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Slaying Hybridity: The “Uncreated” Monstrous Doubles in the *The Saga of the Volsungs*,
Nibelungenlied, and *Kudrun*

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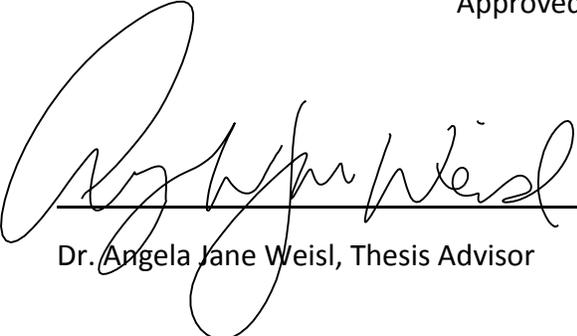
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Slaying Hybridity: The “Uncreated” Monstrous Doubles in the *The Saga of the Volsungs*,
Nibelungenlied, and *Kudrun*

While anxieties about gender and gender roles might be thought of as contemporary concerns, thirteenth-century Old Norse text *The Saga of the Volsungs* and Middle High German texts the *Nibelungenlied* and *Kudrun* all exhibit a similar uneasiness about gender performance. In these epics, fears about gender fluidity are founded on the slaying of hybrid mythological creatures (dragons and griffons) and are perpetuated by various media: blood, tears, clothing, promises, and lies. These monsters threaten the established order within the text, a patriarchal order defined by feudal society. Once the hero defeats the monster—whose very essence is simultaneously an embodiment of the perceived order and stability of the patriarchy and the chaos and disorder of the matriarchy—the threat temporarily subsides only to reemerge in a new form due to the intimate relationship between the hero and the monster. The monster becomes a part of the hero’s new identity, a part that cannot be separated from the hero. And it is this bond that eventually displaces the hero and other characters within the text, leaving questions, doubts, and ambiguities surrounding their hybrid identities. Without a stable position within society (and within the text), these new, roaming hybrid characters must die, literally or metaphorically, for order to attempt to be restored.

Within the *The Saga of the Volsungs* and *Nibelungenlied*, two texts which have a similar narrative, the authors, or perhaps the scribes, both recognize and acknowledge the beauty of this outward expression of hybridity, particularly that of gender fluidity. And yet, they simultaneously express their fears and reservations, showcasing the potential chaotic and destructive power of these “unstable,” or rather “uncreated,” identities. In contrast to these two texts, the third text *Kudrun* condemns all forms of hybridity, for they pose a direct threat to the

patriarchy. Only characters with stable identities (and by stable identities I mean identities that are created and accepted by the feudal society) are rewarded. These characters not only survive but are able to access alternative forms of power through their stability without negative repercussions. Kudrun, who embraces her role as a female, is able to amass and wield masculine power successfully despite her biological sex, even if only for a short time. Therefore, based on the final outcome of the *Nibelungenlied*, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, and *Kudrun*, the fear of these characters extends beyond just their physical hybridity within the text; it lies more so in the public performance of the hybridity, the performance of multiple gender roles simultaneously that destabilize the created order. These “monsters” challenge and disassociate biological sex and gender performance, leaving society to question, and potentially reevaluate, their gendered categories while exposing them to the possibility and beauty of an “uncreated” identity: an identity unaffected by societal influences.

The first text, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, does not offer one particular vehicle for the growing concern about gender fluidity but rather offers multiple outlets for this anxiety in the form of physical transformations and lies; these become more of a blood spatter of ideas expressed, which helps link it to both *Nibelungenlied* and *Kudrun*. The hero of the epic, Sigurd, slays Fafnir in a verbal battle and eats his heart. In doing so, he establishes a more fluid gender identity that allows him to both deceive and exchange shapes with other characters, two acts that the text suggests are reserved for females. In addition to Sigurd’s new identity, the texts offer another bi-gendered and dragonish character in Brynhild. Her vow to Sigurd and her final speech—which not only mirrors Fafnir’s dying words but also suggests that gender fluidity cannot exist—help situate the idea of the created and “uncreated” identity, the anxieties that surround the disassociation of biological sex from gender performance. So although *The Saga of*

the Volsungs is the last to be produced chronologically¹, it helps to establish a particular lens through which to explore the same anxieties as the other two narratives.

Due to the similar narrative structure and the hopeful ending (at least in regards to hybridity), the *Nibelungenlied* will be the second text I examine, which defines the slippage and merging of gender spheres through the absorption and spilling of blood. Unlike the first text, the *Nibelungenlied* omits the actual dragon fight—that is to say that the audience does not witness Sifrid’s feats in battle, verbal or physical. However, the story does offer a partial explanation of the fight through Hagan. He recounts the tales, stating that after killing the dragon, Sifrid bathed in its blood. During Sifrid’s bloodbath, “a broad lime leaf fell on his back between his shoulder blades” (*Nibelungenlied* 86), preventing the blood from completely covering his body. So while the rest of Sifrid’s skin becomes horny and impenetrable (indicative of his hyper-masculinity), the small crossed-shaped spot does not, exposing his only weakness, the only area which he can be penetrated. Sifrid’s hybrid identity, although beneficial to the Burgundians at first, eventually poses a threat to the King and Queen, Gunther and Brunhilde. Therefore, with the help of Hagan and the inadvertent participation of Krimhilde, Brunhilde devises a plan to kill Sifrid and succeeds. But because gender fluidity is defined in this text by the spilling and absorption of blood, all of the characters who participate in the death of the dragon—the dragon being Sifrid in this case—and are doused in his blood, start to reshape their identities. These characters no longer operate solely within their assigned gender sphere, but instead move more fluidly between the two. The text recreates these hybrids, these dragons, which eventually must die in order to restore order.

¹ *The Sage of the Volsungs* was written down during the late thirteenth century, whereas both *Nibelungenlied* and *Kudrun* were transcribed in the early thirteenth century.

Finally, *Kudrun* generates a different narrative structure than the previous two. Whereas the anxieties surrounding hybridity focus more on the slaying of the dragon in *The Saga of the Volsungs* and, most notably, the *Nibelungelied*, *Kudrun* uses the discussion of the mythological creature—in this case a griffon—as a platform to establish the boundaries and limitations of the sexes and gender performance. When the hero Hagan slays the griffon, he and his fellow companions, all of whom happen to be princesses, begin to move more fluidly through gender spheres. However, despite their importance in establishing the ways in which characters can create a hybrid identity, Hagan and the princesses are not the main focus of this anxiety. The text positions the two noble women, Queen Gerlint and Kudrun, as the prototypes of how women should and should not operate within society. Queen Gerlint is the hybrid who poses a threat to the established order. She embraces the opportunity to appropriate masculine power; however, she fails to operate successfully within the masculine sphere, which ultimately leads to her death. On the other hand, Kudrun, who the text frames as the model woman, only acts within the limitations of her sex. By rejecting opportunities to masculinize herself and by assuming power only when men give it to her, Kudrun surrenders to traditional feminine gender roles and is rewarded by the text. She is able to assume power typically reserved for men, although temporarily, without negative consequences. She controls all of the ending marriages and eventually decides Hartmuot's fate. Despite the overt narrative differences between *Kudrun* and the other two texts, all three seem to have a similar solution to the same problem: characters who establish a hybrid identity must die. Only characters who embrace traditional gender roles, like Kudrun, survive, for these characters stabilize and reaffirm the social order.

The three oral traditions that form the basis for these narratives are Germanic in origin and retell different versions of two groups of Germanic people: the Franks and the Burgundians.

While the *Nibelungenlied* and *Kudrun* were eventually written down in thirteenth century present day Germany, *The Saga of the Volsungs* was transcribed in Iceland years later. Despite the distance between the texts (spatial and temporal), they all reflect similar cultural and social concerns as a result of new anxieties arising in both Germany and Iceland, particularly those regarding hybridity. As Jesse L. Byock even points out, “at times, storytellers invented character and occurrences” (9), some of them bordering (and even crossing over to) the realm of fantasy and the supernatural. The same form of agency that is given to the storyteller to alter the narrative is passed on to the scribes; they too have the ability to graft any concerns that they have onto these manuscripts and pre-existing tales. Despite the possible fictionality, Byock does not avoid looking at Islandic family sagas for historical importance as several historians do because he believes these narratives “reveal normative codes of the society and indicate to the reader basic rules of conduct” (9). He continues, stating the tales are the “most realistic stories about everyday issues,” some of which include “feuds over insults,” “love,” and “struggles for local status” (9). For these reasons, Byock’s discussion of family sagas, which include *The Saga of the Volsungs*, extends to the *Nibelungenlied* and *Kudrun* as well; they comment on several of the same social issues while revealing what the culture that produced the manuscripts valued.

