

HELREIÐ BRYNHILDAR

(*The Hel-Ride of Brynhild*)

Bellows' Introduction (1936)

The little *Helreith Brynhildar* immediately follows the "short" Sigurth lay in the *Codex Regius*, being linked to it by the brief prose note; the heading, "Brynhild's Ride on Hel-Way," stands just before the first stanza. The entire poem, with the exception of stanza 6, is likewise quoted in the *Nornagestthattr*. Outside of one stanza (No. 11), which is a fairly obvious interpolation, the poem possesses an extraordinary degree of dramatic unity, and, certain pedantic commentators notwithstanding, it is one of the most vivid and powerful in the whole collection. None the less, it has been extensively argued that parts of it belonged originally to the so-called *Sigrdrifumol*. That it stands in close relation to this poem is evident enough, but it is difficult to believe that such a masterpiece of dramatic poetry was ever the result of mere compilation. It seems more reasonable to regard the *Helreith*, with the exception of stanza 11 and allowing for the loss of two lines from stanza 6, as a complete and carefully constructed unit, based undoubtedly on older poems, but none the less an artistic creation in itself.

The poem is generally dated as late as the eleventh century, and the concluding stanza betrays Christian influence almost unmistakably. It shows the confusion of traditions manifest in all the later poems; for example, Brynhild is here not only a Valkyrie but also a swan-maiden. Only three stanzas have any reference to the Guthrun-Gunnar part of the story; otherwise the poem is concerned solely with the episode of Sigurth's finding the sleeping Valkyrie. Late as it is, therefore, it is essentially a Norse creation, involving very few of the details of the German cycle (cf. introductory note to *Gripisspo*).

Hollander's Introduction (1962)

Though plainly the product of a later age (twelfth century?) than even the preceding poems—as is evidenced by a number of legendary traits which have no parallel elsewhere and must be of the poet's invention, and also by the minor key of a postheroic age—and though by no means among the best lays of the *Edda*, this poem accomplishes what is manifestly the aim of the preceding lays: the winning of our sympathy for Brynhild. Indeed, it may be styled a biographic justification, in an elegiac strain, against the accusations of the giantess, who represents a hostile world: there has been nothing in her life but woe. After an idyllic and harmless youth at Heimir's court she unwittingly offends Óthin by aiding a young hero she loves against an old suitor; the youth is slain (no doubt—by Óthin's spear?), and she is doomed to sleep behind the wall of flame until awakened by Sigurth. But here too she is cruelly betrayed and by a remorseless fate compelled to seek the death of the very hero she loves best. To her, it has been a world full of sorrow; but in a future and better life, Sigurth and she shall live together forever—clearly a Christian thought, foisted on an archheathen theme!¹

The poem is not used in the paraphrase in the *Völsunga saga*; but is (with one slight omission) cited in full in the *Nornagests Þáttur*.

OUTLINE

(*line numbers according to Bellows*)

P1	Of Sigurd & Brynhild's Funerals; Brynhild fares to Hel
1-2	The Giantess Questions Brynhild's Purpose
3-4	Brynhild & the Giantess Trade Insults
5	Brynhild's Defense: Gunnar Lied
6	Of Brynhild's Childhood in Hlymdalir
7	The Stealing of the Swan-Coats
8	Of Hjalmgunnar's Death
9-10	Of Odin's Anger & Brynhild's Punishment
11-12	Of Sigurd's Coming
13	Of Brynhild Betrayed
14	Of Brynhild's Final Reward

