarhvot* ends by focussing on Guðrún's isolating grief, *Hamðismál* follows Hamðir and Sqrli on their doomed mission for vengeance. In *Guðrúnarhvot*, Guðrún is the focus, along with her questionable motives for 'whetting' her sons, which inevitably leaves her alone again. In *Hamðismál*, the sons are the focus, and so the use of 'urged' implies parental guidance and encouragement to be 'heroic', making their end all the more poignant. *Guðrúnarhvot* and *Hamðismál*, therefore, act in dialogue with each other through the various re-creations of Guðrún's *hvot*, presenting

¹¹⁰ Clark and Jóhanna Katrín, p. 343.

¹¹¹ *Guðrúnarhvot*, st. 1/6-8, 'with fierce/bitter words, Guðrún incited (her) sons on to battle'.

¹¹² *Guðrúnarhvot*: Bellows, st. 1/4; Hollander (1928), st. 1/3; Larrington, st. 1/3; Orchard, st. 1/3.

different sides to the complex issue of women inciting, and the ‘doomed’ revenge that follows.

Before departing, Hamðir chastises his mother in *Hamðismál*, presenting us with a ‘wisdom teaching’ on how vengeance should be enacted successfully: *svá skyldi hverr qðrum / verja til aldrлага / sverði sárbeitu at sér né stríddit*.¹¹³ While *hverr* can be translated as ‘each, everyone’, and *sér* as ‘for oneself’, translators opt for a variety of pronouns.¹¹⁴ In translating *hverr*, Larrington alone chooses to render this as ‘man’, rather than ‘one’.¹¹⁵ Yet most choose to translate *sér* as ‘himself’, apart from Orchard, who removes any equivalent to it.¹¹⁶ Orchard’s decision not to use a gender-specific pronoun makes this a ‘universal’ teaching, while the other translations may imply a masculine focus for a modern audience. For Bellows and Hollander, this could simply be because ‘he’ was, and still is, often used as the generic pronoun for both ‘he’ and ‘she’. Larrington’s specific choice of ‘man’ in the first line, however, combined with her use of ‘himself’ in the last, emphasises the male focus of Hamðir’s phrase. This effect may not be entirely intentional on Larrington’s part—she changed ‘man’ to ‘one’ in her 2014 edition but retained ‘himself’—yet our comparison of the translation possibilities here raises the question of whether Guðrún’s gender difference is being emphasised, particularly as these lines are spoken by Hamðir.¹¹⁷

Such gender tensions are also present in Hamðir and Sqrli’s reluctance to avenge their sister, for ‘underlying their reluctance is an implicit assumption that sisters do not need to be avenged as brothers so unequivocally do.’¹¹⁸ Guðrún’s ‘inciting’ of her sons therefore

¹¹³ *Hamðismál*, st. 8/5-8, ‘Each person should bring about the death of another with a wound-cutting sword in such a way that one does not harm oneself.’

¹¹⁴ *hverr* is masculine, making ‘every man’ a reasonable translation. It is possible, however, that in the background is the noun *maðr*, which is grammatically masculine, hence *hverr*, but *maðr* actually means ‘a person’ of either sex, ‘man in the generic sense, human being’, La Farge and Tucker, p. 170.

¹¹⁵ *Hamðismál*: Larrington (1996), st. 8/3.

¹¹⁶ *Hamðismál*: Orchard, st. 8/4: ‘Everyone should bring about death for another / with a wound-biting sword, without getting hurt.’

¹¹⁷ *Hamðismál*: Larrington (2014), st. 8/3-4.

¹¹⁸ Carolyne Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters in Medieval European Literature* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2015), p. 99.

becomes a subversive action against the gender norms of this heroic world, highlighting the ‘asymmetry in cross-sex sibling emotional priorities’.¹¹⁹ Bearing this in mind, Larrington’s use of ‘man’ in her translation, however unintentional it may be, is even more striking, as it may implicitly suggest this gender disparity to her audience. The ‘destructive nature of heroic individualism and the ethic of vengeance’ is the focus of *Hamðismál*.¹²⁰ Yet Eddic poems ‘repeatedly express the conviction that heroes and heroines show their true quality not through success but in defeat, nowadays an unpalatable thought’—and an ‘unpalatable’ thought to Hamðir and Sqrli, too, until Guðrún persuades them otherwise.¹²¹ Thus, in *Hamðismál*, ‘Guðrún and her sons are [...] made representatives of the “heroic ideal” and simultaneously are also vehicles through which the poet can explore the dilemmas of heroic society’.¹²² When the sons move to leave on this doomed mission, they are referred to as *móðgir* ‘heroes’ (B; H), ‘the brave men’ (L).¹²³ This illustrates Heinrich Beck’s claim that *moðr* is one of the ‘spiritual qualities from which heroic behaviour results’, and while translators may differ in how positively they present Guðrún’s vengeful actions and ‘advice’, Guðrún’s sons remain ‘heroes’ only due to their mother’s encouragement, linking Guðrún’s actions with bravery and heroism once again.¹²⁴

Once her sons depart, Guðrún is left alone. While *Hamðismál* leaves Guðrún and turns to her sons, *Guðrúnarhvöt* remains focused on Guðrún as she gives an account of her woes. As Larrington writes, ‘Our last glimpse of Gudrun [...] is of the bereaved mother, sister, and wife lamenting the terrible story which has unfolded in the last eleven poems.’¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ Larrington, *Brothers*, p. 100.

