

**VIKING AND MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA**



## VIKING AND MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA

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# Viking and Medieval Scandinavia

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# The Dialectic of Seduction

## *Óðinn and Völundr*\*

▼ **ABSTRACT** The article compares two myths found in the *Poetic Edda* — Óðinn's quest of the Mead of Poetry and Völundr's captivity and escape — and finds a series of analogies between both narratives: in both cases the protagonist is first tricked or left by a woman and afterwards he himself tricks and leaves a woman. In both cases the hero attempts at reaching his goal by hard work, which does not lead to success and then resorts to trickery, which brings success. Óðinn as well as Völundr undergo (either literal or symbolic) snake metamorphosis and a bird metamorphosis. Both myths end with pregnancy, one literal and one symbolic. This complex analogy is then interpreted via the exploration of the mythological context and by revisitation of similar episodes in other myths. One of the recurrent ideas stressed in the article is the thesis that myths work like Rorschach blots and that we cannot 'solve' them by finding their 'meaning', we should rather study their form so we better understand their ability to evocate a multitude of meanings.

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▼ **KEYWORDS** Óðinn, Odin, Vǫlundr, Velent, Wayland, *Poetic Edda*, *Hávamál*, *Vǫlundarkviða*, myth, mythology, Old Norse myth, Mead of Poetry, journey to Otherworld

In this article I am going to investigate the structural and motivic links between two mythical narratives of seduction and escape — that of Óðinn (*Hávamál* 95–110; *Skáldskaparmál* v–vi) and Vǫlundr (*Vǫlundarkviða*). I want to show that the similarities between the stories go further than it was previously assumed, and that new light can be shed on the analogy of the two narratives if we include one episode usually not counted in — Óðinn's failed attempt at the seduction of *Billings mær*.

Both myths describe first a situation where a woman eludes the protagonist and he is left 'tricked' (in Óðinn's case he never gets her, in Vǫlundr's he loses her). This is followed by an inversed situation where the protagonist (as it were) takes emotional revenge — but on a different woman. Óðinn/Vǫlundr successfully seduces the second woman, sleeps with her, and leaves her crying while he himself escapes from a trap-like or prison-like place. The protagonist's flight from the place is a literal flight — he either turns into a bird or takes on bird's wings.

This similarity suggests that there is a connection between the two stories. Are they two realizations of one background mythic pattern? Or are they independent formations which grew out of a cosmology with specific constraints on the construction of narratives? Does this analogy help us interpret the stories in a new way? I will try to answer some of these questions after the comparison itself.

## The Story of Vǫlundr

Vǫlundr (Velent/Welund/Wieland/Wayland) is a legendary smith known to most (or all) Germanic peoples. We have fragments of his story referenced in the Old English poem *Deor*, in kennings he is referenced in *Beowulf* and *Waldere*, by name he is mentioned in King Alfred's translation of Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae*. We find him mentioned as 'Wieland' in the Latin epic poem *Waltharius* and in the Middle High German romance *Friedrich von Schwaben*. Within Scandinavia we find a variant of his story in *Þiðriks saga af Bern*. However, the most important source for the Old Norse Vǫlundr is the poem *Vǫlundarkviða* (*Vkv*) found in the Codex Regius of *The Poetic Edda*. Outside the textual sources we find two depictions of high probability — one on the Franks Casket and

one on *Andre Stone VIII*. In this text I will use almost solely *Völundarkviða* because the other sources are very fragmentary and do not add much to our knowledge other than the fact that his name and smithing skills were a staple of Germanic legend across northern Europe. The only other complete narrative about *Völundr* beside *Völundarkviða* is *Velents þáttr* in *Þiðriks saga* — the story is clearly of continental origin and follows a different narrative tradition with a different ‘spirit’ even though it retains some of the very old elements which the elliptic *Völundarkviða* leaves out.<sup>1</sup>

However, choosing *Völundarkviða* as the only source for our story means having to deal with a number of ambiguities: ‘The analysis of *Völundarkviða* is made particularly difficult by its elliptical style, which, in places, gives the poem the appearance of having lost individual lines or even whole segments of story’ (Burson 1983, 3).

The story of *Völundr* in *Völundarkviða* is divided into two main parts.<sup>2</sup> In the first part of the story *Völundr* is free and lives with his two brothers in *Úlfdalir*, a northerly place not far away from a sea or lake.<sup>3</sup> One day three swan maidens arrive on wings from the far south and start living with the three brothers (*Vkv* 1–2).<sup>4</sup> They stay with the brothers for nine years, but one day they suddenly fly away (3). Two brothers go on desperate search for them (and we do not hear of them anymore), but *Völundr* stays at home and puts all his energy into work, waiting for his swan wife (*Hervör*)<sup>5</sup> to return, making many gold rings for her (4–5). However, the growing heap of gold rings attracts somebody completely different than his lovely swan maiden — a villainous king, *Níðuðr* (6). The king sends a troop of warriors who capture the sleeping *Völundr* and transport him in shackles to *Níðuðr*’s halls (7–12).

1 And I will use one of the elements at the very end of the analysis.

2 While it is usually assumed that *Völundarkviða* is composed of two narrative parts, not all scholars agree on the delineation of the two parts, e.g. Mizuno suggested a ring-composition with the centre on the moment of beheading of the two sons of *Níðuðr* (2003). Much closer to consensual division is Paul Beekman Taylor (1963) and Anne Burson (1983) who divide the poem into a first part (stanzas 1–5) and a much longer second part (stanzas 6–41), and that is basically the division I kept in my analysis. The first half (according to Taylor’s, Burson’s, and my division) of the story is shorter in number of stanzas, but much longer in story-time (the swan maidens stayed with *Völundr* and his brothers for eight years).

3 According to the *Vkv* prose they were sons of the King of Finns and lived by a lake called *Úlfsjár*, but the prose presents a slightly different version of the story than the poem, for example there is the motif of the bird-garments, which is missing in the poem (Dronke 1997, 286). In the poem itself there is nothing about their Finnish origin, *Völundr* is called ‘*álfa ljóði*’ (of the elf-folk).

4 While the text of the poem gives the agency and initiative to the maidens (‘*Ein nam þeira Egil at verja*’ *Vkv* 2), the accompanying prose shifts it to the brothers.

5 The name of ‘his’ swan maiden is *Hervör Alvítr*, daughter of *Hljóðvér*, according to the prose. The name seems to be a later construction, based partly on an unclear word ‘*alvítr*’, which appears in the poem. Only the other two swan maidens are named explicitly in the poem.

And thus starts the second part of the story, where Vǫlundr is held captive in Níðuðr's kingdom. The king does not want Vǫlundr to be able to escape, so he cuts his hamstrings and Vǫlundr thus cannot walk properly, if at all (17). Níðuðr gives the ring that Vǫlundr made for his swan woman to his daughter Bǫðvildr and takes Vǫlundr's sword for himself. Vǫlundr is forced to make jewellery and weaponry for the king, which he does, but plots his revenge (20). First he lures in the two young sons of the king, decapitates them and makes goblets, gems, and a necklace from their skulls, eyes, and teeth respectively (20–25). Then he seduces the king's daughter Bǫðvildr, who comes to have her ring repaired (26). He drinks with her until she is drunk enough to succumb to his seductions and then sleeps with her (28). Then he suddenly appears to be able to fly (29).<sup>6</sup> He flies to visit the king, laughs in his face, tells him all the things he has done (32–38), and flies away, free as a bird, literally. Níðuðr is devastated and Bǫðvildr is crying, confessing to her father that she could not resist the seduction (41). And here the story ends.

