

**Enigma Variations:**  
*Hervarar saga's* Wave-riddles and Supernatural Women in Old Norse  
 Poetic Tradition

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What lives in concealment and dies in discovery?

This riddling description of a “riddle” itself might seem to prove true with consideration of the scholarly reception of the Old Norse riddles preserved in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. While the Old English riddles recorded without solutions in the Exeter Book have proved dynamic subjects for study (including in some cases multiple attempts at interpretation and reinterpretation),<sup>1</sup> the Old Norse riddles, conveniently solved in the performative context of the episode in which they are set, have been largely neglected. When they have been considered, they have usually been thought of as oddities or anomalies. Christopher Tolkien states in the introduction to his 1960 edition of *Hervarar saga* that “there are no others in ancient Norse,”<sup>2</sup> and this view is accepted, although with cautionary qualifiers such as “nearly the only riddles” and “almost unique,” in a recent article by Alaric Hall.<sup>3</sup> However, this forces the riddles into too narrow a generic categorisation, and too rigid a definition of “riddle.” Rather, the features they share with each other, and with other and more canonical eddic poetry, strongly suggest a shared existence in a fluid poetic tradition.

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I am grateful to Dr Judy Quinn for discussion of the ideas in this paper at an early stage. I have also benefitted greatly from the feedback from various audiences who have heard earlier versions, in particular that of the Scandinavian Studies seminar, University College London.

<sup>1</sup> Exeter, Cathedral Library MS 3501. For the scholarly literature see Russell Poole, *Old English Wisdom Poetry*, Annotated Bibliographies of Old and Middle English Literature 5 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), pp. 244–332.

<sup>2</sup> *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* (London: Nelson, 1960), p. xix.

<sup>3</sup> “Changing Style and Changing Meaning: Icelandic Historiography and the Medieval Redactions of Heiðreks saga,” *Scandinavian Studies*, 77 (2005), 1–30, at p. 9; italics mine.

This paper will demonstrate, then, that the riddles are a vital part of the Norse poetic tradition, and that considering them as such provides valuable insights into how that tradition functioned. It will do so through a case-study of riddles about waves, comparing their language and imagery with that of other eddic-style poetry, particularly that used to discuss supernatural female beings, as the wave-riddles do.

To begin with some contextual information, *Hervarar saga* is a *fornaldarsaga* or “saga of ancient time,” built around four major groups of poetry in eddic metres, of which the riddle collection is the third.<sup>4</sup> The riddles are put forth during a contest between the eponymous King Heiðrekr and a man whom he believes to be his enemy Gestumblindi, called to Heiðrekr’s court to submit to judgement for his crimes on the understanding that he will be pardoned if he is able to ask a question the king is unable to answer. Gestumblindi, however, has sacrificed to Óðinn (well known from other texts as an expert in poetic wisdom contests) for help with this dilemma, and the god has switched places with him. Although Gestumblindi/Óðinn takes the opportunity to propound a variety of riddles, he eventually wins by means of his favourite get-out clause: he asks what Óðinn (i.e. he himself) said into the ear of his own son Baldr at the latter’s funeral.<sup>5</sup>

A date in the first third of the thirteenth century has been proposed for the assembling of the saga in something like the form we now have it,<sup>6</sup> and it can confidently be dated before

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<sup>4</sup> The others are sets of narrative stanzas relating first, the aftermath of a duel between Hjálmar inn hugumstóri and Qrvar-Oddr on the one side and twelve berserks, the Arngrímssons, on the other; second, the quest of Hervqr to claim her ancestral possession, the enchanted sword Tyrfingr, largely comprising a dialogue between her and her dead father Angantýr Arngrímsson; and last, a battle between the Gothic and Hunnish tribes.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Vafþrúðnismál* st. 54 (Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn, eds., *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*. 2 vols, I: *Text*, 5th ed. [Heidelberg: Winter, 1983], p. 55. References to this work will henceforth be abbreviated *NK*.)

<sup>6</sup> Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002), pp. 63, 234–89.

c. 1306–8, the date of its oldest extant manuscript, Hauksbók.<sup>7</sup> The poetry is often supposed to be older, although how much older is, as often, a vexed question. Hall suggests, unlike Tolkien, that the riddles were composed specifically for the saga or at least as part of a story about King Heiðrekr and his death. “A collection so rambling and encyclopedic without being obviously mnemonic would probably be literary and originate with *\*Heiðreks saga* itself,” he claims.<sup>8</sup> However, while the saga may have been the first time the riddles were brought together, the eclectic nature of the collection suggests that many of them, or their “ingredients” at least, were already extant and gathered together from disparate sources. They are all broadly similar, most having between six and eight lines and a two line *stef* or refrain, *Heiðrekr konungr, | hyggðu at gátu* “King Heiðrekr, think about the riddle,” which is usually heavily abbreviated or omitted altogether in the manuscripts and in all likelihood was only appended when the riddles were set into the prose framework. But while some closely-related groups can be identified,<sup>9</sup> overall the riddles are far from uniform in their structure, use of formulas and employment of riddling devices, while a couple of others have parallels in other European folk or learned traditions and thus clearly were not written for the saga.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gunnar Harðarson and Stefan Karlsson, “Hauksbók,” in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Philip Pulsiano *et al.* (New York and London: Garland, 1993), pp. 271–2.