Thorpe (1866)	Bellows (1936)	Hollander (1962)
<p>After Brynhild's death two piles were made, one for Sigurd, which was the first burnt; but Brynhild was burnt afterwards, and she was in a chariot, which was hung with precious tapestry; so that it was said that Brynhild drove in a chariot on the way to Hel, and passed through a place in which a giantess dwelt.</p> <p>The giantess said: 1. "Thou shalt not pass through My stone-supported dwelling place. Better had it beseeemed thee to work broidery, Than to seek after another's husband.</p> <p>2. Why dost thou, vagrant woman! from Valland, My dwelling visit? Thou hast, golden dame! if thou desirest to know, Gentle one! from thy hands washed human blood."</p> <p>Brynhild 3. "Upbraid me not, woman of the rock! Although I have in warfare been. Of us, I trow, I shall the better seem, Wherever men our conditions know."</p> <p>Giantess 4. "Thou, Brynhild! Budli's daughter! Wast in evil hour born in the world; Thou hast been the bane of Giuki's children, And their happy house subverted."</p> <p>Brynhild 5. "From my chariot I will truly tell thee, Thou witless crone! If thou desirest to know, How Giuki's heirs made me Both lovelorn and perjured.</p> <p>6. The bold-hearted king² caused the garbs Of us eight sisters under an oak to be borne. Twelve years old was I, if thou desirest to know, When to the youthful king oaths I gave.</p> <p>7. By all in Hlymdalir I was called Hild with the helm, By all who knew me.</p> <p>8. Then caused I next, in the Gothic realm, The old Hialmgunnar to Hel to journey: I gave victory to the youthful brother of Oda,</p>	<p>³[P1] After the death of Brynhild there were made two bale-fires,⁴ the one for Sigurth, and that burned first, and on the other was Brynhild burned, and she was on a wagon which was covered with a rich cloth. Thus it is told, that Brynhild went in the wagon on Hel-way, and passed by a house where dwelt a certain giantess.</p> <p>The giantess spake: 1. "Thou shalt not further forward fare, My dwelling ribbed with rocks across; More seemly it were at thy weaving to stay, Than another's husband here to follow.</p> <p>2. "What wouldst thou have from Valland⁵ here, Fickle of heart, in this my house? Gold-goddess,⁶ now, if thou wouldst know, Heroes' blood from thy hands hast washed."</p> <p>Brynhild spake: 3. "Chide me not, woman from rocky walls, Though to battle once I was wont to go; Better than thou I shall seem to be, When men us two shall truly know."</p> <p>The giantess spake: 4. "Thou wast, Brynhild, Buthli's daughter, For the worst of evils born in the world; To death thou hast given Gjuki's children, And laid their lofty house full low."</p> <p>Brynhild spake: 5. "Truth from the wagon here I tell thee, Witless one, if know thou wilt How the heirs of Gjuki gave me to be joyless ever, a breaker of oaths.</p> <p>6. "Hild⁷ the helmed in Hlymdalir⁸ They named me of old, all they who knew me.⁹</p> <p>7. "The monarch¹⁰ bold the swan-rob¹¹ bore Of the sisters eight¹² beneath an oak; Twelve winters I was, if know thou wilt, When oaths I yielded the king so young.</p> <p>8. "Next I let the leader of Goths, Hjalmgunnar¹³ the old, go down to hell, And victory brought to Autha's brother;</p>	<p>After the death of Brynhild two funeral piles were made, one for Sigurth, and that one was kindled first; but on the other, Brynhild was burned, and she was laid in a wain which was lined with cloth of gold.²² It is said that Brynhild rode in this wain on her way to Hel. She came to a dwelling place where lived a giantess.</p> <p><i>The giantess said:</i> 1. "Thy wain halt there! Thy way lies not through My homestead, standing on stones upraised.²³ 'Twere better for thee in thy bower to weave, Than in Hel to hanker after Guthrún's husband.</p> <p>2. "Why would'st, wayward Welsh²⁴ fair woman, E'er drift into my lowly dwelling? From thy hands hast thou, highborn lady, Washed the blood of warriors many."</p> <p><i>(Brynhild said:)</i> 3. "Upbraid me not, thou bride of thurses, That in many frays I fought with heroes;²⁵ Of us both, I ween, the better am I: Uncouth to mankind thy kin is ever."</p> <p><i>(The giantess said:)</i> 4. "And thou, Brynhild, Buthli's daughter, To most woe wast thou of all women born: To Gjuki's offspring but ill thou broughtest, And low didst lay their lordly house."²⁶</p> <p><i>(Brynhild said:)</i> 5. "As the wiser one from my wain I shall Tell thee, witless woman, if to wit thee list, How Gunnar's lies my love did steal, How the false one's guile faithless made me.</p> <p>6.²⁷ "(Was I nursed and raised in noble king's hall, Beloved by most of lieges and thanes.)²⁸ But in Hlymdale²⁹ court was I hight ever Hild³⁰ beneath Helm by whoever knew me.</p> <p>7. "The fearless king³¹ our feather coats took—³² Eight sisters we—an oak beneath. Was I winters twelve, if to wit thee list, When to Agnar I dear oaths did swear.</p> <p>8. "To Hel I sent Hjalmgunnar old,³³ The Gothic³⁴ king, all gashed with wounds, But bestowed victory on stouthearted Agnar;</p>