## The Story of Óðinn

Óðinn is the most prominent deity in the extant sources. Similarly to Vǫlundr, he was widely known among the Germanic tribes (Wōden, Wōdan, Wuotan) and if we correctly understand Tacitus's remark on 'Mercurius' ('Deorum maxime Mercurium colunt', *Germania* 9.1)<sup>7</sup> (Fuhrmann 1972, 14) then some kind of early form of this deity was widely popular already in the first century AD. It seems clear that part of the prominence

6 The mystery of Vǫlundr's sudden ability to fly has two usually suggested solutions (Dronke 1997, 265–66). Either his wings are 'magical' or 'technological'. *Vǫlundarkviða* is composed in such a way that it suggests an association of Vǫlundr's final flight with the flight of the three swan maidens from the first half of the poem. Vǫlundr somehow, either through his connection with the swan maidens, or through his Finnish or elvish nature, gains the ability of magical, 'shamanic', flight. He gains his ability not immediately after his supernatural wife leaves him, but only after a long road of hard work, trials, and initiatory wounding. The other possibility is that Vǫlundr constructs his wings using his superior craftsman skills, so he makes a sort of flying machine. This is the version we have in *Þiðriks saga* and here the myth also connects (in an unclear way) with the ancient Greek myth of Dædalus. The association of Vǫlundr with Dædalus became fixed in the later tradition, so e.g. the Labyrinth, 'Domus Dædali' is 'Vǫlundarhús' in Icelandic. To me, the two versions of the wings are not that far apart. Magical or mythical motifs tend to get more concrete and literal representations over time or in certain genres, so for example the supernatural ability to fly can be expressed in a more concrete way as a 'fjaðrhamr' or 'álptrahamr' and this 'feather-form' can be taken even more literally as a kind of clothing that can be then borrowed or lent (e.g. Loki from Freyja), or even stolen and hidden in a chest as happens in the swan maiden stories in folklore. And there is just a little step from a literally understood feather-garment which allows one to fly to a mechanical 'flying machine'.

7 'As for gods, Mercury is the one they worship most' (trans. Rives 1999, 80).

of Óðinn in our Old Norse sources is a bias created by the fact that he was a god of poets, warriors, and chieftains, a social stratum that produced a large part of the poems and treatises we have now at our disposal. It is no surprise that Óðinn plays an important part in many myths. While Völundr is a single-myth-character, Óðinn is a multi-myth-character. We will here concern ourselves with just one myth, as preserved in *Hávamál* (*Hvm*) 96–110 and expanded with the details of Snorri's prosaic version in *Skáldskaparmál* vi. I here follow the analysis of John McKinnell, who demonstrated convincingly that this section of *Hávamál* makes up a thematic and stylistic unity: '*Hávamál* B has a single theme — sexual treachery — and is neatly structured to introduce two narrative episodes about named individuals, each consisting in six narrative stanzas and one summarizing stanza' (2014a, 96). McKinnell then shows how specialized use of words, framing stanzas, and overall symmetry point to the fact that *Hávamál* B should be viewed as a self-standing poem that was at some point included in *Hávamál* based on the fact that it is also Óðinn's speech (the story is narrated in *ich-form*).

The poem is structured into two halves. In the first half Óðinn is hiding among the reeds waiting for his love interest (*Hvm* 96), the daughter of Billingr. He sees her sleeping in her bed, shining like the sun, nothing seems to him more precious than her (97). They speak and she says he should come later, in the evening, because nobody should witness their lovemaking (98). But when he comes later, the house is surrounded with guards (100). Óðinn is frustrated but waits the rest of the night. He comes back just before dawn, everybody in the house is asleep. He finds a bitch tethered to the bed of the daughter of Billingr (101). He then reflects on the fact that he has been tricked by the girl and shows reluctant admiration for her shrewdness (102).

The second part of the poem tells very allusively the famous story of how Óðinn seduced Gunnlōð and stole the Precious Mead from the giants. He travelled to the hall of the ancient giant Suttungr, speaks there many clever words (104) and Gunnlōð brings him the Precious Mead (105). He escapes narrowly from the hall or cave by digging through the rock (106) and proclaims that without the help of Gunnlōð he would surely not have been able to get home (108). He slept with her, used her, and left her with no compensation for her wholehearted love (105). Óðinn brings Óðrærir (i.e. the Mead) up to the realm of men and gods (107). The next day the giants come to ask what happened with Bolverkr (Óðinn's alias) and Óðinn swears a false oath (presumably swearing that he knows nothing of the matter). Thus, Suttungr is tricked and Gunnlōð is left crying (110).

The well-known story of the theft of the Mead is told in *Hávamál* 104–110 in a very fragmentary and allusive way, and probably not even chronologically. The listeners were expected to fill in the well-known chronology and details from their common knowledge, which is why we

will use Snorri to fill in some of the details. Some of Snorri's details are slightly in variance with what the poem seems to describe, but we do not have to resolve the differences.

Snorri (*Skáldskaparmál* i in Faulkes 1998, 4–5) adds an episode preceding the meeting with Gunnlǫð. Óðinn first tries to get the Mead 'legally', by doing the work of nine slaves for the whole summer. However, this hard work does not get him the results. So, he resorts to a 'vél' (trick). He bores a tunnel into the side of the mountain, turns into a snake, and slithers his way inside the cave, narrowly escaping the treacherous attack of the giant Baugi, who up until then assisted him with the boring. There he seduces Gunnlǫð who promises him three gulps of the Mead for three nights of lovemaking. Óðinn spends three nights with her and with the three gulps drinks all the Mead, turns into a bird and flies away. Suttungr pursues him, but Óðinn escapes. In Ásgarðr Óðinn spews or vomits the Mead into three vessels: a cauldron and two vats.

## The Scholarly Discussion

The scholarly tradition analysing the myth of Vǫlundr is rich and varied dating back at least to the nineteenth century. It would be futile to try to enumerate here a complete bibliography on the topic (an exhaustive bibliography of more than a hundred entries, and a scrupulous *Forschungsgeschichte* can be found in von See and others 2019), I will therefore mention only research that informed my understanding in a significant way. Here belongs one of the early research articles on the topic, by Sophus Bugge — a detailed work speculating on the origins of the myth, overviewing sources, and bringing in context across the European literary landscape and stating for the first time many of the observations repeated in later scholarship (1897). The focus on English tradition, including folklore, is characteristic for a number of other articles, e.g. by Ellis Davidson (1958), Bradley (1990), or Christie (1969). A search for the historical roots and origin of the myth is represented by Osborn (2019). The Vǫlundr myth is one of the few Old Norse and Germanic myths accompanied by attested (or contested) visual representations, so it is no surprise we find scholars commenting on and assessing the pictorial representations — e.g. Kopár (2015), who explores the connection of the Vǫlundr and Sigurðr myth or Souers (1943), focusing on one of the few certain depictions, the Wayland on the Franks Casket. The study of visual art is also a major element in the recently published monograph on Wieland, an original interdisciplinary endeavour connecting the myth not only to circumpolar shamanism but also to the Greek and Near Eastern mythological traditions (Vierck 2021). A similar vein is followed by Lotte Motz in her daring comparative journey across the Buriat, Chukchee, Ainu, Samoyed, Inuit,

and Mongolian story analogues into the European area and south to Canaan, with much grander cosmological interpretations than is otherwise usual in scholarship (1986). Quite ingenious is also Richard Dieterle's approach, who reads the whole poem as a metallurgical allegory (1987). Two important aspects — the connection to *álfar* and the issue of Völundr's emotionality — was covered in an article by Ármann Jakobsson (2006).