<sup>8</sup> “Changing Style,” p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gátur*, 8–16 (*Hervarar saga* sts 55–63) share the opening lines *Hvat er þat undra, | er ek úti sá | fyrir Dellings durum?* “What is that wonder which I saw outside, before Dellingr’s doors?” (and cf. l. 104 of the OE poem *Solomon and Saturn: Ac hwæt is ðæt wundor ...* “But what is that wonder ...” [*The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, ed. and trans. Daniel Anlezark, Anglo-Saxon Texts 7 (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), p. 84]); Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gátur*, 18–24 (*Hervarar saga* sts 65–71) all begin *Hverjar eru þær ...* “Who are those ...”, followed by a word meaning “women” or similar. The numbering and expanded sigla for the riddles used throughout this paper are those of the *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* project (*SkP*), <http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php>. The same applies for all poetry cited here which is covered by the project. All translations are my own.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. the cow-riddle, Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gátur*, 29 (*Hervarar saga* st. 76), similar examples of which occur in many European folk-traditions; the sow-riddle, Gestumblindi,

The riddles are in the third person or, if in the first, have a narrator describing an object or more abstract entity with an “I saw...” formula; the solver must say what it is, never what I am. The manuscripts provide the solutions to all of the riddles in the form of King Heiðrekr’s responses. The majority concern natural phenomena: besides the waves, solutions include the sun, rain, fog, and various birds, animals, insects and plants, while a few others refer to items from Scandinavian life, such as the smith’s hammer and bellows, ale, flint in the hearth, and pieces in the board-game *hnefatafl*.<sup>11</sup> Most of the solutions are straightforward and readily solvable, though a few involve more complex word-play or poetic devices such as *ofljóst* or *greppaminni*,<sup>12</sup> and one or two are slightly obscure, the best rival to the Latin and Old English one-eyed peddlars of garlic perhaps being “a dead snake on a dead horse on an ice-floe on a river” (though Heiðrekr’s solution seems to be an overinterpretation of the riddle, which probably refers only to a dead snake on an ice-floe on a river).<sup>13</sup>

There are three extant redactions of *Hervarar saga*. The first, sometimes called the H-redaction, has as its main witness the aforementioned Hauksbók (Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling AM 544 4to), from c. 1306–8; to all intents and purposes a personal miscellany owned and largely handwritten by the Icelandic Lawman Haukr

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*Heiðreks gátur*, 12 (*Hervarar saga* st. 59), variations of which can be found among the works of Aldhelm and Pherecydes of Athens.

<sup>11</sup> On this game see Sten Helmfrid, “Hnefatafl—the Strategic Board Game of the Vikings” (2005), <http://hem.bredband.net/b512479/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ofljóst* is lit. “overly clear”; in this device a homonym of the intended referent is substituted by a circumlocutory phrase, e.g. Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gátur*, 35 (*Hervarar saga* st. 82); *greppaminni* is lit. “poets’ reminder,” a question-and-answer format, e.g. Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gátur*, 7 (*Hervarar saga* st. 54).

<sup>13</sup> Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gátur*, 25 (*Hervarar saga* st. 72); cf. Symphosius’ *Ænigma* 94 (ed. and trans. Walter Ohl, *The Enigmas of Symphosius* [Philadelphia: n. p., 1928], pp. 128–9); Exeter Book Riddle 86 (ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, *The Exeter Book* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1936], p. 238).

Erlendsson.<sup>14</sup> This contains what appears to be a condensed version of the saga prose, but is actually the best manuscript witness for the poetry in the earlier part of the saga.

Unfortunately, a lacuna in the manuscript begins after the second riddle and the rest of the saga is lost from that point. However, Hauksbók, or selections from it, appears to have been copied (rather badly) when it was in a less-damaged state and while this intermediary is now lost, two seventeenth-century paper copies of it, Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling AM 281 4° (hereafter 281) and Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling AM 597b 4° (597b), preserve Hauksbók's version of the riddle-contest, though apparently corrupted in several places. There are 36 riddles in the H-redaction, more than either of the other redactions and more logically ordered, with riddles having the same or similar openings grouped together.

The second version ("R") has only one significant manuscript witness: Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum GKS 2845 4° (2845), a vellum manuscript from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. This manuscript also has lacunae, but not affecting the riddle-match; it contains 30 riddles, including one not in the H-redaction. Despite its textual problems, 2845 gives a fuller account of the saga prose, and is believed to be closer to the original; it is thus the foundation for all modern editions of the saga. Since the H-redaction witnesses are late and corrupt in places, 2845 is also the best manuscript for the text of the riddles it contains.

The final version ("U") exists in a seventeenth-century paper manuscript, Uppsala Universitetsbiblioteket R715 (R715). This is fraught with textual difficulties, especially in the poetry (which sometimes makes no sense at all), and is covered in not-always-helpful annotations in the hand of Jón Rugman.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, it occasionally has superior readings and is valuable in determining an original reading when it corresponds to either R or H, where these differ.<sup>16</sup> It also survives complete and so preserves the end of the saga,

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<sup>14</sup> Gunnar Harðarson and Stefan Karlsson, "Hauksbók," p. 271.

<sup>15</sup> Jón Helgason, ed., *Heiðreks saga. Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, STUAGNL 48 (Copenhagen: Jørgensen 1924), p. xxii.

<sup>16</sup> A. LeRoy Andrews, "Studies in the Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda – *Continued*: II. The Hervarar Saga," *Modern Philology*, 18:2 (1920), 93–100.

lost in the other versions. It contains 26 riddles.

As stated, in this paper I will examine the riddles with the solution “waves,” of which the R- and U- redactions have four and the H-representatives have three. These stanzas make a nice case study for considering the place of the riddles in the Old Norse-Icelandic poetic tradition because they appear in different variations and combinations in each of the three redactions: lines or combinations of lines are mixed and matched between one another and indeed with other riddles in the collection.

At this point it is worth looking briefly at the characteristics of the wave-riddles, the first of which may be given as representative:<sup>17</sup>

*Hverjar eru þær snótir,                   er ganga syrgjandi*  
   *at forvitni föður?*  
*Hadda bleika                               hafa þær inar hvítföldnu,*  
   *ok eigut þær varðir vera.*

“Who are those women, who go sorrowing, to the curiosity of their father? They have pale hair, the white-hooded ones, and those women do not have husbands.”

The first three lines are closely similar in all of the wave-riddles, the only differences being that a different word with the basic meaning “women” is used in each instance of line 1, a different adverb is used in each instance of line 2, and the fourth wave-riddle has a different line 3 to the others. In general, lines 1–3 in each wave-riddle form a discrete, descriptive unit of meaning, lines 4–5 form another unit of meaning, and line 6 is a discrete unit on its own. Since alliteration falls within the discrete units, there is no metrical reason why any particular beginning unit has to go with any particular middle or end unit.