In order to understand the normative codes of conduct and the potential alterations to the texts, it is important to note the value systems that were in place both during the time that these oral narratives were formed as well as when they were recorded. Iceland was discovered around 850 by Scandinavian seamen, and shortly after had between 10,000 and 20,000 men and women immigrate to the area. These people, *landnámsmenn*, “established a social order different from those they had left behind” (Byock 3). Besides agreeing to be on “friendly” terms with the Norwegian King, the settlers did not have “foreign policy...defensive land...sea force...and no

levy or regional military structures” (3). Furthermore, the people operated without “religious or political figures powerful enough to gain widespread authority,” thus creating a “system of decentralized government” (3). This form of legislation allowed for economic prosperity and social “fluidity” (6). However, in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries—the same time the three texts are recorded—the social structure began to change; Iceland became socially stratified (6). The change was largely influenced by the large immigrant population whose unique experiences influenced the culture. Byock also mentions that “from this experience [the immigration to Iceland] there emerged an innovative social order marked by aspects of statelessness as well as elements of incipient statehood. Features of both ranked and stratified societies were present” (7). In an examination of a nation on the rise that is defining itself by the “Other” and undergoing a social change (one that can be seen by other nations as move from chaos (statelessness) to order (stratification)), one can observe the parallels between this hybrid nation and the fears and anxieties surrounding the narratives that assume a similar form. In these texts, the “Others,” who embody hybridity, seem to pose the largest threat to the (emerging) established order.

Similarly, the *Nibelungenlied* and *Kudrun* reflect the social and political turmoil in Germany during the time the narratives are recorded. Dating back to the ninth century, Germany began to establish the foundations of feudalism; however, unlike the rest of Europe, the progression and implementation of feudalism took a longer time. Feudal practices really came to fruition towards the end of the tenth-century (Thompson 292-3), when the nation began to enjoy social and political stability. And by the “twelfth century the former incoherent and heterogeneous elements embodied in feudal particularism and the duchies, under Saxon leadership, had been brought into alignment and given a constructive intention and

interpretation” (xv). This peace, though, was soon brought to an end with the rise of Frederick Barbarossa and the fall of Henry IV, which in turn caused the fall of Saxony (xvi) in the late twelfth century. Rather than unifying the nation, Frederick I tore it apart. The result was “the conversion of the once strong and magnificent German Kingdom into a rope of sand, a confused and jarring chaos of small and warring states ruled by petty dynasties neither materially able to accomplish great things nor morally capable of understanding...high things” (xvi). With the downfall of the kingdom, the royal authority was also “rapidly collapsing (309) along with the old form of German feudalism (320). No longer was nobility based solely on blood, for the new system rewarded the remedial tasks of *ministeriales*, a “preferred class of serfs employed for service” (324), with the honors of “petty nobles” (325). The distinction between the real nobles and these serfs soon became blurred, leaving thirteenth century nobles lacking the “culture, the grace, the urbanity, and the pride which one so habitually associates with the aristocracy” (335). It is this shift from order to chaos and disunity within the land that helps mark the social anxieties within each of the three stories. The potential of having an “Outsider” like Sifrid in *Nibulengenlied*, for example, achieve such a high status poses a threat; his displacement within the society and his quick assimilation into a powerful position disrupts the current order. Therefore, given the circumstances and the slow decay of the German nation, it is not unlikely that the scribes grafted their anxieties onto the text. Moreover, by using these older narratives, these scribes appear to delve into the past to find a solution for their current state.

In addition to understanding the cultural context that all three narratives engage in, it is important to understand the gender relations present within the feudal system, specifically pertaining to the nobility. While women did have some power before the eleventh century, they slowly were losing it. Systems of representations in the “Christian West” and the feudal societies

began placing women as “constitutionally inferior to man” and stressing that women “needed man’s guidance” (247). Societies which had previously been “more favorable to women” began adapting and implementing a government “where the principles of masculinity and primogeniture were diminishing the roles of women” (247). That is not to say, though, that women had no political power. As Paulette L’Hermitte Leclercq points out, “women did play a role in political life” but,

it was almost always temporary and circumstantial. A woman could be called upon to take the place of a man, but the fact that she was a woman was never without consequences. Women did not fight in battles and were not trained in the schools of law and administration that began to develop in the twelfth century. By nature and vocation they were destined to return to the one role for which they were truly fitted: to make sons who would in turn make history. (239)

So even with the ability to assume a more masculine political role, women were severely limited as to what they could do. Deviations from these established gender roles, which are present within all three narratives, thus become problematic. If the feudal order in Germany is failing during this time, blurring the lines of class and disrupting social order, then gender performance is the one of the only remaining stable factors. And, if these notions are challenged—if women demonstrate masculine qualities and men act in a feminine manner—then the foundation of the society collapses.

The Saga of the Volsungs, Nibelungenlied, and Kudrun showcase the fear of unstable gender performance—a performance that does not match the societal expectations of a character’s biological sex—through the slaying of the hybrid, mythological creature. Scholars Renete Benkert-Dodrill and Joyce Tally Lionarons explore the presence of these hybrids, specifically dragons,

within literature in an attempt to understand how the dragons embody and perpetuate social anxieties. While Benkert-Dodrill refers to the dragon as “bisexual” due to its self-copulating, hermaphroditic body, I suggest, and will later show, how the term bi-gendered is a more appropriate term in discussing the dragon’s presence within the text. The basis of this facet of my argument is due in part to Benkert-Dodrill’s mention of the dragon demonstrating both masculine and feminine qualities. Beginning with her argument, Benkert-Dodrill examines how the “bisexual” dragon is used in *Nibelungenlied* to describe “natural phenomena” to a more “primitive” culture. The understanding of the creature can be found in an observation of the different cycles within nature—particularly the “life cycle,” “moon cycle,” and the “cosmic cycle.” All three cycles explore the power struggle between man and woman, from an individual level to a larger scale; however, only the first and third are important for the context of my discussion. The life cycle, Benkert-Dodrill argues, is the “most obvious manifestation of the polarity between man and women...since the developmental stages of life correspond very closely to the unfolding of the conflict between matriarchal and patriarchal order” (25). This cycle deals with the birth of a new child, where the power moves from the man to the woman, thus causing the man “to fight and eliminate the creative powers of mother” before he can “feel secure and even learn to trust her guidance and intuition” (25). While the man does eventually reassert his dominance, his power is only a temporary solution to the struggle between man and woman. The cycle will continue inevitably: man will have power over the woman, lose it to her during childbirth, and desperately try to reclaim his power thereafter. The only permanent solution to the polarity is death.

Using the dynamic relationship between man and woman as the foundation of her third cycle, Benkert-Dodrill presents the “cosmic cycle,” the ultimate stage that merges the idea of

chaos, destruction and rebirth with the struggle between the female (matriarchy) and the man (patriarchy). It is within this stage that her discussion of the dragon emerges. In this stage, the author posits that the universe moves from order, to chaos, back to order—much like the “life cycle.” The dragon comes “to stand for the first stages of the cosmic cycle—chaos and creation” (28). Within the text the dragon presents a threat and must be destroyed, but, upon its death, the hybrid creates stability, albeit temporary. This dual disposition of the creature gives the dragon its bi-gendered nature, as Benkert Dodrill associates the chaos with matriarchy and the reclaimed stability with the patriarchy. However, permeant order is not restored with the slaying of the dragon, just like order is not completely restored when the man reclaims his power over the female after childbirth. The dragon-slayer “absorbs the dragon’s strength and power” through the consumption of the creature’s heart and/or blood, including the power of the matriarchy. As a result, “the...female...becomes one with its...male counterpart” (29); the dragon-slayer becomes the new metaphorical dragon. And while the death of the original dragon does restore temporary order, the new hybrid carries the same destructive powers that can only be stopped through death.

Joyce Tally Lionarons’ argument is similar to Benkert-Dodrill’s, although she presents the dragon as a “monstrous double,” signifying both absence and being (Lionarons 10). The goal of the male character to defeat the dragon is to “legitimate oneself and gain the name of a hero, but it is not finally to annihilate the dragon. Instead, the dragon conceals its existence in a new form that simultaneously reveals itself in the ‘dragonish’ characteristics acquired by the dragon-slayer” (11). Lionarons reiterates that the dragon-slayer retains part of the dragon; he or she absorbs part of its power, whether that power is physical strength or increased knowledge. The hero also absorbs the disorder and chaos embodied by the dragon, indicative of the matriarchy as Benkert-Dodrill posits. The combination of both of these critics’ arguments produces the

necessary lens to analyze each the hybrid creatures in relation to gender anxieties. The killing of the mythological beast temporarily restores (gendered) order but creates a new monstrous threat, one which each of the texts tries to grapple with.