Most useful for my analysis were the scholarly works which focused closely on the narrative itself and its inner structuring and resonances. Here belongs Paul Beekman Taylor's analysis of the repeated elements in the poem, its inner 'rhymes', which is followed by a short nature-mythological interpretation (1963). Another structural analysis of the narrative comes from Anne Burson, who goes into even deeper detail and uses the Proppian and Lévi-Straussian concepts (1983). Tomoaki Mizuno, mentioned already in the footnote above, offered a reading of the poem conceptualized as a ring composition (2003). Close perceptive reading of the text is the hallmark of the John McKinnell's article on Völundr, in which he explores the various facets of the symbolism (e.g. eyes, sword, ring), brings in the wider cultural context, and sketches psychological profiles of the protagonists (2002). Last but not the least, Kaaren Grimstad's contribution neatly summarizes the main themes and presents a useful overview of the Völundr myth in its complexity (1983).

When it comes to the scholarly debate on the mythology connected to Óðinn, his seductions, and the quest for the Mead of Poetry, the tradition is even more robust. Fortunately, as in the case of *Völundarkviða*, the *Hávamál* scholarship is exhaustively covered in von See and others (2019) and (in much less detail) in Dronke's edition (2011). A comprehensive analysis of Óðinn's initiatory myths can be found in Jens Peter Schjødt's monograph, which remains a basis for all later discussions on the topic (2008).

When it comes to in-depth reading of the Billing's *mær* episode in *Hávamál*, I took many notes from John Lindow's very informative article (2000). The obscure passage in *Hávamál* of Óðinn's bird transformation is discussed in detail by Ursula Dronke (1984). On the other hand the section concerning Óðinn's travel to Gunnlōð is analysed and interpreted in an original way by Svava Jakobsdóttir, who is ready to follow wider comparative material (2015). While I subscribe to her creative approach to the topic, I will remain much 'closer to home' in my interpretation. A number of scholars also tend to read the *Billings mær* and Gunnlōð's episodes as one meaningful whole, not only the already mentioned John McKinnell (2014a), but also Dorian Knight (2013), who takes this structural unity as a basis of nature-mythological interpretation.



## The 'Dialectic' of Seduction

Let us return to the two narratives and first notice their overall structure. The structure is quite similar, but this similarity is hidden behind a façade of difference, because the atmosphere and characters of the stories are different, and the plot is driven by different motivations.

Óðinn is light-spirited and masterful, and even when he is outsmarted by *Billings mæ*r or attacked by Baugi, he takes it in a sportsman-like manner and goes on without blinking (even with a slight appreciation for those who were clever enough to trick him). He is never really caught or submitted to harm,<sup>8</sup> and he travels to the Otherworld on his own free will.

Völundr, in contrast to Óðinn, is brooding, vulnerable, and vengeful (his emotional instability was noticed by scholars) (Ármann Jakobsson 2006). He takes the departure of his beloved with heavy heart. He is harmed and crushed in many ways: his wife leaves him, his treasure is taken, his freedom too, and he is crippled. His travel to the Otherworld is involuntary.<sup>9</sup>

However, behind these surface differences, there is analogy in structure: both poems are divided into two parts, each associated with one woman:

	<i>Völundarkviða</i>	<i>Hávamál B</i>
Part I.	'Hlǫðvés mær' (Hervǫr)	'Billings mær'
Part II.	'Níðaðar mær' (Bǫðvildr)	'Suttungs mær' (Gunnlǫð)

In both cases the two parts are connected through various means: in *Hávamál* the connection is established by the fact that the two episodes follow each other, both deal with the 'treacherousness' of men and women, and both are of the exact same length (eight stanzas) (McKinnell 2014a, 99) and both have the same protagonist. Aside from that there is a pair of

8 If there is any 'harm' done to him, it is extremely subtle, sublimated into two motifs — a) the hard work of nine slaves, b) the losing of part of the Mead 'through the backside', which is maybe a variant of initiatory wound to the bird's tail-feathers attested from folklore and myth (Svava Jakobsdóttir 2015), or from a passage in *Hervarar saga* where Óðinn also turns into a bird, King Heiðrekr attacks him with a sword, but cuts just the tips of his tail feathers.

9 In the case of *Völundarkviða* the question of what should be perceived as 'Otherworld' is open to debate. Úlfdalir, the place of Völundr's habitation, seems to be located on a geographical periphery. The association of Völundr with the *álfar* and Finnar shows his otherworldly character. However, from a narrative standpoint, the starting location is Úlfdalir, that is 'Home', and Völundr's capture and transport brings him to the structurally oppositional space — the Otherworld. There he is captured and from there he escapes.



verses which connect the sections by stressing their analogy yet antithesis — both *Billings mæ*r and Gunnlǫð are described as ‘in góða kona’:<sup>10</sup>

St. 101.4 –6	‘grey eitt ek þá fann <b>innar góðu konu</b> bundit beðjum á.’	‘A bitch I found then tied on the bed of <b>that good woman</b> .’
St. 108.4 –6	‘ef ek Gunnlaðar né nyttak, <b>innar góðu konu</b> , þeirar er lǫgðumk arm yfir.’ ( <i>Eddukvæði</i> in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I, 342, 344; my emphasis)	‘if I had not used Gunnlod, <b>that good woman</b> , and put my arms around her.’ ( <i>The Poetic Edda</i> in Larrington 2014, 26, 27; my emphasis)

While both expressions are the same, their meanings are contrasting. In the case of *Billings mæ*r there is a possible element of irony or sarcasm in the words (mixed with ‘ungrudging respect and admiration’ (Larrington 1993, 48)), while in the case of Gunnlǫð the words are meant earnestly and are perhaps mixed with a tint of regret and sadness.<sup>11</sup>

In *Vǫlundarkviða* the connection is clear from the very fact that the two sections are the two (uneven) halves of the same poem, with the same protagonist at the centre. Additional connecting points are the fact that at the end of each section there is a scene of somebody flying away using wings (swan maidens and Vǫlundr respectively). Another connecting element is the ring that Vǫlundr made for his swan maiden. The arm-ring is ‘the essential binding link between the two segments.’<sup>12</sup> This ring is made for Hervǫr (his swan wife who left him) but is given to Bǫðvildr (the daughter of his captor), which associates the two women symbolically.<sup>13</sup>

However, the analogy of the two parts of *Vǫlundarkviða* and *Hávamál* B goes further than just two interactions with two women — it is the structure of

<sup>10</sup> All quotations from eddic poems take their text from Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014 and all the translations are from Larrington 2014.

<sup>11</sup> It is extremely difficult or outright impossible to detect irony or similar tonal features of premodern texts, so these observations must remain mere suggestions. Whatever the intended tone and emotion is (nevertheless scholars really like to detect this or that emotion there, cf. McKinnell 2014a or Larrington 1993), the very negative experience of finding a dog bound to the bed strongly contrasts with the positive evaluation of the one who prepared such a surprise. Nevertheless, it is also possible to read the ‘good’ in a non-ironic way.