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<sup>17</sup> Editions and translations of the wave- and other riddles are my own, being prepared for volume 8 (ed. Margaret Clunies Ross) of *Skaldic Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, ed. Clunies Ross *et al.* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007–; henceforth *SkP*). For the other wave-riddles in edited form see Appendix B. The editions and translations used in this paper may not be identical to the final form of the published editions.

The table in Appendix A shows the ways the riddles are put together from these units in the different redactions, in the order in which they appear in each, along with the solutions as given in the manuscripts. As can be seen, the units are combined in different ways in each redaction. The wave-riddles do (generally) come close together in the manuscripts: the three of the H-redaction are all one after the other; the R-redaction has three together, then another after an interruption by two riddles on different topics; and the U-redaction has three together, ten other riddles, and then the final wave-riddle. The possibility thus exists that one or more of the scribes picked up from their exemplar in the wrong place and copied lines from one wave-riddle into another, then, since they all refer to the same subject, substituted the missed lines back in elsewhere. However, this mix-and-match effect more likely indicates that rather than individual, particular riddles for waves existing with an absolute fixed form, individual descriptions for waves existed in poetic (or riddling) form and could be put together differently in any particular telling, as they seem to have been in the telling of each redaction of the saga. This is relatively unusual in the extant Old Norse poetic corpus, much of which (being skaldic-type) is characterised by a complex form and tight rules governing its composition which make it necessary, and more likely, that each re-telling is exact.<sup>18</sup>

As can be seen from the table, it is immediately apparent that the waves are consistently anthropomorphised as women. This is a common trope in Old Norse poetry, particularly in kennings, in reference to the daughters of the mythological sea-being Ægir, whose name as a common noun means “ocean” or “sea.” *Skáldskaparmál* relates that Ægir and his wife Rán had nine daughters, and names them as Himinglæva, Dúfa, Blóðughadda, Hefring, Uðr, Hrǫnn, Bylgja, Bára (on second listing replaced by Drǫfn) and Kólga: all terms for or appropriate to waves.<sup>19</sup> The compiler(s) of *Hervarar saga* evidently had this frame of

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<sup>18</sup> E.g. Diana Whaley, “A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland,” in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 42 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 161–202, at p. 167.

<sup>19</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2 parts (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), I, pp. 36 and 95. The names are also listed in Þulur

reference in mind; alongside standard words meaning “waves” such as *bárur*, *bylgjur* and *öldur*, we are given, as solutions, *Ægis meyjar* “Ægir’s girls,” *Ægis dætr* “Ægir’s daughters” and *Ægis ekkjur* “Ægir’s women” (at least one such description appears in each redaction of the saga). The riddles’ personification of the waves as women is thus situated as part of a wider-spread convention, with a rich tapestry of mythological allusion behind it.

This mythological background explains why the waves are portrayed as females and perhaps also goes some way to explain the oblique phrase *at forvitni fōður*. In other attested instances, *forvitni* means “curiosity,” sometimes in a negative sense.<sup>20</sup> However, in his *Lexicon Poeticum* Finnur Jónsson suggested that in the wave-riddles the word could mean “covetousness” or “desire” (*begærlichted, ønske*),<sup>21</sup> and Christopher Tolkien translates this line, “by their father unceasing sought.”<sup>22</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross discusses the likely conceptualisation of the sea by early Scandinavian societies as “an entity where male and female principles met and mingled,” suggesting that “as both waves and ocean are formed from the same substance, it might be expected that the male-female relationship would have been thought of as incestuous.”<sup>23</sup> Further, it was postulated by Müller in 1844 that the wave-maidens could be equated with the mothers of the god Heimdallr,<sup>24</sup> who are also

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*Waves* 1, in the A version of Snorra Edda, and six of the nine appear in Einarr Skulason, *Fragments*, 17 (*Skáldskaparmál* st. 361), from the first half of the twelfth century.

<sup>20</sup> Johann Fritzner, ed., *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog*, 3 vols, 4th ed. (Kristiania [Oslo]: Den norske forlagsforening, 1883–96): *forvitni*; Richard Cleasby, Gudbrand Vigfusson and W. A. Craigie, eds, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957): *forvitni*.

<sup>21</sup> *Lexicon poeticum antiquæ linguæ septentrionalis: Ordbog over det norsk-islandske skjaldesprog oprindelig forfattet af Sveinbjörn Egilsson*, 2nd ed. (Copenhagen: Møller, 1931): *forvitni*.

<sup>22</sup> *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, pp. 39–41.

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in medieval Northern society. Volume 1: The Myths*, The Viking Collection 7 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), p. 175.

<sup>24</sup> Wilhelm Müller, *Geschichte und system der altdeutschen religion* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1844) p. 229.

nine in number according to *Gylfaginning*,<sup>25</sup> *Hyndluljóð* (st. 37), the otherwise lost poem *Heimdallargaldr*,<sup>26</sup> and Úlfr Uggason's skaldic poem *Húsdrápa* (st. 2/5-8). Comparative evidence from Indo-European and Celtic traditions has been put forward in support of this association,<sup>27</sup> and it was a popular artistic motif in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>28</sup> Clunies Ross has also noted the fit between wave-mothers and the circumstances of Heimdallr's birth as described in *Hyndluljóð* (st. 35/8; *NK* p. 294), *við iarðar þróm* "at the edge of the earth," nourished by the might of the earth, the *svalköldum* "very cold" sea (38/3; *NK* p. 294), and sacrificial blood – plausibly at the sea-shore.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, *Hyndluljóð* also names Heimdallr's mothers (st. 37; *NK* p. 294), with none of the names corresponding to those of the wave-maidens found in *Skáldskaparmál* or invoking attributes of waves. Nine is a significant number in Old Norse mythology,<sup>30</sup> and its association with both the wave-maidens and the mothers of Heimdallr does not necessarily equate the two groups, though it is possible that mention of one group of women could evoke suggestions of the other. At the same time, though, the wave-maidens are not consistently identified as being nine in number. In his *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* Rudolf Simek suggests that "the names for Ægir's daughters [...] appear to have