<p>Whereat Odin became hostile to me.</p> <p>9. He with shields encompassed me, Red and white, in Skatalund; their surfaces enclosed me; Him he ordained my sleep to break, Who in no place could be made to fear.</p> <p>10. He made around my hall, towards the south, Towering burn the destroyer of all wood: Then bade that man only over it to ride, Who me the gold should bring, that under Fafnir lay.</p> <p>11. On Grani rode the chief, the gold-disperser, To where my foster-father ruled o'er the dwellings. He alone seemed there to all superior, The Danish warrior, of the court.</p> <p>12. We slept and were content in the same bed, As if he had my born brother been; Neither of us might on the other, For eight nights, lay a hand.</p> <p>13. Reproached me Gudrun, Giuki's daughter, That I had slept in Sigurd's arms; Then was I made aware of what I fain would not,— That they had deceived me, when a mate I took.</p> <p>14. To calamities all too lasting men and women, Ever will be while living born. We two shall now, Sigurd and I Pass our life together. Sink thou of giant-kind!"</p>	<p>For this was Othin's anger mighty.</p> <p>9. "He beset me with shields in Skatalund,¹⁴ Red and white, their rims o'erlapped; He bade that my sleep should broken be By him who fear had nowhere found.</p> <p>10. "He let round my hall, that southward looked, The branches' foe¹⁵ high-leaping burn; Across it he bade the hero come Who brought me the gold that Fafnir guarded¹⁶</p> <p>11.¹⁷ On Grani¹⁸ rode the giver of gold, Where my foster-father ruled his folk; Best of all he seemed to be, The prince of the Danes,¹⁹ when the people met.</p> <p>12. "Happy we slept, one bed we had, As he my brother born had been; Eight²⁰ were the nights when neither there Loving hand on the other laid.</p> <p>13. "Yet Guthrun reproached me, Gjuki's daughter, That I in Sigurth's arms had slept; Then did I hear what I would were hid, That they had betrayed me in taking a mate.</p> <p>14. "Ever with grief and all too long Are men and women born in the world; But yet we shall live our lives together, Sigurth and I.²¹ Sink down, Giantess!"</p>	<p>Then Óthin wreaked his wrath on me.</p> <p>9. "With shields he screened me in Skatalund;³⁵ A ring he raised of red one and white ones.³⁶ And bade my sleep be sundered by him Who naught would fear, nor be faint of heart;</p> <p>10. "Made the waster-of-wood,³⁷ as the welkin high, Burn all about my bower to southward; Bade him only over it ride Who would fetch me the gold on which Fáfñir lay.</p> <p>11. "The giver-of-gold³⁸ rode Grani then Where my foster father his folk-land ruled; Did Sigurth seem, the sea king of Danes,³⁹ Among weapon-wielders worthiest of all.</p> <p>12. "Neath linen we twain did lie together, As though born we were brother and sister: In nights full eight neither of us His hands did lay in love on the other.</p> <p>13. "Yet Guthrún said, Gjúki's daughter, That I had slept in Sigurth's arms; Then grew I aware, as I would not, rather, How they beguiled me Gunnar to wed.</p> <p>14. "Women and men to the world are born, Their lives to live in longing and sorrow; Our lives we should not have lived apart,⁴⁰ Sigurth and I—sink now,⁴¹ thurs-bride!"</p>
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¹ But compare the tentative interpretation of St.14.

² By depriving them of the swan-plumage, for they were Valkyriur like the wives of Volund and his brothers, Agnar reduced them under his subjection.

³ The prose follows the last stanza of *Sigurtharkvitha en skamma* without break.

⁴ Two bale-fires: this contradicts the statement made in the concluding stanzas of *Sigurtharkvitha en skamma*, that Sigurth and Brynhild were burned on the same pyre; there is no evidence that the annotator here had anything but his own mistaken imagination to go on [Brynhild, in fact, only *requests* that she and Sigurd be burnt together – my note].

⁵ Valland: this name ("Land of Slaughter") is used elsewhere of mythical places; cf. *Harbarthsljóth*, 24, and prose introduction to *Volundarkvitha*; it may here not be a proper name at all.

⁶ Gold-goddess: poetic circumlocution for "woman."

⁷ Hild: a Valkyrie name meaning "Fighter" (cf. *Voluspo*, 31). In such compound names as Brynhild ("Fighter in Armor") the first element was occasionally omitted.

⁸ Hlymdalir ("Tumult-Dale"): a mythical name, merely signifying the place of battle as the home of Valkyries.