<sup>12</sup> ‘In addition, the ring functions as a sexual symbol which links the women in the two halves of the poem through their relationships with Vǫlund’, Burson 1983, 3.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Bodvild is associated with the swan maiden when Volund first sees her wearing the ring he had fashioned for his wife’, Taylor 1963, 230.

- I a first failed attempt at a sexual encounter or a relationship, which ends up with the hero being deceived, rejected, and/or abandoned by the desired partner, followed by
- II a second attempt, which is in both narratives an **inversion or antithesis** of the first one: the hero is this time without any lingering naïveté, he is a clever, unscrupulous seducer, who does ‘what has to be done’; he seduces the innocent, well-meaning ‘good woman’, sleeps with her and immediately afterwards abandons her by flying away using bird’s wings; she is left behind crying.

The encounter with the first woman leaves the protagonist ‘defeated’, whether it was just an attempt at a seduction (in Óðinn’s case) or a sudden end of a relationship as in Völundr’s case:

So far, the swan bride appears to have brought nothing but disaster to the hero. Having initiated the relationship and then ended it for reasons which remain inscrutable, she abandons him without him having offended any tabu, denudes him of the brothers who might have defended him, and leaves him with a seemingly reasonable but empty confidence that she will return. (McKinnell 2014b, 237)

In the encounter with the second woman the roles are reversed, it is the woman, who is ‘defeated’, so the two story-halves make up a kind of symmetry in both narratives. This symmetry is emphasized in *Hávamál* through formal means (same length of both passages, repeating the same formula ‘innar góðu konu’). In *Völundarkviða* the symmetry is emphasized via a story motif of flying away in a bird form — first time around it is the woman, second time around it is the man. Anne Burson notices this pattern in *Völundarkviða* and frames it as the roles of ‘captor’ and ‘captive’, which reverse in the second part of the story.<sup>14</sup>

What we find in both cases is a kind of thesis–antithesis progression, but not a complete dialectic, because there is no explicit synthesis.<sup>15</sup> The balanced ideal is not reached, only ‘present in the form of absence’, that is it is the full and lasting relationship that Völundr wishes to have with Hervör or that Gunnlǫð wishes to have with Óðinn, but they will never attain it.

The progression shows rather a tragedy of not being able to reach a balance by behaving in a compensatory way. Both Óðinn and Völundr

<sup>14</sup> ‘The general pattern followed is that of the captor’s arrival at an unfamiliar place near a body of water. This is followed by the captive’s arrival at the same place and his or her subsequent loss of mobility’, Burson 1983, 5. The role of captive is played first by the swan maidens, second by Völundr. Burson also notices that Niðuðr’s children become captives of Völundr in a subsegment of the second segment. However, the main structure is twofold: ‘Both Völund and the swan maidens leave their grieving captors behind, and in both instances the captors’ response is passivity’, Burson 1983, 6.

<sup>15</sup> The synthesis will be suggested at the end of the article.

seem trusting, hopeful, and naïve in the first episode, too trusting. Their trust is betrayed and they consequently become cynical and utilitarian, like a person who does not want to get emotionally hurt ever again. However, I would not like to psychologize the myth too much, it is enough to notice the compensatory pattern in the narratives. Summarized:

version	The Woman I tricks the Hero
inversion	The Hero tricks the Woman II

Another common element appears in both narratives and that is the figure of the jealous, protective father of the second woman. He is the ‘master of the mountain’, either keeping the hero imprisoned, while forcing him to produce treasure (jewels and weapons) or keeping the coveted treasure (the Mead). In both cases the Father-Keeper figure is clearly characterized as possessive and controlling. So we can update our list of characters and their common features:

Hero	‘Loser’ in the encounter with Woman I. ‘Winner’ in the encounter with Woman II, defeats the Keeper and flies away from Keeper’s hall using bird’s wings.	Óðinn (Bölværkr)	Völundr
Woman I	Tricks or abandons the Hero.	Billingsr’s maiden	Swan maiden
Woman II	Is used and tricked by the Hero. Father of the Woman II.	Gunnlōð	Bǫðvildr
Keeper	Hoarder of treasure. Master of the Hall from which the Hero must escape.	Níðuðr	Suttungr

## Part II: Closer Look

The second part of *Völundarkviða* is longer than the first part and contains more motifs and narrative elements. It is worth closer comparison with the quest for the Precious Mead using not only the allusive and unclear text of the second part of *Hávamál B*, but also Snorri’s prosaic description of the same. Let’s overview the similarities:

1) Both Óðinn (calling himself Bolverkr) and Völundr are **consumed by hard work** in a period immediately preceding their travel into the Keeper's hall:

BOLVERKR'S HARD WORK (SKÁLDISK VI)	VÖLUNDR'S HARD WORK (VKV 5.1–6 AND 7.5–8)
<p>‘Bolverkr vann um sumarit <b>níu mannsverk</b> fyrir Bauga.’</p> <p>‘Bolverk did the <b>work of nine men</b> for Baugi during the summer.’</p>	<p>‘Enn einn Völundr sat í Ulfdølom, hann sló gull rautt við gimfastan, lúði hann alla lindbauga vel; [...] sá þeir á bast bauga dregna, <b>síau hundruð</b> allra, er sá seggr átti.’</p> <p>‘But Volund sat alone in Wolfdales. He struck red gold about a firm-set gem he closed up all the serpent-rings well; [...] they saw on the bast-rope rings threaded, <b>seven hundred</b> in all, which the warrior owned.’</p>

2) Both Óðinn and Völundr need to resort to **trickery** to get the better of the Keeper. While Snorri is very explicit about that, in *Völundarkviða* the ‘strategems’ (which really is what Völundr in the end does) are implied — as Ursula Dronke explains in her commentary: ‘the poet plays with the double senses in both words. *Vél* is “trickery”, “deception”, and also “subtle (material) device”. Völundr works on his schemes of revenge all the time that he is fashioning his ingenious treasures’ (1997, 315).

BOLVERKR'S MACHINATIONS: VÉL (SKÁLDISK VI)	VÖLUNDR'S MACHINATIONS: VÉL (VKV 20.1–4)
<p>‘Þá mælti Bolverkr til Bauga, at þeir skyldu freista <b>véla</b> nökkurra, ef þeir megí ná miðinum.’</p> <p>‘Then Bolverk told Baugi that they would have to try some <b>strategems</b> to see if they could get hold of the mead.’</p>	<p>‘Sat hann, né hann svað, á valt oc hann sló hamri; <b>vél</b> gorði hann heldr hvatt Níðaði.’</p> <p>‘He sat, nor did he sleep, ceaselessly he struck with his hammer, <b>subtle things</b> he shaped quite quickly for Nidud.’</p>

3) Both Óðinn and Völundr undergo a **snake metamorphosis**. While in Óðinn's case the transformation into a snake is literal (at least according to the literal-minded Snorri), in the case of Völundr the transformation is symbolic: when he is brought to Níðuðr his eyes look like snake's eyes and immediately after this characterization his sinews are cut, so he — as it were — loses his legs, becoming even more like a snake:<sup>16</sup>

BOLVERKR'S SNAKE FORM (SKÁLDISK VI)	VÖLUNDR'S SNAKE FORM (VKV 17.5–10)
'Þá brást Bolverkr í <b>ormslíki</b> ok skreið inn í nafarsraufina.'	'ámun ero augo <b>ormi</b> þeim inom frána; <b>sníðit ér hann sina magni</b> ok setið hann síðan í sævar stöð!'
'Then Bolverk turned himself into the <b>form of a snake</b> and crawled into the auger-hole.'	'his eyes are like those of a shining serpent. Cut from him the might of his sinews and afterwards put him in Sævarstad!'