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<sup>25</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in *Gylfaginning*: see Snorri Sturluson, *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> e.g. Georges Dumézil, "Comparative Remarks on the Scandinavian God Heimdallr," trans. Francis Charat, in Dumézil's *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. Einar Haugen (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 126–40; William Sayers, "Irish Perspectives on Heimdallr," *alvissmál* 2 (1993), 3–30.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Karl Ehrenberg, "Heimdall durch die neun Wellenjungfrauen emporgehoben [Heimdallr Lifted by the Nine Wave-Maidens]," in Wilhelm Wägner, *Nordisch-germanische Götter und Helden* (Leipzig and Berlin: Otto Spamer, 1882), p. 171; W. G. Collingwood, "Heimdall and his Nine Mothers," in *The Elder or Poetic Edda; commonly known as Sæmund's Edda*, ed. and trans. with notes by Olive Bray (London: The Viking Club, 1908) p. 218.

<sup>29</sup> *Prolonged Echoes*, I, pp. 174–7.

<sup>30</sup> Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. Angela Hall (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1993), pp. 232–3.

been indefinite [...] and any synonym for “wave” could be used in poetry as a name for one of [them].”<sup>31</sup> Snorri could have systematised here because of the significance of the number nine, although as indicated above even he had at least ten personal names in mind. The wave-maidens are not numbered at all in the riddles, though the full solution to Gestumbl *Heiðr* 23 in R715 reads: *þad eru Ægis dætur; þær ganga iij samann, er vindur vekur þær* “That’s Ægir’s daughters; they go three together when the wind wakes them.”<sup>32</sup> Perhaps this is a scribal error, although I shall argue later that it may have been made with good reason.

The Heimdallr question has been addressed in some detail in the scholarship, and is tangential to the issues under discussion here. Neither does it necessarily either confirm or deny the belief in an incestuous relationship between Ægir and his daughters; this could have been understood without Heimdallr being the product. However, the main piece of evidence for this relationship seems to be the wave-riddles themselves; yet it is possible, even preferable, to read *forvitni* as “curiosity” after all. Not only does “to the curiosity [i.e. “surprise, disbelief, bewilderment” etc.] of their father” make completely satisfactory sense, it fits perfectly into the poetic tradition and imagery these riddles participate in, and which the remainder of this paper will explore.

Beyond their female nature, two characteristics of the wave-maidens seem to be particularly emphasised in the riddles. The first is their seeming attractiveness and seductiveness, represented by their *hadda bleika* “pale hair” (Gestumbl *Heiðr* 21/4) and especially their *hvítir faldar* “white hoods” (Gestumbl *Heiðr* 21/5 and 24/5), and by the mention of their *beð* “bed” in Gestumbl *Heiðr* 24/4. The second, arguably related characteristic is that the wave-maidens are not benevolent: *mörgum mönnum | hafa þær at meini orðit* “to many men they have caused harm,” says the second of the wave-riddles (Gestumbl *Heiðr* 22/4–5), and *sjaldan blíðar eru þær | við seggja lið* “they are seldom gentle with the host of men,” agrees the third (Gestumbl *Heiðr* 23/4–5). In skaldic tradition it is the latter attribute that is particularly brought out; there personifications of the waves and sea are often rather more fearsome than in the riddles, especially as represented by the wave-maidens’ mother, Rán.

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<sup>31</sup> *Dictionary*, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Jón Helgason, ed., *Heiðreks saga*, p. 132.



This combination is the version of 2845, the main manuscript, and R715 agrees. While being white-hooded is on one level a visual description of foam-topped waves, white headdresses were also worn as an item of decorative finery by young, sexually attractive or marriageable women, and it is perhaps also a specifically bridal image. There is evidence for bridal head-dresses in medieval Scandinavia, and indeed evidence from eddic poetry via *Þrymskviða*, in which a key part of Þórr’s disguise as Freyja is a head-covering referred to seven times in the poem, usually as *brúðar lín* “bridal linen.”<sup>39</sup> The colour is not mentioned in the poem but dictionaries attest the word *línhvítr*, apparently “linen-white” or “white as linen.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the line *inar hvítföldnu*, “the white hooded-ones,” appears again in Gestumbl *Heiðr* 24/4, which is the same in all manuscript redactions. There the line does not seem to connect semantically with the other lines in any significant way, but it is noteworthy that the word for “women” in the first line of the riddle is *brúðir*, a word which can designate women in general but also, more specifically, “brides.”<sup>41</sup> Here, then, we have a riddling paradox: brides who lack husbands.

In the H-redaction, though, the final line, *ok eigut þær varðir vera* “and those women do not have husbands,” is combined with *mörgum mönnum | hafa þær at meini orðit* “to many men they have caused harm” in lines 4 and 5. This permutation also works well in terms of imagery and poetic effect, leaving the wave-maidens’ actions open to interpretation: perhaps they do not have husbands because they cause harm to men, or perhaps they cause harm to men because they do not want husbands. Although this is the minority reading, it is not a weaker version of the riddle; it is an equally satisfactory variant. Indeed, part of the solution to this riddle in the U-redaction reads, *þær fylgia iafnann farmonnum og eru verlausar* “they always follow seafarers and are without husbands.”<sup>42</sup> The prose response to the riddles often echoes the verse text in some way, and this expansion to the solution suggests that there may once have been a further variant, describing the wave-maidens’ pursuit of sailors,

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<sup>39</sup> *Þrymskviða* 12/6, 15/6, 17/6, 19/2 (*NK* pp. 112–4); *lín* “linen” 27/2 (*NK* p. 115); the head-covering is also alluded to in 16/8 and 19/12 (*NK* p. 113).