⁹ In *Regius* these two lines stand after stanza 7, but most editions place them as here. They are not quoted in the *Normageststhatr*. Presumably two lines, and perhaps more, have been lost. It has frequently been argued that all or part of the passage from stanza 6 through stanza 10 (6-10, 7-10 or 8-10) comes originally from the so-called *Sigrdrifumol*, where it would undoubtedly fit exceedingly well.

¹⁰ The monarch: perhaps Agnar, brother of Autha, mentioned in *Sigrdrifumol* (prose and quoted verse following stanza 4) as the warrior for whose sake Brynhild defied Othin in slaying Hjalmgunnar.

¹¹ Regarding the identification of swan-maidens with Valkyries, and the manner in which men could get them in their power by stealing their swan-garments, cf. *Volundarkvitha*, introductory prose and note, where the same thing happens.

¹² Eight: the *Normageststhatr* manuscripts have "sisters of Atli" instead of "sisters eight."

¹³ Hjalmgunnar: regarding this king of the Goths (the phrase means little) and his battle with Agnar, brother of Autha cf. *Sigrdrifumol*, prose after stanza 4. One *Normageststhatr* manuscript has "brother of the giantess" in place of "leader of Goths."

¹⁴ Cf. *Sigrdrifumol*, prose introduction. Skatalund ("Warriors' Grove"): a mythical name; elsewhere the place where Brynhild lay is called Hindarfjöll.

¹⁵ Branches' foe: fire.

¹⁶ Regarding the treasure cf. *Fafnismol*.

¹⁷ This stanza is presumably an interpolation, reflecting a different version of the story, wherein Sigurth meets Brynhild at the home of her brother-in-law and foster-father, Heimir (cf. *Gripisspo*, 19 and 27).

¹⁸ Grani: Sigurth's horse.

¹⁹ Danes: nowhere else does Sigurth appear in this capacity. Perhaps this is a curious relic of the Helgi tradition.

²⁰ Eight nights: elsewhere (cf. *Gripisspo*, 4.2) the time is stated as three nights, not eight. There is a confusion of traditions here, as in *Gripisspo*. In the version of the story wherein Sigurth met Brynhild before he encountered the Gjukungs, Sigurth was bound by no oaths, and the union was completed; it is only in the alternative version that the episode of the sword laid between the two occurs.

²¹ The idea apparently conveyed in the concluding lines, that Sigurth and Brynhild will be together in some future life, is utterly out of keeping with the Norse pagan traditions, and the whole stanza indicates the influence of Christianity.

²² As will be seen, these indications differ from those given in the preceding poem. In all likelihood the prose is based on the lay following.

²³ Her cave, the way to Hel is conceived as lying through the habitations of the mountain giants.

²⁴ Here purely honorific.

²⁵ As a Valkyrie. See St.8.

²⁶ She speaks prophetically of the fall of the Gjúkungs as though it had already taken place.

²⁷ In the original, St.6 follows St.7.

²⁸ Inserted here by the Translator, following Neckel's suggestion, to bridge a lacuna not indicated, on the pattern of *Oddrúnargrátr*, St.13.

²⁹ According to the *Völsunga saga*, Ch.27, and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, Hlymdales is the seat of her foster, Heimir, where Sigurth stays as guest and meets her and is betrothed to her. (See *Grípisspá*, Sts.19, 29, 31).

³⁰ "Battle," a Valkyrie; see *Völuspa*, St.30. In the paraphrase of *Skáldskaparmál* this is Brynhild-Sigrdrifa's name.

³¹ Agnar. We may suppose the loss of a stanza here, explaining how Hild and her sisters fought in the wars as Valkyries; see *Grottasöngur*, Sts.13ff. Her oaths may refer tonly to the protection of Agnar in battle (in return for his releasing her?).

³² Just as Volund and his brothers gain possession of the three swan-maidens (*Völundarkviða*, Introductory Prose).

³³ For a further account, see *Sigrdrífumál*, Sts.4ff.

³⁴ Purely honorific here.

³⁵ "Grove of Heroes" (?). It corresponds to the Hindar Fell of *Sigrdrífumál*.

³⁶ Ordinarily, a white shield is a sign of peaceful intentions, a red shield, of war. Do they here symbolize the red and white flames?

³⁷ Kenning for "fire."

³⁸ Kenning for "prince"; here, Sigurth.

³⁹ Here, an honorific epithet.

⁴⁰ For this interpretation, see *Scandinavian Studies* XXII (1950), 166 ff. The line is generally interpreted "we shall live our lives together."

⁴¹ That is, "Avaunt!" See note on the last line of *Völuspa*.