4) Both in the case of Óðinn and Völundr **drunkenness** plays an important role in the scene just before the transformation into a bird.<sup>17</sup> The difference is that while in the case of Óðinn it is primarily him who is heavily drunk, while Woman II (Gunnlōð) is serving, in the case of Völundr it is primarily Woman II (Bǫðvildr) who is heavily drunk, while Völundr is serving. In any case drunkenness precedes the feathering:

16 'His [i.e. Völundr's JK] connection with serpents has never been explained: in *Thiðriks Saga* (139, p. 137) he gives Widia a helmet with "the serpent called Slangi" on it; and in a French folktale, *Pieds d'Or*, clearly based on the story of Weland, the smith in captivity is visited by captor's daughter, the Queen of the Vipers, in serpent form. There is thus probably some special significance in the opening line of Deor: Weland among serpents (?*be wurman*) endured hardships'. Ellis Davidson 1958, 152.

17 Henning Kure brought my attention to the gold symbolism in this scene: 'Völundr drinks with Bǫðvildr in his gold-smithy — Óðinn drinks with Gunnlōð on a throne of gold. Both father-keepers leave treasure-guarding (ring, mead) to their "seduce-able" daughters' (personal communication).

THE DRUNKENNESS (HVM 14.1–3; SKÁLDISK VI)	THE DRUNKENNESS (VKV 28.1–4)
<p>‘Qlr ec varð, varð ofrqlvi at ins fróða Fjalars.’ ‘Fór Bqlverkr þar til, sem Gunnlqð var, ok lá hjá henni þrjár nætr, ok þá lofaði hon honum at drekka af miðinum þrjá drykki.’</p> <p>‘Drunk I was, I was more than drunk at wise Fjalarr’s.’ ‘Bolverk went to where Gunnlod was and lay with her for three nights and then she let him drink three draughts of the mead.’</p>	<p>‘Bar hann hana bióri, þviat hann betr kunni svá at hon í sessi um sofnaði.’</p> <p>‘He overcame her with beer, because he was cleverer, so that on the couch she fell asleep.’</p>

5) Both Óðinn and Vqlundr undergo a **bird metamorphosis** immediately after sleeping with the Woman II. They use their bird form to escape the place which either is their prison (in Vqlundr’s case) or would soon turn into a trap if they lingered longer (in Óðinn’s case). While in Óðinn’s case the transformation is explicit, in Vqlundr’s case we have the two possibilities discussed above (i.e. either magical or technological bird’s wings):<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Notice how unclear *Vqlundarkviða* is when it comes to the description — we have just the information about Vqlundr in the air and two semantically unclear expressions, one possibly alluding to the webbed feet of aquatic birds (‘fit’, ‘fitjar’) and the other to a bird’s tail (‘vél’). The part with the *vél* is highly dubious, because we have to emend the text to have it there. The manuscript has ‘Vel ec qvaþ Volundr’ (29.1) which is itself not very clear (Well I said Vqlundr?). This could be emended to ‘vél á ek, kvað Vqlundr’ (I’ve got a tail, said Vqlundr) which would make both the verse semantically clear and would be contextually close to the following half-line ‘verða ek á fitjum’ (may I be on those webbed feet).

BÖLVERKR'S BIRD FORM (HVM 13.4–6; SKÁLDSK VI)	VÖLUNDR'S BIRD FORM (VKV 29.1–6)
‘Þess <b>fugls fjoðrum</b> ek fjoðraðr vark í garði Gunnlaðar.’ <sup>19</sup> ‘Þá brást hann í <b>arnarham</b> ok flaug sem ákafast.’	“‘Vel ec”, qvað Völundr, “verða ec á <b>fitiom</b> , þeim er mik Níðaðar námo reccar”. Hlæiandi Völundr <b>hófz at lopti</b> .’
‘with this bird’s feathers I was fettered in the court of Gunnlod.’ ‘Then he turned himself into the <b>form of an eagle</b> and flew as hard as he could.’	“‘Good for me”, said Volund, “if I were on my <b>webbed feet</b> , of which Nidud’s warriors deprived me!” Laughing, Volund <b>rose into the air</b> .’

6) Both Óðinn and Völundr leave behind **grieving and crying** Woman II. They slept with the protagonist willingly, believing in their promises and sweet talk. They are crying because they are left behind by the seducer and are ashamed in front of their fathers — in Gunnlōð’s case because she failed at her task of guarding the Mead, in Bōðvildr’s case because she is now pregnant with the child of an escaped prisoner:<sup>20</sup>

GUNNLÖÐ IS SAD (HVM 110.4–6)	BÖÐVILDR IS SAD (VKV 29.5–10)
‘Suttung svikinn hann lét sumbli frá ok <b>grœtta Gunnlōð</b> .’	‘Hlæiandi Völundr hófz at lopti, <b>grátandi Bōðvildr</b> gecc ór eyio; tregði for friðils oc fjoður reiði.’
‘He left Suttung defrauded of the drink and made Gunnlōð weep.’	‘Laughing, Volund rose into the air; weeping, Bodvild went from the island, she grieved for her lover’s departure and her father’s fury.’

19 It is important to note two things: first, the cited stanza is from a different section of the Hávamál poem and the myth is there used most probably just as a prototypical example of extreme drunkenness, the feathers can be meant less literally and more metaphorically, but these details are difficult to ascertain. Second, in all three cited sections, the type of bird is different: a heron, an eagle, a swan.

20 The situation here is more complicated. The poem itself seems to suggest genuine connection between Bōðvildr and Völundr, at least from Bōðvildr’s side. From Völundr’s side there is clearly protectiveness of Bōðvildr and the child — he warns Níðuðr not to harm Bōðvildr or the child (VKV 33). This tendency is transformed into full blown romance with a happy ending in *Þiðriks saga*, but in *Völundarkviða* the main ingredient still seems to be tragedy and revenge.

7) In both cases the Keeper (Níðuðr, Suttungr) is left **tricked and crushed**:

SUTTUNGR IS DEFEATED ( <i>HVM</i> 110.4–5)	NÍÐUÐR IS DEFEATED ( <i>VKV</i> 38)
‘ <b>Suttung svikinn</b> hann lét sumbli frá.’ ‘He left Suttung defrauded of the drink.’	‘Hlæiandi Vølundr hófz at lopti, enn <b>ókátr Níðuðr</b> sat þá eptir.’ ‘Laughing, Volund rose in the air, and Nidud sadly sat there behind.’

Thus far it has become clear that both narratives share a rather specific list of features including four characters playing analogous roles and seven story elements listed above plus one (the fact that the experience with the Woman I is a failure).