Unlike the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Saga of the Volsungs* presents the most holistic understanding of the dragon and dragon-slayer relationship because it is the only text that gives the entire account of the dragon fight. The text dedicates several pages to the build-up, the fight, and the after-effects of the dragon-slaying, unlike like the other two texts which either recount the fight through other characters or provide only a few sentences regarding the matter. That is not to say that the actual fights have no significance within the other text. On the contrary, despite their brevity, the fights play a significant role in establishing the foundations of the society and the supposed limitations of gender performance in all texts. However, it is befitting to start with the most detailed account of the dragon fight because the language surrounding the instance helps establish a stable foundation for the later works within this paper.

Not much has been written on *The Saga of the Volsungs* and the critical pieces that do look at the text focus mainly on the dispute between Brynhild and Gudrun. In their article “Monstrous Mates: The Leading Ladies of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Völsunga Saga*,” Kaaren Grimstad and Ray M. Wakefield observes how both narratives initially frame Brynhilde as the “monstrous Other” (240), while Kriemhild and Gudrun represent the courtly lady. However, once in the same court, all of the ladies begin to violate codes of honor and shame, thereby leading these women to abandon their hospitality and assume more monstrous roles. Similarly, in “Indirect Aggression: a Pragmatic Analysis of the Quarrel of the Queens in *Volsungasaga*, *Piðreks Saga*, and *Das Nibelungenlied*,” Eric Shane Bryan examines the power struggles between the queens through indirect aggression: those who use indirect speech are assumed to

have more power, while those who use direct speech hold a weaker position within the text. While both critical pieces focus on the idea of how women exercise power within the text—which can be seen as an anxiety about powerful and destructive women—neither focus on gender anxiety expression through the male characters within the saga. Through their actions, several of the male characters begin to defy the textual standards of what constitutes masculine behavior; they slip into the feminine sphere which eventually causes their death. On the other hand, Brynhilde’s actions trap her within a liminal space: she maintains one promise while breaking another. This ambiguous gendered space combined with her indirect aggression position her as Fafnir’s double.

Before looking at the parallel between Brynhild and Fafnir, it is necessary to understand how Fafnir sets the gendered standard of the text through his own transformation. Fafnir was once a man; however, he was so consumed by greed that he “became so ill-natured” and transformed into “the most evil serpent,” sitting upon his “horde” of gold (*The Saga of the Volsungs* 59). In a closer examination of the physical transformation Lionarons states that

Metamorphosis serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual’s life in its more important moments of crisis: for showing *how an individual becomes other than what he was*... There is not evolution in the strict sense of the word; what we get, rather is crisis and rebirth (57, original emphasis).

Furthermore, she articulates that “metamorphosis in the saga requires dying to one’s previous life...in order to undergo a new birth and the creation of new identity” (59). In undergoing his transformation, Fafnir creates a new, dragonish identity. While this change does not appear to have anything to do specifically with gender, the act of shapeshifting, according to the texts, does create a hybrid identity, one that merges both gender spheres. The text continuously suggests that

the knowledge and power of shapeshifting is meant to be an exclusively female act. Men who transform thus create hybrid identities that merge the masculine and feminine gender spheres.

In conjunction with the act of shapeshifting, the act of breaking vows and promises seems to be not only tied with these metamorphic transformations, but also further disassociates biological sex from gender performance. According to Judith Butler in “Critically Queer,”

performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements which, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power. Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include legal sentences...declarations of ownership, statements that not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. (17)

In short, performative acts are legal binding actions that create something out of nothing, being out of non-being like the dragon itself. These actions help establish new identities. Within the text then, promises are significant in two ways. First, they become legal actions, which, if broken, have serious consequences. Demonstrated by King Volsung in section four, once enacted, promises are worth more than life itself: “it would be shameful both for him [King Siggeir] and for us [King Volsung and his daughter] to break our agreement without cause. And if it is broken we could neither have his trust nor bind him in a friendly alliance. He would repay us with as much ill as he could. The one honorable thing is to hold to our side of the bargain” (39). Promises unite nations and are a form of a legal contract. Therefore, breaking the promises weaken and cripple the nation. Secondly, the practice of breaking vows seems to be linked exclusively to female characters. As Brynhild claims, “It is wiser counsel not to put your trust in women, because women always break their promises” (75). She genders the keeping and

breaking of promises: to keep a promise suggests a certain form of masculinity whereas the breaking of the vow is indicative of femininity.

Despite both actions being associated with females, men seem to be the ones who break their promises—with the exception of King Volsung—when they transform. The first two transforming men are Sinfjotli and Sigmund, two nobles who wander into a house and shapeshift into wolves for ten days. During their adventure, the two come to an agreement that “they would risk a fight with as many as seven men, but not with more, and that the one being attacked by more would howl with his wolf’s voice” (*The Saga of the Volsungs* 44). This mirrors a political alliance. Engaging in acts of “war,” the two men agree to assist if their enemies exceed a certain amount. However, soon after this agreement is made, Sinfjotli breaks his promise, which thereby nulls the verbal contract, and Sigmund, in his rage, “bit[es] him in the windpipe” (45). Despite being of blood relation, Sigmund kills his own son, but soon witnesses two weasels perform the same act of violence: one biting and killing the other. After the bitten weasel dies, the attacker runs into the forest and returns with a leaf. The animal places it on the wound and the dead weasel is resurrected (45). Sigmund sees the healing power of the leaf and looks towards the sky to find a raven with the same leaf. The raven, who is most likely the God Odin, brings the item to Sigmund, which permits him to revive his son.

While Sinfjotli and Sigmund’s feud and reaction may express a certain form of masculinity through violence, it also bears resemblance to Marie de France’s “Eliduc²,” which

² *The Lais of Marie de France* were recorded toward the end of the twelfth century; however, that does not exclude the possibility that her *lais* had no influence on *The Saga of the Volsungs*. There are several versions of Marie de France’s *lais* that have an Icelandic translation, so even if “Eliduc” does not have a particular translation, it does not mean that the scribes were unfamiliar with her work. As William Henry Schofield mentions though his examination of Marie de France’s work and this particular scene that the revival scene is “an extremely common tradition as old as Apollodorus, Hyginus, and Pliny” (283). And, out of the several different formats this scene

casts a feminine shadow over the scene. In the lai, the resurrection scene occurs between two women: Guildeluec and Guilliadon (who is on a comatose state). Two weasels appear in a chapel when a valet hits and kills one of the weasels. The living one runs into the forest, finds a flower, and heals and revives its dead companion. Guildeluec sees this, grabs the herb, and revives Guilliadon (Marie de France 1031-1064). Given the potential influence of Marie de France's lais on *The Saga*, the connection between the two texts links the two male characters with Guildeluec and Guilliadon and helps blur the lines between the masculine and feminine spheres. But the hybridity of this scene does not end with the simple connection between the two scenes; it extends to the recreation of identity through the transformations and the breaking of the promises. By engaging in both of these practices, Sigmund and Sinfjotli deviate from traditional masculine performances. Their (feminine) actions cause chaos and disorder within the text, which must be followed by rebirth. By bringing Sinfjotli back from the dead, Sigmund gives birth, in a metaphorical sense, to Sinfjolti. However, this rebirth of stability cannot last since both of these characters transgressed gender boundaries within the narrative.

Similarly, Sigurd and Gunnar also change shapes, allowing them to move more fluidly through the gender spheres. Firstly, the changing of shapes mirrors the sorceress and Signy's previous exchange, another act that occurs distinctly between female characters. Secondly, the transformation highlights Gunnar's inadequate masculinity. In order to win Brynhild's hand in marriage, Gunnar has to demonstrate his masculinity—defined by his bravery—by jumping through fire that surrounds her fortress. Symbolically, Gunnar must find a way to penetrate her body through this trial. However, despite being a man and having the proper equipment to

takes—Scholar Reinhold Köhler notes at least thirty examples—only *The Saga* and *Eliduc* use the weasel as the animal “whose actions indicate the plant of healing” (283). Therefore, Schofield concludes that “It is...not unreasonable to attribute Western origin to the motive as it appears in Old Norse” (283).

accomplish the task, Gunnar is still unable to complete the action due to his inability to outperform Brynhild in the masculine sphere. He fails in comparison, and, therefore, needs Sigurd's masculinity to win his bride. And yet, by transforming, Sigurd is emasculated by the text: he exemplifies both hyper-masculinity and femininity through this exchange. Even though Sigurd is in Gunnar's body, he fails to consummate the relationship. Instead, he places a sword "unsheathed between them" (81), thereby removing and rejecting his masculinity, temporarily.