<sup>40</sup> See Fritzner, ed., *Ordbog: línhvítr*.

<sup>41</sup> Fritzner, ed., *Ordbog: brúðr* 1.

<sup>42</sup> Jón Helgason, ed., *Heiðreks saga*, p. 133.

which would also fit line 6 rather well. The verb *fylgja* has a range of connotations,<sup>43</sup> making it a nicely ambiguous choice to apply to wave maidens, particularly in a riddling context: such a line could imply (among other possible interpretations) that they do not have wave-husbands of their own, so are free to chase sailors; that they pursue sailors, but do not win them as husbands, or that they accompany sailors, but are their seductive mistresses rather than their wives. All of these possibilities offer valid perceptions and nuanced ways of thinking about the waves and their interactions with the world of men. The wave- (and other) riddles are flexible, then, being recombined not mistakenly or accidentally, but because there is a rich array of available material to work with, and something new to be said with each new combination.

Increasing the complexity still further, the line also appears in a different riddle, Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gátur*, 18 (*Hervarar saga* st. 65):

*Hverjar eru þær rýgjar á reginfalli,*

*elr við kván kona?*

*Mær við meyju mög um getr,*

*ok eigut þær varðir vera.*

“Who are those women on the mighty mountain, woman begets with woman? Maid with maid begets a son, and those women do not have husbands.”

Here the solution is wild angelica, a plant native to northern Europe which produces side-shoots after its first year. The “women” word in line 1 is *rýgjar*, playing on two layers of imagery: the angelica growing wild on the mountainside, and giantesses (supernatural females) in their traditional dwelling-place.<sup>44</sup> In this riddle the line *ok eigut þær varðir vera* “and those women do not have husbands” is not only apt but the key to the whole riddle: as the prose response expands, *þat eru hvannir tvær ok hvannarkálfr á milli þeira* “That is two [female] angelicas and a young angelica between them”;<sup>45</sup> the line creates the paradox of

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. Fritzner, ed., *Ordbog: fylgja*; Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Lexicon Poeticum: fylgja*.

<sup>44</sup> Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Lexicon Poeticum: rýgr*.

<sup>45</sup> Tolkien, ed., *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, p. 36.

apparent reproduction between females without male involvement. So which riddle-type came first? Since the line is so vital to the angelica-riddle, must the wave-riddles be seen as secondary, merely recycling a line which is perhaps not now loaded with the meaning it seemed to have? On the contrary; metrical lines are ripe for recycling in poetic composition, and there is no reason this line should have only one “correct” context. This example demonstrates that at least three riddles – or one and up to three variants of another – can use the same line, and use it successfully.

Individual lines and descriptions from the riddles do not find echoes and parallels only in other riddles, however. They also share language and imagery with other eddic-type poetry, participating in a wider poetic discourse depicting female supernatural beings, and I would argue that the riddlers and redactors were influenced by and exploited this immanent tradition. I turn now, therefore, to an examination of the eddic-type long poems with which comparisons can be drawn. A line of the type “Who are those women” is also found in stanzas of *Fáfnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, and *Baldur draumar*. Significantly, the latter two of these poems, like *Hervarar saga*, relate poetic wisdom contests with Óðinn as one of the participants.

The first instance, from *Fáfnismál*, a dialogue between the legendary hero Sigurðr and the dragon Fáfnir, is explicitly linked to female supernatural beings, norns, in their capacity of attending to mothers in childbirth (st. 12/4–6; *NK* p. 182):

*hveriar ro þær nornir er nauðgonglar ro  
oc kíósa mæðr frá mögom?*

“Who are those norns, who go to those in need, and choose mothers from sons?”

Although its format is the same as that of the riddles, Sigurðr’s question is not particularly enigmatic but a straightforward request for information, which is granted in the following stanza by Fáfnir’s exposition of the kin of the norns. However, it explicitly proves that this poetic formula was available for the discussion of female supernatural beings. It also has as its crux fate, the norns’ role in choosing who lives and who dies; this a recurrent concern of the poetry discussed in this paper.

The next instance also seems to be concerned with the fate-deciding role of supernatural women and their influence over the human world. In *Vafþrúðnismál*, Óðinn, once again in disguise, engineers a contest against the giant Vafþrúðnir in order to gain information about the end of the world, Ragnarøk. In the end Óðinn wins by using the same unanswerable question he does at the end of the riddle match with King Heiðrekr, asking what it was he said into his son Baldr's ear at his funeral. The question most relevant to the present discussion, however, comes in the section where Óðinn is asking questions about the future, and the new world post-Ragnarøk (st. 48/4–6; *NK* p. 45):

*hverjar ro þær meylar, er líða mar yfir,  
fróðgeðiaðar fara?*

“Who are those girls, who pass over the sea; travel wise-minded?”

The following stanza of the poem contains the response of Óðinn's interlocutor, the giant Vafþrúðnir (st. 49; *NK* p. 45):

*Þrjár þjóðar falla þorp yfir  
meyia Mǫgþrasis,  
hamingjor einar þeira í heimi ero  
þó þær með iqtnom alaz.*

“Three of Mǫgþrasir's girls enter the settlements of mankind, the only guardian spirits of those in the world, though they are brought up with giants.”<sup>46</sup>

The answer seems equally as enigmatic as the question, not least because of the loss of much of the mythological information behind it. Mǫgþrasir is otherwise unknown, and therefore so too any indication of who his daughters might have been. The reference to

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<sup>46</sup> Several interpretations of this difficult-to-construe stanza have been put forward; the present one is indebted to the convincing suggestions of Kari Ellen Gade, in her review of Tim William Machan, ed. *Vafþrúðnismál*, in *Scandinavian Studies* 63:3 (1991), 370–3.