Only one of those narrative elements is relatively unspecific and universal — number 7, the final triumph over the antagonist who has vaguely father-like or father-in-law-like features. That is something we find quite commonly in many Old Norse myths (Þórr defeating Geirrøðr, Hymir, etc., Óðinn defeating Vafþrúðnir, the Æsir defeating Þjazi, etc.), the hero at the very end usually triumphs over ‘the old giant’ (cf. Ármann Jakobsson 2008; Clunies Ross 1981).

However, the rest of the elements and their order is specific enough to suggest this is definitely not a coincidental similarity. These two myths are related.

## Interpretation

And now we arrive at a turning point. Until now we were just comparing story elements and noticing structural similarities hidden behind apparent dissimilarities, which was a combination of a bit of philology and bit of hermeneutics. The logical next step entails answering the question: What does this common structure mean? I would not like to follow the footsteps of Paul Beekman Taylor who in his classical paper on *Völundarkviða* first provided an inspired analysis of the various analogies and structural rhymes in the poem, but then ended up reducing the poem to a nature-mythological allegory about light and life defeating the dark winter (1963, 234).

There are many possible interpretive pathways to be explored, some of these connected to ‘How it came to be?’ and some to ‘What does it mean?’ types of questions: Are these two myths two descendants of



one parent myth? Or is the heroic legend of Vǫlundr derived from the myth of Óðinn? Or vice versa? Or is there an implicit structure for some Odinic myths that attract certain motifs in certain order? Or can the similarity be explained by cultural influence and/or shared heritage with other cultures? Or is the Old Norse mythematic inventory for creating myths so limited and the narrative constraints ('mythotactic' as an analogy to phonotactic) so narrow that the probability of arriving at very similar stories is higher than we would expect? And what kind of ideas do these myths express? Are they so similar because they express a similar idea, or give form to a similar collective experience? Is there a social, ritual, or performance-related background to the common structure? Etc.

What all these possible questions (and other questions that readers may have in mind) have in common, is that they are by necessity products of theory (i.e. various theoretical approaches) and the answers are also dependent on theory. There is no space in this article to attempt to answer all these questions and even if there were, most of them cannot be ever answered with anything close to certainty. Instead, in the next couple of sections I will focus on two layers of analysis:

- 1 Internal relationship and structure of the common motifs
- 2 Parallels within the corpus of extant Old Norse myths

Why choose these two layers? These layers are according to my understanding simply the only meaningful way to read myths — the same way as when exploring an unknown text in an only partially understood language. We get a picture of a meaning of a previously unknown word by its repeated usage in various contexts within given language and the same counts for mythemes. We can then focus the general understanding by looking closely at the specific context and structure of the given mythical narrative and try to spot its rhythm and internal organization.

Unfortunately there is a limit to this analogizing from language to mythology — in the end mythemes are not words, narratives are not sentences, they are just similar in certain respects. The similarity resides in the fact that we need to know the whole (*langue*) to understand a part (*parole*). One of the main differences lies in the fact that while words have rather easily summarizable meanings, mythemes do not. That is why even when we get an informed impression of what e.g. 'turning into a bird' in Old Norse mythology connotes, we cannot ever find out what it 'means'. So, to sum up my general observation in the form of a thesis, I claim that:

Mythemes are like words that have only connotations and no denotation.

One of the most important functions of myths in my view is their applicability, that is their ability to reflect many meanings — from cosmological, societal, personal, psychological, legal, ritual, to practical and many others

(Bynum 1978). If mythemes had one clear denotation, the applicability of myths would collapse into just one application (that is their 'true meaning') and they would lose their polyvalent reflective character and become mere allegories.

## The Internal Structure

Thus far we have established these elements of the common pattern:

(first part — Woman I)

- o rejection by Woman I

(second part — Woman II)

- 1 hard work with no results
- 2 resorting to stratagems
- 3 snake transformation
- 4 drunkenness
- 5 bird transformation
- 6 rejection of Woman II
- 7 triumph over the Keeper

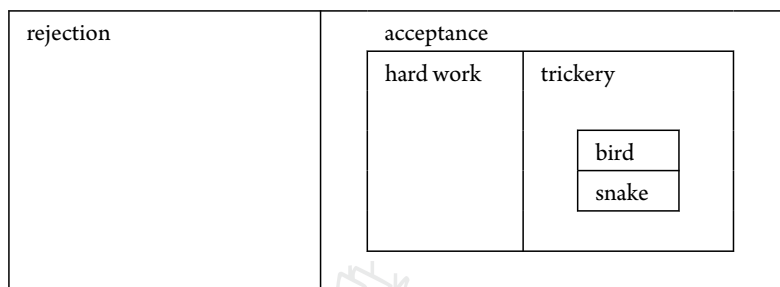
Surprisingly, the elements (with the exception of 4 and 7) seem to form oppositional pairs:

**rejection** by a woman vs. **acceptance** by a woman

**hard work** vs. **trickery**

**snake** vs. **bird**

It seems also that these pairs are nested in a peculiar way:



The initial rejection by the Woman I is complemented by the following acceptance by Woman II. The next pair of oppositions is contained within the acceptance-section. The hero tries first the way of the hard work, but with no success, then he turns to tricks and stratagems and these

are successful. The last pair of oppositions is contained within the trickery-section as the hero, after finishing his unsuccessful hard work, comes into the enemy's halls as a snake and leaves as a bird.

The first members of the pairs of oppositions have the common feature of being failures, while the second members are successes: rejection and hard work lead nowhere, while acceptance and trickery are successes. In the case of Völundr even the last pair is aligned with this, as his snake 'form' (= mutilation) is clearly a misfortune, while his bird form is presented as triumphant.

## Interpreting the Structure and the Motifs

We could read this structure as a kind of 'lesson': success is possible only after an initial failure. Failure being the necessary experience on which the following success can be built. However there is always a kind of tragic tone to the following success as the hero (at least in the case of Völundr) is not innocent and trusting anymore and he himself has to behave in a scheming and strategic way and in this process he just perpetuates the same injustice or sadness that has been done to him.<sup>21</sup>

The 'lesson' of the second pair of oppositions seems to be that the goal of the initiatory process of either attaining the numinous boon or gaining freedom and magical flight, cannot be reached by straightforward means of hard work or honest dealing. It has to be trickery and thievery. Prometheus must steal the fire, Viśnu must trick the cosmos-owning Asura-king into a twisted deal to win the Three Worlds, Gefjon must trick King Gylfi to get the island of Zealand. The archetypal Owners and Jailers cannot be reasoned with, they will not ever give their possession willingly through a straight deal. The cosmogonic or initiatory process is based on a fundamental trick, on a founding mischief.

The 'lesson' of the last pair of oppositions must be somehow connected to the symbolism of the two animals. This opposition is fundamental to the Old Norse cosmos. We find it in the description of the cosmic tree Yggdrasill in *Grímnismál*:

32. 'Ratatoskr heitir íkorni, er renna  
skal at aski Yggdrasils; arnar orð  
hann skal ofan bera ok segja  
Niðhöggvi niðr.'



'Ratatosk is the squirrel's name,  
who must scurry about on  
Yggdrasill's ash; the eagle's  
utterance he must bring from  
above and tell to Nidhogg below.'

<sup>21</sup> In the case of Völundr and his swan wife the motivation for her leaving him could be based on the migratory pattern of the birds (Dronke 1997, 285).