Sigurd's movement into the feminine sphere is not solely defined by his ability to transform and unwillingness to consummate the relationship. By assisting Gunnar in his feats to conquer Brynhild, Sigurd breaks his vow to her. The two promised to marry each other, not once but twice. During the first promise Sigurd professes, "I swear that I shall marry you, for you are to my liking," to which Brynhild replies, "I would most prefer to marry you, even should I choose from among all other men" (71-2). Only a few pages later, Sigurd and Brynhild renew their vows again: "I swear by the gods that I will marry you or no other woman" (75). In breaking his promises to Brynhild, Sigurd is emasculated. He becomes the lying woman that Brynhild warns him about.

Sigurd's failure to maintain his promise places Brynhild in a double bind. While she already moves between gender spheres more fluidly than other characters, Brynhild further demonstrates her hybridity through her promises. She cannot keep both her promise to marry Sigurd and her vow to marry any man brave enough to jump through the fire because she is unaware the Sigurd inhabits Gunnar's body when he passes her test. Therefore, she must break her promise to Sigurd, which confirms her previous notion about women breaking promises; however, at the same time, she defies the notion. She maintains her vow to marry Gunnar; she is the masculine female who keeps her promise.

The text sets Brynhild up for breaking her promise to Sifrid from the moment she is introduced. Right after his battle with Fafnir, Sigurd stumbles upon Brynhild. While the close proximity within the text suggests a link between the two characters, Brynhild's description and Sigurd's actions further position her as Fafnir's human monstrous double. When Sigurd first sees Brynhild, he mistakes her for a man: "Sigurd went into the rampart and saw a man lying there asleep, dressed in full armor. First, he removed the helmet from the man's head and saw that it was a woman. She was in a coat of mail so tight that it seemed to have grown into her flesh" (67). Her initial appearance suggests an ambiguous identity that can be easily changed through clothing; by putting on clothing or taking it off, she can effortlessly float between the two genders. Therefore, unlike the verbal battle that transpires between Sigurd and Fafnir, the "battle" between Sigurd and the masculine Brynhild is physical. Sigurd slices open her armor, transforming her identity. The cutting of her "flesh," her gender performance, slowly removes her from the masculine sphere and binds her to her biological sex. However, Brynhild refuses to be consumed defined by her femininity: she chooses death as a way to maintain the last remnants of her hybridity.

Brynhild's death, final request, and last words mirror Fafnir's. First, unlike the other male characters who broke their vows and were killed by others, Brynhild commits suicide. In her last attempt to float between gender spheres, she picks up a sword and stabs herself; she penetrates herself. While the action does not appear to be sexual, the act of self-penetration invokes the image of the hermaphroditic and self-copulating dragon. Out of this penetration, gendered stability is restored temporarily and the hybrid threats within the Burgundian kingdom are vanquished. However, her death also gives birth to a new, latent form of social anxiety: the ability to change social positions due to wealth. As she dies, Brynhild asks that "a large amount

of gold be brought and that all who wanted to accept the gift of wealth to come forward” (92). This request links her to Fafnir in a new way. Both she and Fafnir amass a large amount of wealth but give it away before they die; Fafnir gives it to Sigurd while Brynhild allows anyone to have it. This exchange, although not dealing with physical bodies, is still transformative. It provides people with the means to advance in social class. As demonstrated by Sigurd, who is an outsider throughout the text, he is able to raise himself within the Burgundian court by means of his wealth and status. He has no blood connection to the royal family and, prior to defeating Fafnir, does not have the wealth to secure a spot within any court. However, once he defeats the dragon and loots its treasures, Sigurd is able to become Gunnar’s vassal, which, in turn, highlights the diminishing practice of primogeniture. No longer are court and high ranking positions based on blood alone, like in the old feudal society. But, despite Gunnar’s initial trust, Sigurd’s connection to the “Other” and lack of blood relations eventually position him as a threat, causing his ultimate downfall. Therefore, while not explicitly mentioned in the text, Brynhild’s act of distributing wealth among everyone gives them the opportunity to advance their social class, which disrupts the social order.

Brynhild and Fafnir’s speech serves as another link between the two hybrids. Sigurd and Fafnir’s verbal battle begins after the hero fatally stabs the dragon. Fafnir asks “Who are you, or who is your father, or who is your family, you who are so impudent that you dare to bear weapons against me?” (63), to which Sigurd responds, “My family is unknown to men. I am called the noble beast” (63). Sigurd’s response is a lie, which immediately transforms him into a bisexual dragon, the “noble beast.” The lie, however, fails to convince Fafnir. The two continue their battle moving into a debate about mythology until Sigurd wins and figuratively sentences Fafnir to his grave: “‘And you, Fafnir, lie in your death throes until Hel has you.’ Then Fafnir

died” (65). In examining the battle between Sigurd and Fafnir, Lionarons points out that “indeed it is necessary that Fafnir speak, because the conversation between Sigurd and the dragon is what fills the gap left by the absence of a physical fight” (Lionarons 64). This verbal fight functions “to enable young men to establish, through a verbal struggle made up of a series of ritualized challenges and insults, the cultural norms of proper social and sexual behaviors as well as to define their own individualized psychosexual identity...[it] serves to allow the hero to define himself as a human subject against an inhuman, objectified other” (65). The fight becomes a fight and struggle for social and gendered order. By winning, Sigurd legitimizes himself as a hero, while at the same time slaying the old form of order and chaos present within the dragon. This fight allows for change to infiltrate the Burgundian court.

In a similar manner, Brynhild and Gudrun also engage in a verbal altercation about their status and their husbands. Their battle begins when Brynhild ventures further out in a river to bathe. The position of the females, and even the words exchanged, indicate that Brynhild believes herself to be more powerful and have more status than Gudrun, despite Brynhild being an outsider, an “Other,” and Gudrun being of blood royalty. This conflict of social and gender positions between royal families and outsiders which resonates within the current German culture establishes the grounds to wage a verbal battle. In retaliation of Brynhild’s claims to power, Gudrun attacks Brynhild’s virginity and maidenhead, proposing that it was Sigurd, not Gunnar, who took it (*Volsung* 82). And, as Bryan argues, “when Brynhildr denies [the claim about her lost virginity], again using direct speech, [Gudrun] deals the decisive blow by producing the infamous ring,” the ring that Sigurd first gave to Brynhild but took back, in the form of Gunnar, and gave to Gudrun (360). Gudrun’s ability to operate through indirect aggression deals a deadly blow to Brynhild, positioning herself as a stronger and more powerful

character. Her victory reiterates the power that the royal family has; it cannot and should not be questioned or threatened by people of lower position, which includes non-native people.

Therefore, in comparing the two verbal feuds within the text, Fafnir approaches the battle in a more direct way—physically, for he takes the most direct path to the river, and verbally, for his interrogation of Sigurd remains direct—while Sigurd, like Gudrun, utilizes more indirect tactics to defeat Fafnir—he not only hides in a ditch, but he continues to evade Fafnir’s questions and provide obscure and ambiguous answers. Thus, Brynhild and Fafnir bear another resemblance: both can only operate through direct speech, while their opponents defeat them through indirect and deadly verbal blows.

Finally, and most importantly, Brynhild’s and Fafnir’s dying speeches encompass the problems with the current Burgundian society and structure. In her last breath, Brynhild asserts, “When you [Gunnar] plotted his [Sigurd’s] death, you did not clearly remember when you and Sigurd had mixed your blood together” (91). Fafnir’s last words are similar, as he claims that the name of the island where “Surt and Æsir” will mix together blood is “called Oskapt, the uncreated” (64). In both speeches, the two dragons look to the past and discuss the mixing of blood to create something new: the “uncreated” (64). The mixing of bodily fluid and the creation of a new identity mirrors the act of conception, for it requires a mixing of bodily fluids. The new conception has two potential meanings based on the historical moment in which this text is recorded: one that deals specifically with gender and the other with socio-political aspects of society. If Brynhild and Fafnir’s speech are taken to comment on the gender norms within the society, then their comments about the mixing of bodily fluids requires distinctly masculine and the feminine sexes, in order to create a new child. At conception, the child only has a biological sex and escapes from the “creation” of prescribed gendered and social roles. However, the

current society in which they live cannot disassociate the biological sex of the child from traditional gender roles once it is born; it cannot “un-create” the culture of gender. Therefore, their speeches stand as pleas that question and challenge the gender norms. Only by accepting forms of hybridity and fluid movement through gender spheres can order fully be established. In addition to the gendered reading of their speeches, Brynhild and Fafnir’s speech can also reflect the current socio-political state of Iceland through the chaos within the Burgundian court. With more people immigrating over to Iceland, the nation has the opportunity to shape its social class and government into something new, something that has yet to be created and that does not have to be defined by their previous experience. Thus, the combination of their dying words can be read as a celebration of the potential of mixing cultures and genders performances; however, if the culture cannot find a way to mediate and celebrate this form of hybridity, all that can amount is chaos and death, not just for characters like Brynhild and Fafnir that the text rejects but also for the nation.