three girls brought up with giants is reminiscent of the *þrjár þursa meyjar* “three giants’ girls” who are said to be the harbingers or inciters of Ragnarøk in *Völuspá* (st. 8; *NK* p. 2), and R. C. Boer speculated that the maids of the present stanza could be their benevolent counterparts.<sup>47</sup> Other scholars have been reminded of the *þrjár meyjar* “three girls” of *Völuspá* (st. 20; *NK* p. 5) who *líf kuro | alda bornom, | orlog seggia* “determined life for the children of men, the fates of warriors,” explicitly referred to as *nornir* “norns” in *Gylfaginning*.<sup>48</sup> No source, however, associates norns with giant ancestry while *Fáfnismál*, in the response to the stanza about norns discussed above, relates, *sumar ero áskungar, | sumar álfkungar, | sumar dætr Dvalins* “some are descended from gods, some descended from elves, some are daughters of Dvalinn [a dwarf]” (st. 13/4–6; *NK* p. 182). Whoever the *meyjar Mogþrasis* are, they are apparently not waves or wave-maidens, despite the promise of the riddling formula with its reference to female beings who *líða mar yfir* “pass over the sea.”<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, at this point we may recall R715’s apparently erroneous “iii.” Could the error have been prompted by knowledge of one or more of the stanzas discussed here, or at least by knowledge of the notion they all share, of supernatural women travelling in threes? The scribe of R715 need not have thought that the wave-riddle was describing norns or giants or *meyjar Mogþrasis*, but if mention of three supernatural women in *Vafþrúðnismál* can prompt modern scholars to make assumptions based on cross-references to other poetic traditions, could not the scribe have done the same thing and applied the image to the wave-maidens?

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<sup>47</sup> *Die Edda mit historisch-kritischem Commentar* (Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink, 1922), p. 58.

<sup>48</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, p. 18. Carolyne Larrington, for example, in a note to her translation of *Vafþrúðnismál*, says “these [maidens] are probably the norns” (*The Poetic Edda*, trans. with Introduction and Notes by Carolyne Larrington [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], p. 269 n. 47).

<sup>49</sup> The word *marlíðendr* is used with sinister connotations in *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 16), when Geirriðr warns Gunnlaugr not to go home one night because, she says, *margin eru marlíðendr* “there are many *marlíðendr*” [*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, Íslensk fornrit 4 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935], p. 28.) The word is a *hapax legomenon*, but some sort of malevolent, rather than benevolent, beings are indicated here: they pose a perceived threat to Gunnlaugr.

Immanent traditions about supernatural women and the poetic language used to discuss them may have affected not just later copyists but the riddle-composers themselves. Before discussing the third example from eddic poetry, that from *Baldurs draumar*, I wish to return to the riddle collection, and consider some other riddles which share the same opening line.

First, Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gáttur*, 19 (*Hervarar saga* st. 66):

*Hverjar eru þær drósir, er um sinn dróttin  
vápnlausar vega?  
Inar jarpari blífa um alla daga,  
en inar fægri fara.*

“Who are those maids, who fight weaponless around their lord? The darker protect during all the days, but the fairer go forth [to attack].”

Here the solution is pieces in the board-game *hnefatafl*. Their personification as warrior-maidens in a riddle using the same structure and language as the stanzas previously discussed reinforces the connection between this poetic formula and the evocation of supernatural females, and could have influenced the composition or transmission of other riddles.

Consider Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gáttur*, 20 (*Hervarar saga* st. 67):

*Hverjar eru þær leikur, er líða lönd yfir  
at forvitni föður?  
Hvítan skjöld þær um vetr bera,  
en svartan um sumar.*

“Who are those playmates, who pass over lands to the curiosity of their father? They bear a white shield during winter, but a black one during summer.”

The solution to the riddle is ptarmigans, the *skildir* “shields” referring to their seasonal plumage; but the martial imagery is unavoidably reminiscent of the shield-maiden and her place on the battlefield. It is worth drawing attention to the particular linguistic similarity of this riddle to both the *Vafþrúðnismál* stanza (Mogþrasir’s girls pass over sea; the ptarmigans pass over lands)<sup>50</sup> and to the opening three lines of the wave-riddles. Although I have rendered *leikur* as “playmates” here, the word can also designate women or female beings in general, like the other “women” words in the wave-riddles.<sup>51</sup> But what are we to make in this setting of the use of the line *at forvitni fǫður*? Who is the “father,” away from the context of the wave-maidens and Ægir? Are doubts now cast on the line’s apparent applicability to Ægir? Or, since all the information needed to arrive at the solution “ptarmigans” is contained in the second half, is this a rather unfortunate instance of a “mix-and-match” riddle, where the formulaic opening lines have been taken out of context and no longer have any relevance?<sup>52</sup>

I would suggest that the ptarmigan riddle could be a case of “mythological interference.”<sup>53</sup> The particular form of this riddle and its analogues in riddles and eddic-type poetry stands testament to an immanent poetic convention which discusses supernatural females in this riddling manner and which, I would argue, influenced the ptarmigan-riddle, set as it is alongside the wave-maiden riddles and the *hnefatafl*-pieces riddle, without necessarily retaining its full set of connotations in this context. It is not necessary to assume that the riddler intended to convey some innate sameness between ptarmigans and wave-maidens, or

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. also *Hyndluljóð* 42/1–4 (*NK* p. 295), part of a prophecy about Ragnarök: *Haf gengr bríðom | við himin síalfan, | líðr lǫnd yfir, | enn lopt bilar...* “The sea advances with storms against heaven itself, passes over lands, and the air gives way...” Here the sea is not personified, but still tied up with this poetic language.

<sup>51</sup> Fritzner, ed., *Ordbog: leika*.

<sup>52</sup> This is in fact not uncommon in riddles in general and seems to occur elsewhere in the *Hervarar saga* collection (e.g. *Gestumblindi*, *Heiðreks gátur*, 8–16 [*Hervarar saga* sts 55–63]). Cf. Archer Taylor, “The Riddle,” *California Folklore Quarterly* 2:2 (1943), 129–47 (at p. 130).

<sup>53</sup> I am grateful to Judy Quinn for this term.