The opposition reappears immediately after the re-establishment of the cosmos after Ragnarøk, according to *Völuspá*:

- |        |   |   |
|--------|---|---|
| 32.5–8 | ‘falla forsar flýgr orrn yfir sá er á fjalli fiska veiðir.’ | ‘the waterfalls plunge, an eagle soars above them, over the mountain hunting fish.’ |
|--------|---|---|

The opposition bird-snake or bird-fish (snakes, especially mythological ones, or in kennings, are commonly designated as fish)<sup>22</sup> correlates with the vertical cosmological axis and should be seen as closely related to the cognitive metaphorical opposition of ‘up’ and ‘down’.

The transformatory processes of Óðinn and Völundr are therefore mapped onto the synchronous cosmological structure. The narrative axis corresponds to the upward vertical axis: first there is the form of the snake, symbolically close to the inferior position of the captive-craftsman or servant/thrall, then we get inside the mountain or hall where the transformation takes place,<sup>23</sup> and then the hero ends up at the third stage — as the bird at the top of the axis, triumphant in his achievement.

The bird transformation appears in a number of places in Old Norse myth — it is connected to Freyja’s *frǫðrhamr*, Valkyries can take on bird forms as well. Loki transforms into a bird as well as the giants Þjazi and Suttungr.

The bird form is used by Loki to fly to the Otherworld either to explore and spy on behalf of the Æsir (e.g. in *Brymskviða*), or just to ‘loiter’ in the Otherworld and get caught (at the beginning of the Geirröðr myth). In this case the bird form is clearly a means to cross the border of the Otherworld in both directions.

Two specific cases of bird forms are the giants Þjazi and Suttungr. These are powerful guardians of numinous sources hidden in the Otherworld — Þjazi guarding Iðunn with her Apples of Eternal Youthfulness and Suttungr guarding Gunnlǫð with her Mead of Poetry. In both cases the guarded treasure originated with the Æsir, but ended up locked in the Otherworld and has to be stolen back. In both cases the quest ends with

22 For example, *Grímnismál* 21; kennings for snake like ‘hængr grundar’ (salmon of the ground), ‘þorskr heiðar’ (codfish of the heath), ‘eitrs ǫlunn’ (mackerel of poison), ‘fiskr foldar’ (fish of the earth), etc. Out of eighty kennings for serpent/snake in the skaldic database forty-two, more than half, are of this type, i.e. ‘(type of) fish of xy’ <<https://skaldic.org/m.php?p=kenning&i=83>> [accessed 20 July 2023].

23 The mythological messenger mentioned in *Grímnismál* 32 above, the mediator between the serpent and the eagle is called Ratatoskr. I wonder whether there is any connection between the name Rati, the name of the auger Óðinn uses to get to the cave with the Mead of Poetry, and the name Ratatoskr of the agent mediating between the serpent at the bottom of the axis and the eagle at the top.

a chase where the Thief flies in a bird form and is chased by the guardian who is also in a bird form. The two myths are clearly part of the same mythological complex: Apples and Mead are two sides of the same coin, which is shown by the fact that the husband of Iðunn, the goddess of youth, is Bragi, the god of poetry. Poetry — eternal fame<sup>24</sup> — is the only true source of immortality, at least in the human realm.

In my understanding, the primary bird in the chase is the Thief. He is the one who turned into a bird as a result of the peak transformatory experience in the Otherworld. However, in most versions of the Thief-Myth around the world — be it Thief of the Mead, or Thief of the Soma, or Thief of the Fire — the escape from the Otherworld must be a narrow chase, either a risky flight between two clashing rocks (Coomaraswamy 1947) or flight of a bird followed closely by the otherworldly guardian. Which typically necessitates the guardian being also a bird, so that the chase can happen. The guardian is a bird because of his otherworldly character, because we have to cross the borders of the world and because the chase must happen, not because he was also somehow transformed by the peak experience.

One curious example of bird transformation outside the eddic corpus appears in *Hervarar saga* as a part of the narrative frame for the famous riddle collection. Óðinn in disguise (calling himself Gestumblindi) comes to Heiðrekr's hall and wagers his head in a knowledge test of riddles. The king claims to be able to guess any riddle and if it turns out to be true, Gestumblindi would lose his life. King Heiðrekr's knowledge is really perfect and he guesses one riddle after the other, so Gestumblindi in the end resorts to a neck-riddle, a tricky question that only Óðinn knows the answer to: What did Óðinn whisper in Baldr's ear at his funeral? The moment of the king's defeat is simultaneously a moment of anagnorisis and theophany, as the wise king gets the message that it is Óðinn himself who is sitting in front of him. He jumps up and attacks the god with his magical sword, but Óðinn turns into a bird and flies away. The king only manages to cut off the tips of his feathery tail.<sup>25</sup> Soon afterwards the king is murdered by his slaves.<sup>26</sup>

The scene is thus a kind of crossover between the ending of *Vafþrúðnismál* (knowledge test and neck-riddle) and *Grímnismál* (human

24 See the Indo-European comparative study of the phrase 'kleos aphthiton' in Watkins 1995: 13, 79, 173, 415.

25 This motif is quite prominent in the comparative material: 'It is a highly characteristic feature of the "Active Door" that who-ever or whatever passes through it must do so with all speed and suddenly, and even so may be docked of its "tail"; which tail may be, in the examples already considered, either the stern-point of a boat, or one of two brothers, or if there is a flock of birds (doves of Zeus or Eskimo geese) then the last of the line; or if the Hero wins through his pursuer may be caught'. Coomaraswamy 1947, 476.

26 *Hervarar saga*, ch. IX in Tolkien 1960.

king visited by Óðinn, knowledge exchange ending in the king dead by an unlucky accident) with the added motif of the bird and his wounded tail. But most importantly the moment of flying away in a bird form from the outsmarted king is also similar to the Vǫlundr and Bolverkr myths.

What this intertextual analysis showed is not only the semantic facets of the mythemes present in the narratives, but also a general closeness of the Vǫlundr material to the Odinic Mead-complex. This proximity is stressed by the element of drunkenness present in both myths. Both Óðinn and Vǫlundr imbibe intoxicating drink just before the moment they are ‘fettered with feathers’. This analysis then explains why there have been attempts at connecting Óðinn and Vǫlundr using the concept of ‘shamanism’ (Vierck 2021). Whatever we think about the usefulness of the term ‘shamanism’, interpretations of this sort are pointing to the intuited structural and motivic closeness of the two myths.

There is one more myth that should be mentioned as a possible parallel to the narratives under consideration here and that is the Rindr (Lat. Rinda) episode from Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* III.4.6–11 (in Friis-Jensen 2015, I, 166–69). Its main protagonist is Óðinn (Lat. Othinus) and as in the case of Gunnlǫð or Vǫlundr narrative, the final turning point of the story is a moment of sexual encounter. The motivations and the resulting status of the hero are however quite different.

The reason for Othinus’s wooing of Rinda is a prophecy that only she can bear the son that will avenge the death of Baldr (Lat. Balderus). In contrast with the two narratives the hero does not improve his status as a result, at least not immediately. While both Óðinn and Vǫlundr heroically escape and gain either the famous Mead or freedom, Othinus gains ignominy and exile because of his behaviour during the seduction.