The same social, political, and gender troubles that arise in *The Saga of the Volsungs* through deceit and transformations occur with the *Nibelungenlied* as well; however, in the second text, the same anxieties are expressed primarily through the spilling and absorption of blood. Despite its prevalence throughout the story, blood remains an elusive topic for critics who have studied the text. H. B. Willson examines blood—specifically towards the end of the poem—in relation to culture and religion, suggesting that it symbolizes the Catholic communion ritual. On the other hand, taking a Feminist and New Historicist approach, Teresa Camacho understands bloodshed as an act of revenge and power for the main female characters, Kriemhilde and Brunhilde, in accordance with Medieval Germanic and Spanish laws. While each scholar utilizes a different approach, both W. B. Willson and Teresa Camacho—intentionally or

unintentionally—equate blood with power: the character Hagan—the main focus of Willson’s article—attains physical power through his spiritual consumption of blood, and Brunhilde and Kriemhilde, the “leading ladies,” struggle for and obtain power through bloodshed.

Remarkably, Camacho’s comparison of archaic Medieval Germanic laws help establish the ideas—and problems —associated with the merging of gender spheres. In archaic laws, “or perhaps even primitive instincts law codes” vengeance was a male practice, “particularly since in law codes and in history it has been linked to war which is not an area that women participated in” (Camacho 142); however, later, in the *Leges Baborum*, the ideas of vengeance changed to allow both men *and* women to exact revenge. The anxieties of merging gender spheres—a co-existence—in relation to exacting revenge surface in the *Nibelungenlied* in the form of blood. As Stephanie B. Pafenberg establishes, “The ‘normal’ gender-specific social roles and spheres of action in feudal society are symbolized by the male sword—‘swert’—and the female spindle—‘spille’” (106). The sword represents an instrument of war and thus symbolizes both political and sexual power (106). In contrast, the feminine spindle represents domesticity and often refers to specific women in the Bible (106-7). Because the men constantly engage in war and the women participate in cloth-making in the *Nibelungenlied*, Pafenberg suggests that these are two ways to distinguish gender spheres. And yet, these actions are not the only factors that establish the boundaries between the two gender spheres. When these gender spheres begin to merge, the spilling and absorption of blood becomes the only way to distinguish and reestablish order.

Perhaps the most important section in the *Nibelungenlied* for understanding the way the text presents different gender spheres, expresses social anxieties about the “Other,” and defines Sifrid’s bisexual nature—despite its brevity—is Hagan’s description of Sifrid’s dragon fight. As Sifrid approaches the Burgundian kingdom, Hagan says, “No knight ever had such great

strength. And that's not all I know about him [Sifrid]. This hero's hand slew a dragon. He bathed in its blood, and it made his skin horny, so that no weapon can cut it. This has been proved many times" (*Nibelungenlied* 10). While the account of Sifrid's conquest appears to have little to do with gender, Benkert-Dodrill and Lionarons's analyses of the dragon and the dragon fight depicted in *The Saga of the Volsungs* (which tells a similar story) connect Sifrid's to the masculine and feminine spheres. Sifrid's new body makes him a "disturbing hybrid whose externally incoherent bod[y] resist[s] attempts to include [it] in any systematic structuration" (Cohen 6), including gender and social roles. He becomes a "Harbinger of Category Crisis," who is "dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (6), because his body threatens to break down tradition gender binaries and his (eventual) position in the Burgundian court dismantles traditional notions of feudalism: Sifrid is both a man and a (noble) beast simultaneously becomes Gunther's vassal despite being an outsider; he is the "the monster dwells at the Gates of difference," at the gates of the Burgundians. And it is his presence, which is the "incorporation of the Outside, the beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distance and distinct but originate Within" (7), that challenges the social, political and gender norms within the society and makes the Burgundians questions their own culture.

With the knowledge and understanding of Sifrid's position within the text, Hagan's account of him and his dragon fight serves as a vehicle to capture the anxieties surrounding the merging of cultural ideologies. By killing the dragon, Sifrid successfully the masculine and feminine sphere, temporarily restoring order. However, as Benkert-Dodrill and Lionarons suggest, the dragon does not completely die with the "death" of the dragon. When Sifrid bathes in the dragon's blood, "a broad lime leaf [falls] on his back between his shoulder blades," (*Nibelungenlied* 86) preventing the blood from completely covering his body. What is supposed

to strengthen him actually curses him. In this small spot, the dragon conceals itself and joins in a union with Sifrid; in this spot, the matriarchy remains and becomes Sifrid's only physical weakness. He transforms into the bi-gendered dragon, internalizing "the characteristics of the dragon while retaining his human form" (Lionarons 82).

Hagan is not the only character to express cultural anxieties within the text; Kriemhilde, Sifrid's wife, does too. She has dream sequences involving two animals—two eagles in the first and two boars in the second—that serve to reiterate the fears about Sifrid's hybrid and destructive potential. In both dreams, these two sets of animals rip apart another, which Kriemhilde's mother, interprets as Sifrid. By having the animals rip Sifrid apart (not just kill him), the text seems to place importance on separating gender spheres and culture in order to maintain peace because without the binaries (male/female, matriarchy/patriarchy, and native/non-native) the Burgundians will no longer have an "Other" to define themselves against. And given the political turmoil of Germany during the early thirteen century, the "Other" is needed to maintain a sense of order and stability. Without proper classifications, the feudal system will fail to distinguish and preserve social order, people will continue to climb social ranks without consequence, and the nobility will begin to lose their cultured status. In short, the disruption of order and the blurring of cultural ideologies will plunge the nation into chaos and disorder.

But, like in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, Sifrid (or Sigurd) is not the only hybrid threat. Brunhilde, too, becomes equally as threatening, particularly due to her bi-gendered nature. The queen defies gender boundaries: she is "outstandingly beautiful" and is "very strong" (*Nibelungenlied* 31); she unites the ideas of courtliness with conquest. Given her bi-gendered nature, Brunhilde's position within society as a powerful women becomes threatening to the men

(and the social order) around her. While the feudal system did allow for women to temporarily exercise more masculine qualities, it typically found ways to eventually restore order to the man and subdue the woman. Brunhilde, the woman who appropriates traditionally masculine qualities, not only defies all conceptions of women's place within society, but also refuses to become submissive. As D.W. Mowatt, the text's translator, mentions, "Her demands are quite simple: he [her husband] must be the best (i.e. the strongest and the bravest) man available" (viii). She tests her potential suitors by giving them a series of three games: throwing a stone, jumping after it and catching it, and throwing a spear. However, if the men fail in any one of them, their "head[s] [are] forfeit" (31). She lures men in with her physical beauty, and kills them—castrates the men and the monarchy—with masculine strength. Brunhilde's weaponry serves to enhance her masculine qualities, too. Four men struggle to carry her two-foot "thick" shield (41) while it takes three men to carry her "strong and barbarous, long and broad" spear "with a murderous cutting-edge"(41). The language used to describe both of her weapons is sexually suggestive. Furthermore, the spear is an overtly phallic symbol. Thus, not only does she appropriate masculine traits, she is, in fact, a better male hero(ine) than the men. Sifrid alone, even with his superior strength, cannot overcome Brunhilde's masculinity. He needs the power of a magical cloak—both to conceal his existence like the dragon and to give him the added strength of twelve men (32)—in order to subdue her.