¹²⁰ Clark, p. 189.

¹²¹ Shippey, p. xviii.

¹²² Clark, p. 176.

¹²³ *Guðrúnarhvöt*, st. 7/7, ‘courageous ones’. Bellows, st. 7/4; Hollander, st. 7/4; Larrington (2014), st. 7/4.

¹²⁴ Heinrich Beck, ‘Heroic Lay and Heroic Language’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 60/2 (1988), 137–46 (p. 138).

¹²⁵ Larrington (2014), nt. to st. 21, p. 313.

Even as her life is marked by grief, however, Guðrún retains her ‘fierce’ spirit, as is evident from the penultimate stanza of *Guðrúnarhvöt*:

*megi brenna brjóst
bølvafullt eldr,
... um hjarta
þiðni sorgir.*¹²⁶

While Bellows and Orchard translate *bølvafullt* as ‘grief-filled’, Hollander’s choice of ‘hate-filled’ contrasts with ‘full of wrongs’ (L), leaving us to wonder whether these are ‘wrongs’ done to Guðrún or those that she herself has committed, causing ‘hate’ towards herself.¹²⁷

These alternative views of Guðrún—as a figure who either suffers grief or who is full of ‘fierce’ emotion—stem from the ambiguity of *bølva*, in *bølvafullt*, which has various possible renderings (e.g., ‘baleful’, ‘accursed’, ‘full of grief’), as well as being related to a name for Óðinn (*bøl-verkr*, meaning ‘evil-doer’).¹²⁸ In these final lines, Guðrún is a figure of pity and guilt; just as she is a tired, ageing heroic figure, she is also a guilt-ridden woman, now seeing and regretting her monstrous ways—or rather, these are the options available to us in the translations. Our assessment is shadowed by the preceding stanzas, however, for while *Guðrúnarhvöt* ends with Guðrún’s grief-filled lament, akin to when we met her in *Guðrúnarkviða I*, just moments before *hlæjandi Guðrún / hvarf til skemmu*.¹²⁹ This Guðrún is not grief-filled, but formidable, as is particularly emphasised in Dronke’s version. Whilst most translators render *hlæjandi* as ‘laughing’, Dronke chooses ‘exulting’, which foregrounds Guðrún as a heroic figure more clearly, assuming we follow Winterbourne’s argument:

The inescapability of fate [...] is that against which acts of bravery are set: the outcome of a battle, the moment of death, are fated to occur when they do occur. Yet the heart of the warrior remains

¹²⁶ *Guðrúnarhvöt*, st. 20/5-8, ‘May fire burn the breast accursed/full of grief, may [word missing] sorrows melt about the heart’. The ellipsis is part of the Íslenzk fornrit edition, denoting that the line is too short and seems to be missing something, perhaps *þrungit* ‘thronging’ or *þungar* ‘heavy’, nt. 20, p. 406. Dronke also suggests *þungar*, st. 21/7, p. 150.

¹²⁷ *Guðrúnarhvöt*: Bellows, st. 21/3; Orchard, st. 20/3; Hollander, st. 22/3; Larrington, st. 21/3.

¹²⁸ La Farge and Tucker, p. 33.

¹²⁹ *Guðrúnarhvöt*, st. 7/1-2, ‘Laughing, Guðrún turned to the storehouse’.

independent of fate, and his bravery enables him to face death rejoicing in the fame that is certain to survive him.¹³⁰

We are left to wonder whether Guðrún is ‘rejoicing’, or ‘exulting’, in her inevitable fame, or laughing at the doomed Old Norse heroic irony of her situation.

Despite general agreement between translators, this laughing scene can be easily misread today without awareness of when, exactly, figures laugh in Old Norse literature; it may seem that Guðrún has gone mad, with the evil laugh of one ‘turned to the dark-side’. In Old Norse literature, however, characters rarely laugh, and when they do, it tends to be in scorn, either of their own situation or someone else’s, rather than at something comic.¹³¹ Guðrún’s laughter here therefore places her firmly within the heroic world, as one of those who laughs in scorn at her own—and her sons’—fate. This laughter can be part of the accepted revenge sequence, “laughing” in anticipation of revenge, “crying” in grief, for whetting and lamenting are two sides of the same coin.¹³² Yet Guðrún is a woman who must lament *and* whet *and* avenge, and she necessarily emerges in the context of vengeance-discourse as an ambiguous figure. Her laughter is the sign of ‘revenge anticipated’, but it is also a moment in which she reveals herself to be truly one of Gjúki’s children: Guðrún ‘has mastered the Huns as ruthlessly as her brother; like him [Gunnar] she sacrifices her own flesh to the perfection of revenge.’¹³³ When her heart is metaphorically ‘cut’ from her in grief, Guðrún mirrors Högni’s laughter. In killing Atli and their sons, and then encouraging her second lot of sons to pursue doomed vengeance, Guðrún mirrors Gunnar’s unflinching ruthlessness in ensuring the death of Högni, his brother, in order to protect the ‘heroic’ treasure: for Gunnar, it was gold; for Guðrún, it is vengeance. By comparing these

¹³⁰ Winterbourne, p. 119.