However, there are also significant similarities: as in the case of Vǫlundr-Bǫðvildr, the woman is impregnated and bears a child which plays important function in the mythology, being Baldr’s avenger (Váli in the eddic corpus, Bous in Saxo’s Latin version). Most intriguing is however the element of hard work leading to no results and trickery being the solution. Othinus tries to win the hand of Rinda ‘legally’ as it were, winning battles on behalf of the king and smithing beautiful gold gifts for the king and his daughter, but his hard work is of no avail. The princess rejects him. It is only after Othinus cross-dresses as a healer woman, that he gains access to Rinda and rapes her while serving her a healing concoction (Schjødtt 2021). The position of Rinda is therefore very close to Gunnlǫð and Bǫðvildr, in the sense that she was deceived and used for some other purpose. On the scale of abuse, the Rinda case is the worst and clearly not consensual.

As can be seen from the text above, I offered a mapping of the connotations of the motifs in the myth as well as suggested parallel mythical narratives — both of which are tools for comprehending the myth on its

own term, as a formation of symbolic language. I did not offer any final meaning of the myths — neither nature-mythological (Taylor 1963), nor astral (Knight 2013), nor metallurgical (Dieterle 1987), nor psychological (Ármann Jakobsson 2006), nor any other sort that would turn the myths into allegories.

I believe that the myths are basically culturally constructed ‘Rorschach blots’ selected to be suggestive and to induce psychic projection of one’s own deepest expectations (Kozák 2021). That is where their power comes from — power affecting not only the audience in the original cultural context, but even us scholars today. Usually, what the researcher sees in the myth is their own reflection. If someone tends to see power struggle all around them, they find it in myth. If sexuality is the ultimate motivation for certain persons, they find it as the core of myth. If someone’s fascination is turned toward the starry sky or nature, that is what they find as the meaning of myth. However, is that a bad thing? I do not believe so. To cause this effect is the integral feature of how myths work. The more we endeavour to project into the mythic structure, the more we make it teem with meaning and the more inspiration we get from it.

Even though I will not add another allegorical reading to what has been already brought forth by previous interpreters, and will keep to more or less purely formal and structural analysis, there is one last structural moment that needs resolving, and that is the ‘dialectic of seduction’ itself.

## Is There a Synthesis?

While we noted already that the ‘dialectic’ of the story is unfinished, having just two steps and not three, this problem still deserves a second look. On a purely narrative-structural level the story is surely a ‘double myth’, a self-iterating plot where ‘the two components must be juxtaposed to comprehend the myth’ (Burson 1983, 16). However, there is a fundamental difference between the two halves. While the first half of the story is fruitless (Óðinn’s attempts fail, Vǫlundr’s relationship with Hervǫr is childless and she leaves him), the second half of the story brings fruit. The story does not end with the hero’s flight, it continues beyond it, and that is the part which could be called the synthesis.

The third part has a different form in either myth, but there is a commonality: there is a result of the encounter during the second episode in the form of something being carried inside a person. We see a literal pregnancy (in the case of Bǫðvildr) and a symbolic one (in the case of Óðinn). Both Óðinn and Bǫðvildr carry inside what they received during the last moments before the flight. And in both cases what they carry is a very important thing. In the case of Óðinn it is the Mead of Poetry and in the case of Bǫðvildr it is a royal heir and a legendary hero. Here

we must go beyond the text of *Völundarkviða* to supplement information which was otherwise general knowledge among the recipients: it is widely attested across the Germanic area that the son of Völundr and Bǫðvildr is called Viðga (McKinnell 2002, 200) (or Widia, Witege, Wittich in OE and MHG sources). While his name does not appear in *Völundarkviða* itself, it is made clear in the poem that the son of Völundr and Bǫðvildr is of high importance. Völundr forbids the defeated king to harm Bǫðvildr and her unborn child and demands a binding oath from him in this regard:

- |     |  |  |
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| 33. | <p>‘Eiða skaltu mér áðr alla vinna, at skips borði ok at skjaldar rönd, at mars bægi ok at mækis egg, at þú kvelj-at kván Völundar né brúði minni at bana verðir, þótt vér kván eigim, þá er ér kunnið, eða jóð eigim innan hallar.’</p> | <p>‘First you shall give me all these oaths: by the side of the ship and the rim of the shield, the back of a horse and the edge of a blade, that you will not torment Volund’s lady, nor be the slayer of my bride, though I have no wife who is known to you, and we have a child inside your hall.’</p> |
|-----|--|--|

In this demand we can see perhaps not only the interest in the survival of his own son, but also an acknowledgement of the relationship with Bǫðvildr. This is even more stressed in the *Velents þáttr* in *Þiðriks saga of Bern* where we find the continuation of the story into the ‘third phase’. Velent has his revenge, but his relationship with Bǫðvildr is a true love (they proclaim to each other that they want nobody else than the other one) and he returns for her (and for their son Viðga) after the death of Níðuðr.

Both Óðinn and Völundr then undergo a three-phase process. The first phase is a complete loss, the second phase is a mirror image of the first one, it also contains a moment of danger and loss, but it is also a turning point, the hero achieves something. In the last, third phase, the seed that has been planted during the second phase is brought to fruition. The legendary hero is born, the numinous Mead brought to Ásgarðr and distributed to poets.<sup>27</sup>

The wider context of this process is the framework characteristic of most of the eddic myths — that is the travel to and interaction with the Otherworld. When we inspect the eddic mythology more closely, we can see a systematic repetition in most of the myths: the protagonist (Óðinn, Þórr, Skírnir, Freyja, Loki, etc.) travels to the Otherworld across a difficult boundary, undergoes a trial of sorts, gains something (or defeats somebody), and returns back (Clunies Ross 1994; McKinnell 2005).

<sup>27</sup> I owe many thanks to Henning Kure for the idea of the solution to the problem of the third phase of the process.



This 'monomythical' structure (Kozák 2021, 169) is the backbone of eddic myth and singular myths are variations of this pattern. They are various solutions to the problem of interacting with the Other. What 'the Other' stands for is then open to interpretations. It can be read socially, psychologically, metaphysically, etc. and I believe that for the original recipients these realms (i.e. social vs. psychological vs. metaphysical/cosmic, etc.) were not separate and distinguished from each other. The reverberations of the possible analogies between various realms of experience belong to the particular charms of myth as a genre.

## Conclusion

The main thesis of this article and its principal novelty is the discovery of the analogy between the myth of Óðinn's quest for the Mead of Poetry and Vǫlundr's captivity and escape. Adding the *Billings mær* episode to the Óðinn's quest enabled us to see an even more detailed parallelism: two encounters with two different women, where the hero is abandoned during the first iteration and then he himself abandons the second woman during the second iteration. Other shared details include the motif of hard work without result versus clever tricks leading to success, and a snake metamorphosis followed by a bird metamorphosis. I suggested the reading where the two sexual encounters function like a thesis and antithesis, first the hero is the loser, then he is the winner, however in both cases one of the sides is left frustrated. The synthesis is achieved (beside the happy ending we find in *Velents þáttur*) on a different level: in the form of the fruit of the second encounter. Here we find another analogy in the myths, the motif of pregnancy, literal in the case of Bǫðvildr and symbolic in the case of Óðinn.

While both myths are teeming with possible meanings, I stressed repeatedly during the second half of the article my basic thesis that myths function like Rorschach blots and their main role is to activate projective and analogical styles of thinking, which creates a specific experience particular to myth as a genre.



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