Brunhilde not only flaunts her ability to perform and dominate the masculine sphere during the trials, but she also calls into question Gunther's—and (unintentionally) Sifrid's—masculinity. Throughout the trials, Brunhilde proves herself a better warrior than the two men. However, it is during the first trial that blood is shed and gender spheres become more fluid. Brunhilde launches her spear and penetrates Gunther's shield. In doing so, she draws blood from

Sifrid and reaffirms her superior masculine performance: “Blood gushed from the mouth of brave Sifrid” (42). Her strength far surpasses Sifrid’s, and Sifrid, at this moment, represents another dragon, not a dragon-slayer. Here, the game between Sifrid and Brunhilde shifts to a battle between a mastery of gender spheres and biological sex; a battle between bi-gendered dragons. Since he cannot conquer her with masculinity since she performs the gender role more effectively than either he or Gunther—despite his biological sex—Sifrid must defeat her with femininity, apparent through the loss of blood. The moment the poet mentions Sifrid’s loss of blood, he emphasizes Sifrid’s presence within the feminine sphere which the cloak unites with the masculine sphere. Therefore, he refuses to “pierce the fair maid” (42) and “penetrate” Brunhilde, a strictly masculine act. Rather, Sifrid turns “the point of the spear backwards over his shoulder” aims “with the shaft at her armour, and cast[s] so that it resounded from his courageous hand (42). He combines the strength of a man with the ability—or rather the inability—of a female (to penetrate) in order to successfully knock Brunhilde off balance. He has to combine male biological sex with feminine gender performance. Despite his success, Sifrid’s and Brunhilde’s display of power and hybridity reaffirm the threat of this union between gender spheres, for they are able to conquer what the patriarchy alone cannot.

With two outside hybrids threatening the established order of the Burgundian court, Sifrid and Brunhilde must die in order to maintain order. Brunhilde, being the greatest and most direct threat to Gunther’s masculinity, is the first dragon to “die.” Although Brunhilde does not die physically, she does experience a metaphorical death within the text. Conquered unknowingly by Sifrid again—with the same combination of the masculine cloak and the loss of blood—Brunhilde finally accepts defeat and consummates her marriage with Gunther: “He made love to her as only he could, and that was the end of her recalcitrance and her modesty. His

attentions *took the blood from her face*, and her special powers left her in the course of love making. She was no stronger than any other woman, and he took possession of her fair body” (63, emphasis added). As Brunhilde lies in bed, with every bone in her body cracked, Gunther penetrates her. He appropriates her strength and masculinity, absorbing them through his phallus. Additionally, through the loss of blood, he removes her from the masculine sphere and returns her to the feminine; the blood drains from her face and she loses all of her masculine power. Without her bi-gendered nature, Brunhilde begins to fade from the text.

Before her metaphorical death, Brunhilde plots Sifrid’s death. However, because she now operates solely within the feminine sphere, she cannot actually kill him and must resort to other methods. Thus, after being dishonored publicly by Kriemhilde, Brunhilde uses Hagan to exact revenge. Rather than killing Kriemhilde, she decides to kill Sifrid for his wife’s offense: Brunhilde’s public humiliation. The death itself, as Lionarons points out, “is structurally reminiscent of a literal dragon slaying” (83). Sifrid begins “the race literally on the ground, lying like an armored serpent—that is, like a dragon—face down in the grass at Hagan’s feet” (84). From these connections, Lionarons asserts that these conditions make the race appear more like a pursuit of a dragon by a dragon-slayer rather than a contest “between equals” (84). However, looking at Brunhilde’s previous contest—one of unequal positions—I would suggest that this scene is indeed another contest between unequals, a contest between the hybrid dragon and the established order. Given the previous outcomes, the results must be the same; the patriarchy/established order finds a way through deception to assert its dominance, much like in *The Saga of the Volsungs*: Hagan tricks Kriemhilde into revealing Sifrid’s weakness and Sifrid into removing his armor. His deception allows him to pierce Sifrid in the back, restoring temporary order.

The mode and description of Sifrid's death parallels Brunhilde's. He too is penetrated by a phallus: a spear, the weapon Brunhilde uses to display her masculinity. Similarly, Sifrid's blood drains from his face at the moment of penetration, removing him from the masculine sphere: "His colour drained away, he could no longer stand. His body was robbed of all its strength for the pallid hand of death was on his face" (93-4). As the blood leaves his face and his body, taking with it all of his strength, it falls upon a bed of flowers: "The flowers all round were drenched with blood" (94). According to *The Trotula*, a widely known medieval medical treatise on the diseases of women, flowers are commonly associated with female sexuality and menstruation, for "just as trees do not bring forth fruit without flowers, so women without their flowers are cheated the ability to conceive" (*Trotula* 66). Thus, in a sense, the blood and the flowers invoke the idea of menstruation and female sexuality, linking Sifrid to the feminine sphere. Moreover, the imagery suggests a form of rebirth through death. While the patriarchy dies, it is simultaneously reborn within new dragons, those who participated in Sifrid's death: Gunther, Hagan, and Kriemhilde. As mentioned before, upon taking away Brunhilde's masculinity, Gunther absorbs and appropriates her strength through his phallus; this act of gaining strength and power through blood marks him as a dragon. Hagan, too, becomes a dragon by penetrating Sifrid. Sifrid's "heart blood spurted from the wound, and soaked Hagan's clothing where he stood" (*Nibelungenlied* 93). The scene parallels Sifrid's act of bathing in dragon's blood. So, although both acts are hyper-masculine—a sexual conquest and act of war—neither Gunther nor Hagan are completely covered in blood: it only douses parts of their bodies, which will eventually allow them fluid movement between gender spheres.

The dragon also conceals itself within Kriemhilde's body, despite her initial absence during Sifrid's death. Seeing her husband's corpse presented in front of her, she touches it. The

poet writes, “With her own white hand she raised his fair head, and red with blood as it was she recognized him immediately,” reminiscent of the “pallid” hand of death that touches Sifrid (96). The emphasis of her white hand touching the bloody head and the blood staining her body reiterates both her role in her husband’s death and her connection to the dragon. She, like Hagan, is partially a dragon-slayer, for without her betrayal, Sifrid would still be alive. Therefore, the slaying of these hybrid characters creates three new hybrids who are displaced within the text and within their own society

Before their deaths, Brunhilde and Sifrid are scapegoated for their “Otherness.” They are foreigners at Worms, strangers. As Lionarons states,

By making Sifrit their scapegoat, the Burgundians can cut through the tangled web of degrees of guilt and innocence, truth and deception, that has led to the argument between the queens;...and they can restore the social order by reinterpreting the figure of Sifrit as an outsider, an alien, monstrous intruder who can be killed with impunity. (83)

While she only applies this idea to Sifrid, Lionaron’s idea of “otherness” extends beyond just him. Brunhilde’s “otherness” and monstrous abilities place her in the same category; she too poses a threat—initially greater than Sifrid’s—to the Burgundian order. But the bases for their death and is not solely based off if their “otherness;” it encompasses the intimate relationship and the powerful status that these two obtain within the narrative that make their “otherness” more threatening. By assimilating into the Burgundian culture and becoming Gunther’s vassal, Sifrid, exactly like in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, upsets the traditional order and status of the nobility. However, unlike the Icelandic culture which is beginning to define itself by the “Other,” the German culture is attempting to change the current feudal system in place. This change, thus,

generates fear and questions, which the text solves through death and movement: either the hybrid dies because the culture cannot adapt to the potential that the character brings or it rejects the character and forces him or her to wander to a new location. So, when Sifrid and Brunhilde die and the dragons manifest themselves within the three Burgundians, Gunther, Hagan, and Kriemhilde become “Others” and, rather than dying, the text pushes them out of the Burgundian kingdom for they no longer belong to that society and moves them into Etzel’s court.

The displacement of the three new hybrids is not the solution though. Shortly after Krimhilde leaves the court, she seeks vengeance for her husband Sifrid. She starts a war at Etzel’s court that blurs the cultural boundaries. During battle, soldiers consume and lose blood. Paths are “bathed in fresh blood” (179), bringing death through femininity to the court, threatening the authority of the patriarchy. On the other hand, men are both bathing in and drinking the blood of their fallen companions. Blood drips and coats the soldiers’ armor and weapons. Hagan even tells his men to “drink up some of this blood” flowing from their fallen companions (194). As the soldiers consume the blood, “each of them was filled with new strength,” increasing their masculinity (195). The battle between the two gender and cultural ideologies results in continuous bloodshed, death and chaos. At the same time though, the same blood renews their strength and vigor. The court becomes impregnated with hybridity and chaos. The only way to restore order, albeit temporarily, is through the slaying of the three bi-gendered characters.