The crucial word here is *brimskerjum* “surf-skerries,” at the end of line 2. This is (more or less) the reading of the main manuscript, 2845,<sup>56</sup> and the most preferable semantically. However, consider the readings of the other significant manuscripts. 281 has *brimserkjum í* “in surf-shirts”; a possible alternative in terms of sense (describing wave-maidens wearing shirts drenched by the surf).<sup>57</sup> The other H-redaction manuscript, 597b, has been corrected to have the same reading as 281, as is the case in several places, but its original reading was *brinserkjum í*. The final significant manuscript, R715, also has this reading, with the order of the words reversed: *í brinserkjum*. \**Brynserkr* is not an attested Old Norse word, but it could very plausibly be a compound of *brynja* “mail-shirt, byrnie” and *serkr* “shirt,” comparable to *brynstakkr* “mail-jacket,” which is attested. The two latter manuscripts thus read, “Who are those brides, who go in mail-shirts [...]?”. This is not a particularly appropriate description of waves, or of Ægir’s daughters; the *brimskerjum* reading is clearly preferable in the context of the wave-riddle. However, in other contexts *brúðir í brynjum* “brides in byrnies” are conventional in poetry and legend; take Guðrún in *Atlakviða*, for example.<sup>58</sup> The apparent scribal “errors” in 597b and R715 are perhaps then less erroneous than first appears; *brynserkjum* may have been the *lectio facilior*, even, for the scribe (*brimsker* “surf-skerry” is itself a *hapax legomenon*). “Who are those brides, who go in mail-shirts” is a very plausible line from an unrecorded riddling wisdom question about supernatural females that may have existed in the oral sphere, or a very plausible conjecture by a scribe aware of this immanent tradition and who misread his exemplar. In other words, the valkyrie or shield-maiden myth “interfered” with his copying of the wave-maiden riddle.

More linguistic and conceptual echoes come in another riddle of the *Hervarar saga* collection, Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gátur*, 17 (*Hervarar saga* st. 64). Here the referent is female swans, described as *brúðir bleikhaddaðar* “pale-haired brides” (ll. 1–2). Given the similarity to the language used to describe the wave-maidens, this could quite easily be used

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<sup>56</sup> The ms. reads “*brim skerum*”, with conventional abbreviation signs representing the italicised letters.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. *dreyrserkr* “bloody mail-coat” (Hallar-Steinn, *Reksteffa*, 29/1 [*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* st. 147]; Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Lexicon Poeticum: dreyrserkr*).

<sup>58</sup> See *Atlakviða* 43/3 (NK p. 247).

to refer to them too, connecting closely with, in particular, the first wave-riddle's *hadda bleika* "pale hair" (Gestumbl *Heiðr* 21/4). The concept of swan-brides also features in the eddic poem *Völundarkviða*, the prose introduction to which is unequivocal in equating these swan-maidens with valkyries. In the text, three brothers, including Völundr, encounter three women spinning linen on the shore of a lake. *Þar vóru hiá þeim álptarhamir þeira. Þat vóru valkyrior* (NK p. 116). "There were next to them their swan shapes. They were valkyries." Each of the brothers marries one of the women. *Þau bioggo siau vetr. Þá flugo þær at vitia víga oc kvómo eigi apr* (NK p. 116). "They lived there seven winters. Then they flew off to go to battle and did not come back."

I do not wish to suggest that wave-maidens should be equated with swan-brides or with valkyries, but rather that all these ideas are hovering on the periphery in the riddle collection, and in other poetry concerned with supernatural women. A further stanza implicated in this argument comes from the *fornaldarsaga Áns saga bogsveigis* "The saga of Án bow-bender" (Án bogsveigir, Lausavísur, 5 [*Áns saga* st. 5]):

*Meyjar spurðu  
er mik fundu,  
hvíthaddaðar:  
"Hvaðan komtu, færfaldr?"  
En ek svaraða  
silki-Gunni  
heldr hæðinni:  
"Hvaðan er logn úti?"*<sup>59</sup>

The girls, fair-haired, asked when they met me: "From where did you come, fourfold?" But I answered the rather mocking silk-Gunnr [WOMAN]: "From where is the calm outside?"

In its saga context this verse describes an exchange between the speaker, Án, and a farmer's daughter, Drífa, and her companions. However, it has been suggested that it was adapted

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<sup>59</sup> Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*. 4 vols. ([Reykjavík]: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), II, p. 385.

from a riddle about a rainbow and a wave in calm weather.<sup>60</sup> There are certainly parallels with the language of the riddles discussed so far: the maidens are described as *hvíthaddaðar* “fair- [lit. “white-”] haired”, while the word *logn* “calm” in line 8 also appears in the fourth wave-riddle, Gestumbl *Heiðr* 24/6. Juxtaposed with this in the *Áns saga* stanza is the woman-kenning *silki-Gunnr* “silk-Gunnr.” Gunnr is a valkyrie named in *Völuspá* (st. 30/7; *NK* p. 7), *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* (st. 7/4; *NK* p. 152) and in *Gylfaginning*, which states that she, the valkyrie Rota and the norn Skuld *ríða jafnan at kjósa val ok ráða vígum* “always ride to choose the slain and rule over battles.”<sup>61</sup> Her name and its manifestation as a common noun, *gunnr* “battle,” are used frequently in skaldic poetry and kennings.<sup>62</sup> This collocation may be moving into the realm of coincidence, but seems to have something to do with the immanent tradition in which supernatural women and riddles are tied up together. It is significant too that the farmer’s daughter’s name is *Drífa*, “Drifting snow” – another female incarnation of an uncontrollable natural phenomenon, much like the waves.

With all this in mind, I return to *Baldrs draumar*, a poem detailing Óðinn’s quest to the underworld to seek information about the fate of his son, Baldr, from a mysterious *völva* or seeress. After having discovered that Baldr is to die and asking about his slayer and avenger, Óðinn demands (st. 12/5–8; *NK* p. 279):

*bveriar ro þær meýiar, er at muni gráta*  
*oc á himin verpa hálsa scautom?*

“Who are those girls, who weep at desire, and who cast to the sky the sheets of their necks?”