¹³¹ See: Brynhildr laughing at Guðrún’s misfortune in *Sigurðarkviða in Skamma*, st. 30/1; Atli laughing as Guðrún proves her innocence, and Herkja’s guilt, in *Guðrúnarkviða III*, st. 10/1; Högni laughing as his heart is cut from him in *Atlakviða*, st. 24/1 and *Atlamál*, st. 64/5; Sigurðr’s killers laughing at Guðrún’s loss in *Hamðismál*, st. 6.

¹³² Clover, p. 158.

¹³³ Dronke, *Poetic Edda: Heroic Poems*, p. 16.

translations, we realise that perhaps Guðrún never ‘metamorphoses’ into a ‘terrifying, even monstrous’ woman after all.¹³⁴ Rather, she has been a ruthless figure all along, only fulfilling the Old Norse tendency to ‘understate’ her emotions,¹³⁵ and waiting for the fated opportunity to ‘show her mettle’, revealing her similarity to her brothers as she displays her heroic heart.

Guðrún’s ambiguity is illustrated in her potential to be seen either as active or passive, a figure of condemnation or awe, a free agent or an agent of fate, righteous or monstrous, guilt ridden or woe weary. In the same way, her final act of laughter emphasises her ambiguity in regard to her emotions, as we witness Old Norse irony at its height. Guðrún’s ambiguity is only so resistant to definition because any expectations that we may have about her—for example, the idea that she should be seen as an innocent, grieving woman—are not always shared by the translators, as each one chooses to mediate and re-create Guðrún in a different light. Bellows and Hollander both tend to depict Guðrún as a fearful, monstrous figure, as is particularly apparent in Bellows’s presentation of vengeance as a desire of Guðrún, and not a duty. For Bellows and Hollander, Guðrún becomes a figure filled with grief and guilt, wearied by her unconventional, eventful life; when she turns to ‘drastic’ vengeance, she appears to be fearful and out of control. For Orchard and Larrington, however, an alternative reading is apparent, as they portray Guðrún, in her life of suffering, as a strong, enduring character, and in Larrington especially, she is a figure with an extreme amount of self-control. In the face of deep grief and immeasurable loss, Guðrún carries on, becoming equal to (or surpassing) her brothers in her heroic temperament and ‘accomplishments’ in Orchard and Larrington, however outlandish this may appear to us.

It is clear that there can be no ‘true’ translation of these poems. Instead of searching for such a translation, this article demonstrates that it is more useful for us to consider how different translations work alongside one another to inform our understanding of Guðrún’s

¹³⁴ See: Acker and Larrington, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

¹³⁵ See: Shippey, p. xviii.

wonderfully ambiguous, multifaceted characterization in the *Poetic Edda*. Indeed, we can expect future translations to contribute yet further to our reading of this fascinating woman, revealing new interpretations for understanding the layers of her motivations and her emotional experience. It is only when we separate these layers and consider them in closer detail, placing them in dialogue with one another, that we begin to understand the abundance of delightful ambiguities that this heroic literature, with its captivating characters, opens up to a translator's creativity.

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First Response

This article focuses on several major translations into English of the Old Norse Poetic Edda, including those by Bellows, Hollander, Larrington, and Orchard, in order to analyse how these translators vary in resolving different ambiguities in the original text. The analysis is centred around the character of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, a central figure in many of the Poetic Edda's heroic poems who is infamous for killing her husband and children as revenge for her husband's slaying of her brothers. Rather than focusing on which translation could be regarded as the 'best' interpretation of Guðrún's character, the author accepts all the translations that they cover as valid literary works in their own regard. The focus is then instead on teasing out the subtle linguistic choices that affect how Guðrún is 'mediated and re-created' by each translator, and the author's analysis demonstrates how small differences in rendering certain phrases contribute to the image of Guðrún either as a bloodthirsty, monstrous woman or as a deeply conflicted, heroic figure. These findings raise questions about how far the cultural milieu in which the translators produced their literary works affected their portrayal of the poems' focal character, particularly given the gendered aspects of Guðrún's vengeance, which is the particular focus of the author's critique. The article concludes by suggesting that common criticisms of ostensibly loose translations can obfuscate the fact that each translation – which, as a text mediated through its own historical context, necessarily constitutes an interpretation of the original work – is itself a vital literary contribution to the discourse surrounding characters like Guðrún.