Therefore, the final scene offers a direct confrontation between the three dragons in an attempt to restore stability within the court and the text. Before she is confronted by Hagan and Gunther, Kriemhilde has only operated within the female sphere, plotting the death of two men and having others attempt to carry out her desires: she finds a feminine way to access masculine warfare. However, she is not strong enough to defeat the two males while remaining solely

within her prescribed gender sphere. Therefore, during the direct confrontation with Gunther and Hagan she transforms herself into a female warrior like Brunhilde by engaging in battle. Because Hagan and Gunther lose—they fail to best Kriemhilde in her own game—Kriemhilde cuts off their heads. She decapitates her brother first, mocking Hagan with it, only to do the same to him soon after (217-8). However, because Kriemhilde presents the greatest threat to the male patriarchy as bi-gendered dragon, she cannot be allowed to exist; she cannot be both masculine and feminine nor can she wield a sword in a female's body. Like the falcon in her dream, she be ripped apart. Hildebrand, a noble warrior, must kill her to restore order: “Angrily he leapt at Kriemhilde, and swung his heavy sword at the Queen” (218). The death of Kriemhilde destroys gender, social, and political threats that threaten the patriarchal feudal society

Despite the death of Hagan, Gunther, and Kriemhilde—the three “dragons”—and the failed attempts to embrace hybridity, the poet recognizes the potential beauty and glory of it, specifically a collapse of gendered difference that subjugates women in a patriarchal society. He writes, “A glorious way of life had died with them” (218). This final notion of the tale links the possibility of a hybrid identity with Cohen's last thesis about monsters: “fear of the monster is really a kind of desire” (16). He claims that the “monster is continually linked to forbidden practices, in order to normalize and to enforce” (16). Through exposure to these different forms of hybridity, including the disassociation of biological sex and gender performance, these monsters attempt to normalize them. However, while these performances may have occurred temporarily under certain circumstances in the past through the old feudal tradition, the permanence of these actions and identities pose a threat to the established order. Women like Kriemhilde and Brunhilde cannot exist within the text because they transform themselves into better men than the other males. They amass and wield power that the feudal system reserves

only for men and thus highlight the inadequacies of the men within the narrative and of the current patriarchal society. Thus, within the text, these monsters cannot escape, hybridity cannot exist, and therefore blood must be shed—the dragon must die—to maintain order. With all of the changes taking place in the hierarchy of social order, indeterminate or fluid gender—something that was believed to be fixed and concrete—becomes the most destructive of them all.

Despite its dissimilar story (even with similar characters) from the previous two texts, *Kudrun* still grapples with the same anxieties about gender and hybridity, although it offers a rather different solution. Unlike the *Nibelungenlied* and *The Saga of the Volsungs*, which both long for and offer sympathetic responses to cultural, social, and gender hybridity, *Kudrun* rejects these notions and the characters who embody them and suggests that the only way to truly acquire power is through one's own appropriate, prescribed gender. Additionally, the text further distinguishes itself from the other two through the hybrid monster used to establish characters as bi-gendered: a griffon. While the text does allude to a dragon fight involving Hagan, the main battle occurs between Hagan and the griffon. Therefore, when the griffon is slain, Hagan and Gerlint—as well as other minor characters—begin to move through the gender spheres more fluidly, while Kudrun resists defying her prescribed gender role.

Although the main focus of this discussion will be on Kudrun and Gerlint, the two feuding females, Hagan's bi-gendered nature is crucial in establishing the boundaries for the masculine and feminine sphere. For Hagan, the death of the griffon allows him to define his masculinity, kill the “monstrous lizard” (*Kudrun* 9), and gain superhuman strength like Sifrid. At the same time though, the slaying of the beast permits him to cry, which the text suggests is an exclusively female action: Wate the Old actually shouts at his men for crying, proclaiming “You are all behaving like women, and with no real reason” (119). Furthermore, it is important to note

that Hagan sheds “bloody tears” (45) invoking the same bi-gendered connotations from the *Nibelungenlied*. Comingling blood and tears conflates Hagan’s masculine prowess in war with the feminine acts of crying and menstruation. Therefore, Hagan loses both his (masculine) gender through the loss of “menstrual blood,” and his place within the text through his death.

The slaying of the griffon also offers a new way of entering the masculine sphere for female characters: cross-dressing. In *Literary Hybrids: Cross-Dressing, Shapeshifting, and Indeterminacy in Medieval and Modern French Narrative*, Erika E. Hess explores the role of cross-dressing in two thirteenth-century French romances *Le Roman de Silence* and *L’Enfant de sable*. Although her work does not deal with any of the three texts that are the focus of this essay, Hess’s exploration of cross-dressing highlights the same anxieties about unstable identity and hybridity that challenges and “explores the limits of the traditional sex-gender categories and boundaries” (Hess 44). Looking specifically at *Le Roman de Silence*, Hess notes that “Silence consistently performs as a boy in an authentic and convincing manner... which creates the illusion of a corresponding inner essence” (64). Furthermore, she quotes Butler, saying “In other words, acts gestures, and desires produce the effects of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as cause (Butler qtd. in Hess 64, original emphasis). Despite her outward performance, Silence’s masculine exterior does not change her female interior, which, if exposed, would cause tension and problems to arise within the text for it disassociates biological sex and gender performativity. This then challenges the traditional patriarchal society because it gives women the opportunity to “become” men even if they do not become male. Consequently, women like Silence who partake in cross-dressing are not viewed “as either uniquely masculine or feminine” (66), but rather as displaced hybrids who float

between the two gender spheres. Silence's masculine performance resonates within Brynhilde, the female warrior. In both *The Saga of the Volsungs* and *Nibelungenlied*, Brynhilde dresses like a male (most notably in the former) and engages in traditionally male practices. Once her hybridity is exposed, she truly becomes a threat within the texts and must be destroyed.

Looking at the actions following the griffon fight helps to define the same anxieties present in *Silence*, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, and (to an extent) the *Nibelungenlied*. When the griffon—a physical hybrid monster dies—a new form of monstrosity emerges in the form of cross-dressing. The three princesses in the company of Hagan end up wearing men's clothing when they board a rescue ship:

Before they [the women] were taken on board the ship, they were given clothes from those that the pilgrims had brought with them. In spite of their modesty, the girls had to put on these men's clothes, although they did so with great embarrassment. However, their tears soon stopped. When the beautiful princesses were brought out to the ship, they were received and greeted courteously by the fine and noble knights, even though these had previously imagined that those girls were strange and monstrous. (11)

This scene is useful for understanding traditional gender roles depicted by the text. First, the women begin to cry before they put on the men's clothing, which, as the text continuously reminds the audience, is a feminine practice; however, when they put on the clothing, the tears stop. The act of putting on men's clothing helps the women perform in a more traditionally masculine way and stops them from crying; it disassociates them from their biological sex. The cross-dressing, though, initially has an adverse effect on the way the women are perceived. Due to the women's hybrid appearance, they are viewed as monsters by the men. Not until the men

converse with the princesses—who, unlike Silence, do not attempt to pass as men—do they realize that these women are *not* attempting to disassociate their biological sex from their gender performance and therefore pose no threat.

While these scenes help define the limitations of gender and cultural hybridity, they are not the main expression of anxiety within the text: that occurs between the two feuding ladies, Queen Gerlint and Kudrun. However, one final piece of information is needed in order to understand how these two ladies become involved in the larger discussion of fears surrounding gender. Only after Hagan dies and shed his “bloody tears” can Hartmuot enter Kudrun’s kingdom and try to court her: he becomes the outsider who disrupts the social order. Because he fails to successfully take her hand in marriage, Hartmout abducts Kudrun and brings her to his kingdom. It is here that Queen Gerlint attempts to defy gender boundaries. Although she does not cross-dress, Queen Gerlint still moves fluidly between the gender spheres, embracing any opportunity to appropriate power and operate within the masculine sphere.

The queen attempts to exercise masculine power through war in an attempt to unify and save her kingdom, and yet, she fails. When Hilde’s campaign comes to rescue Kudrun and wage war on the Normans, Gerlint tries to prevent her son from leaving the castle in order to save his life. In her first attempt to dissuade Hartmuot’s from his decisions, she pleads “What are you going to do, my lord? Are you planning to throw away your own life and the lives of these warriors? If you leave the fortress, the enemy will kill you” (122). While her actions are warnings, the queen simultaneously threatens Hartmuot’s masculinity by questioning his decisions about war. And, as mentioned earlier, women did not engage in any form of warfare, strategic or tactical. Hartmuot not only rejects her advice, but scorns her for attempting to meddle in masculine feats of war: “It is not for you to give advice to me or to my men. Go and

give orders to your women—they may listen to you. Tell them how to embroider and sew jewels on silk” (122). Hartmuot’s exclamation emphasizes the fear of women giving military commands, in a feudal society that makes war the province of men. Instead, Hartmuot suggests that she becomes a commander of women and domestic issues; the only time that she can give orders is in the domestic sphere. However, while giving orders to these women provides her a form of power, it shows Queen Gerlint’s limitations as a female.

Queen Gerlint refuses to submit and continues to pressure him to accept her advice; however, she provides a feminine solution for a masculine problem:

Your fortress is a strong one. Have the gates barred, and these intruders will get very little out of their journey here. You know very well...that they hate you because you killed their kinsmen, and you should take all the more care for that reason. Beyond the castle, you have no kinsmen to help you, and there are twenty proud Hegelings to every one of our men. Furthermore, my dear son, we have bread, wine and food enough in the castle for a while year. If any of us is taken captive, that person will not be spared for ransoming. (123)

Women traditionally are not warriors, at least in this type of feudal society, and therefore would have limited access to knowledge about war. Queen Gerlint, on the other hand, not only understands wars, but has devised a plan that would ensure their success; however, her plan is highly feminized. She urges Hartmuot to remain passive and to bar gates to prevent the castle, and herself, from being penetrated. Like Krimhilde’s, she attempts to engage in an indirect battle, which, as seen in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, suggests that she holds more power. And it is this suggestion that makes her a threat to the patriarchy.

Hartmuot again, only this time more crossly, rejects Queen Gerlint's attempt to move through the masculine sphere, yelling "Lady, get back! How can you presume to give me advice? I am quite able to think for myself. I would rather die out there at the hands of Hilde's soldiers than be found shut up in my castle" (123). To present an indirect, feminine alternative is more of an insult to Hartmuot, who would rather die in a direct, masculine battle. His exclamation works, too, in placing his mother back in the feminine sphere: "'I am giving you advice that will help you to save your life,' replied the old queen, with tears in her eyes" (123). Gerlint's attempt to give advice raises certain concerns about women's speech. Regardless of the type of advice they give, whether good or bad, women's speech is always called into question. Moreover, the exchange of advice involves certain power dynamics between the giver and the receiver, ultimately falling on the receiver to reject or accept the advice. Given the dual disposition of Gerlint's advice, a feminine approach to a masculine topic, and Hartmuot's rejection of it, in essence, he simultaneously rejects her bi-gendered nature. Additionally, as a result of the outburst, Gerlint concedes and tears form up in her eyes; Hartmuot temporarily hinders her limited movement through the gender sphere. However, her tears do not fall; they only form in her eyes, suggesting that she is not entirely removed from the masculine sphere and not dwelling wholly within the feminine. This allows her to make one final push to retain her bi-gendered nature; she declares war and calls men to arms (123).

Because characters who manipulate traditional gender spheres are seen as threats in these three texts, Queen Gerlint must die; however, when faced with death, she attempts to revoke her gender fluidity and retreat back to the feminine sphere. She runs to Kudrun, submits herself to her, and pleads, "Save, us Princess, from Wate, and his men. It is within your power to decide whether I live or die" (134). While the Queen attempts to relinquish and reallocate power to

Kudrun, her understanding of gender spheres, and, more importantly, her understanding of how Kudrun operates within the feminine sphere, causes her death. She believes that Kudrun, during a time of war, can save her, and, although Kudrun does decide to spare Queen Gerlint's life, the choice is not ultimately hers to make, for she refuses to operate within the masculine sphere, refusing to operate during the heat of war. Therefore, Wate, one of Hilde's soldiers, is the one who decides to kill Queen Gerlint. Right before she dies, Gerlint makes one last effort to establish herself within the feminine sphere: she cries. The scribe writes, "Wicked Queen Gerlint began to weep" (*Kudrun* 135). And yet, it is too late. Wate "took her by the hair, asking leave of no-one, so great was his anger, and he struck off the queen's head" (135). Wate, with this last blow, metaphorically castrates Queen Gerling and her masculine performance, establishing a boundary between the two gender spheres and restoring temporary gendered order.

In contrast to Queen Gerlint, Kudrun refuses to operate within the masculine sphere. Unlike the three women on the island with Hagan, Kudrun actively rejects cross-dressing, regardless of circumstances, because of the possible conflation between gender and biological sex: "No-one shall ever see *me* wearing a man's clothing" (Kudrun 110, emphasis added). Men's clothes display a physical rejection of the feminine roles and the acceptance of traditionally masculine ones. Furthermore, unlike Gerlint who is eager to participate in battle (even if it means just giving orders), Kudrun remains completely passive during the fight. At one point, a sword, a symbol of masculine power, falls before her, and she refuses to pick it up: "When Queen Hilde's daughter [Kudrun] saw a naked sword brandished in anger before her, she had good cause to regret the fact that she was so far from her friends! And if Prince Hartmuot has not seen what was happening, her head would have been struck off" (129-30). Fearful for her life she and several other of her ladies scream which causes Hartmuot's to run in her direction and slay the

warrior about to strike her down (130). This scene parallels Queen Gerlint's death, only with Kudrun, her feminine virtues, exemplified by the other ladies joining in her scream of terror, protect her from being killed. Because she refused to operate within the masculine sphere, Kudrun cannot be castrated like Gerlint; she has no form of masculinity that can be slain.

By rejecting opportunities to masculinize herself and assuming power only when men give it to her, Kudrun surrenders to traditional feminine gender roles and the text rewards her with temporary masculine power before she loses it through her own marriage to Herwic: she not only establishes herself as queen, but she also advises and controls three other marriages at the end of the text—Ortwin and Hartmuot's sister Ortrun, Hildeburc and Hartmuot, and Herwic's sister and Sifrit. In doing so, she also saves Hartmuot. Kudrun states, "I shall tell you how to save your life...I and my kinsman will provide you with a wife, with whom you can retain both your lands and your position, and the hostility that was between us will be forgotten forever" (145). Either Hartmuot can accept death, or he can succumb to Kudrun's wish and marry a suitor that she has selected. Despite—or perhaps because of—her refusal to cross-dress or pick up a sword, Kudrun, at this moment, ends up having the most power. Even when Kudrun amasses so much authority, she rejects any chance to seize more (masculine) power. Through her offer, Kudrun allows Hartmuot to retain his masculinity, defined by his social status and land. Even though the text provides Kudrun with temporary power, it cannot leave her with it, emphasizing the fears of the feudal society where women subvert power from men; her reward is not permanent, and thus, the text ends with an alliance formed with Kudrun's husband and Ortwin (151-2). Therefore, unlike the *Nibulengenlied* and *The Saga of the Volsungs*, which are more concerned with how gender fluidity compromises or threatens the patriarchy, *Kudrun* rejects

gender performance and suggests that power and authority can be discovered independently of gender performance, through biological sex, even by female characters.

The Nibelungenlied, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, and *Kudrun* all explore the potential of gender fluidity and disassociating biological sex from gender within a feudal society. In *The Nibelungenlied*, blood allows the fluid movement between gender spheres for certain characters such as Sifrid and Brunhilde; however, their bi-gendered performance threatens established norms. Sifrid absorbs blood in order to obtain hyper-masculine strength, and yet, he must perform in a more feminine way in order to conquer Brunhilde. Similarly, Brunhilde designs her three challenges to test each male's masculine performance; the man who is able to outperform her in the masculine sphere will ultimately win her hand in marriage. Despite each character's mastery of both gender spheres, neither Sifrid nor Brunhilde can survive. Their performances conflict with current gender norms associated with their biological sex, thereby doubly establishing them as outsiders, both as people whose origins are outside of the Burgundian court and as people who cannot conform to assigned gender roles. Within *The Saga of the Volsungs*, the same anxieties arise; however, rather than blood, the breaking of promises and the acts of transformation serve as an attempt to stabilize gender norms. According to the text, only women break their vows and have the knowledge to transform; therefore, men who operate within this sphere, regardless of previous masculine performance, or women who defy these expectations, pose a threat. They act against the social norms, and this disruption suggests these monsters stand "at the threshold...of becoming" (Cohen 19). Each character "ask[s] us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about...gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression" (19) within feudal society. Characters such as Brynhild not only resist conformity,

but raise questions about established gender norms: is there a way to examine the “uncreated”—the biological sex of a child—independently from the “created”—the prescribed gender performance?

Although *The Nibelungenlied* and *The Saga of the Volsunga* simultaneously acknowledge the beauty of this possibility but understand the fears associated with them, *Kudrun* outright rejects most notions of alternative gender performances for they threaten what feudal society deems to be masculine and feminine. Thus, when Queen Gerlint acts in a traditionally masculine way as she attempts to provide advice during war, she threatens her son’s masculinity. This fear is what perpetuates the story and ultimately leads Kudrun to conform only to conventional feminine gender norms, for if the text, reflective of feudal society, accepts these new forms of fluidity, then it encourages gender performances that destabilize the current understanding of masculine and feminine. People during this time who are currently considered masculine or feminine might no longer fit within these categories thereby displacing them and positioning them as outsiders, as monsters. And within in a society that stresses the importance of stability and place, social and otherwise, displacement threatens not only their understanding of gender, but their entire way of life.

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