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<sup>60</sup> Ólafur Halldórsson, *Áns rímur bogsveigis* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árnammagnússonar á Íslandi, 1973), p. 81.

<sup>61</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, p. 30.

<sup>62</sup> See Judy Quinn, ““Hildir Prepares a Bed for Most Helmet-Damagers”: Snorri’s Treatment of a Traditional Poetic Motif in his *Edda*,” in *Reflections on Old Norse Myths*, ed. Pernille Hermann, Jens Peter Schjødt and Rasmus Tranum Kristensen, *Studies in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (Brepols: Turnhout, 2007), pp. 95–118.

Several interpretations of this ambiguous stanza are possible, probably deliberately so. *Háls* and *skaut* can both designate types or parts of sails,<sup>63</sup> although they cannot both be sensibly construed in that way in the present context. *Skaut* also has the range of meanings ‘headdress, corner, edge, border’, as well as designating a square piece of cloth in general, while *háls* can mean ‘ridge’ as well as ‘neck’.<sup>64</sup> The phrase thus evokes a wide range of imagery not easily captured in one Modern English translation. But sails and headdresses are prominent among this imagery, and however the phrase *hálsa skautum* is understood, wave-maidens seem a definite possibility for the referent, tossing either their metaphorical *bvítr faldinn* “white hoods,” or the more literal ships which venture out on them. This half-stanza is so similar to the wave-riddles, despite the difference in metre, that it could well be seen as another variant of them, or is at least suggestive that they all share a common origin as ways of poetically describing and defining the waves. What is less clear in the context of the poem is why Óðinn would suddenly start asking about waves in this enigmatic fashion, especially after the series of more direct and straightforward requests for information that precedes this stanza. Even more mysteriously, in *Baldrs draumar* this inquiry causes the prophetess to recognise Óðinn, ending the question and answer series. We are thus left not only without a direct response to the question, but also wondering why it should immediately reveal Óðinn’s true identity. Clunies Ross has suggested this as an instance of “code-slippage”: Óðinn slips into the riddling style he above all is associated with, thus giving himself away.<sup>65</sup> This theory directly points to the interconnectedness of these poems and the traditions behind them: the background information gained from other poems, such as *Vafþrúðnismál* and the riddles, is needed to make sense of the current one, and it is expected that the audience will bring this background information with them and make the necessary associations. *Baldrs draumar*, and by extension other eddic texts (such as the riddles), can thus introduce a complex web of connotation and allusion in a concise and

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<sup>63</sup> Fritzner, ed., *Ordbog: hals* 3d; *skaut* 2; Cleasby, Vigfusson and Craigie, eds, *A Dictionary: háls* B I.2; *skaut* 2.

<sup>64</sup> Fritzner, ed., *Ordbog: hals*; *skaut*.

<sup>65</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, “Voice and Voices in Eddic Poetry,” in *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages: Proceedings of the Seventh International Saga Conference, Spoleto, 4–10 September 1988*, ed. Teresa Pàroli (Spoleto, Presso la sede del centro studi, 1990), pp. 219–230, at p. 225.

enigmatic manner: “topical shorthand,” in Clunies Ross’s words.<sup>66</sup>

The phrase *er at muni gráta* in line 2 is also ambiguous, causing difficulties for translators and commentators: Carolyne Larrington gives “who weep for love”<sup>67</sup> while Mats Malm notes that it can be understood “who weep at their will” or “who weep over their beloved.”<sup>68</sup> Malm believes Baldr’s death to be the cause of the weeping, which might indeed be suggested in the context. But eddic poetry is capable of alluding to a complex range of images and subtexts all at once, and the use here of the riddling formula is doubtless conscious: it is designed to be ambiguous, elusive, and suggestive. In another context this question could easily be seen as a wave-riddle, or riddling wisdom question about waves. It could already have existed in oral tradition, plucked from there to be used in this poem. It certainly had the potential to exist, or be put together, comprising the same ingredients as the examples already discussed. A poetic convention which discusses supernatural women in riddling terms need therefore not only be useful to explain apparent scribal errors; rather, it is something a poet could draw on deliberately, a shorthand with which to create multiple layers of suggestion. If the stanza from *Baldrs draumar* is read in light of the wider tradition, if wave-maidens are read in light of valkyries, literally “choosers of the slain,” it makes sense to consider that wave-maidens might well “weep” at their conflicted “desire”: that to have their human favourites would be to drown them. The valkyries of eddic poetry who effectively act *at forvitni fǫður* “to the curiosity of their father” through outright defiance, embody a persistent concern in Old Norse literature, that of a woman’s desire for independence of thought and action, particularly in relation to marriage;<sup>69</sup> but they and their lovers are ultimately ill-fated. In the first wave-riddle, their lack of husbands is perhaps what causes the wave-maidens to go *syrgjandi*, “sorrowing” (*Gestumbl Heiðr* 21/2),

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<sup>66</sup> Clunies Ross, “Voice”, p. 225 n. 16.

<sup>67</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, p. 244.

<sup>68</sup> “Baldrs draumar: literally and literarily,” in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference, 2–7 July 2000, University of Sydney*, ed. Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross (Sydney: Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 2000), pp. 277–89, at p. 281.

<sup>69</sup> Judy Quinn, “Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas,” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford, Blackwell, 2005), pp. 518–35, at p. 526.

but there is no escaping their plight: *við þat muna þær sinn aldr ala* “with that they must spend their lives,” states the second wave-riddle, soberly (Gestumbl *Heiðr* 22/6). It is noteworthy too that the “women” word in the third wave-riddle, *ekkjur*, denotes “widows” as well as women in general.<sup>70</sup> It is nowhere else stated that wave-maidens are trying, vainly, to attain human husbands through their destructive behaviour, but the wave-riddles seem to point towards this conception. Like valkyries, they could well have been thought of (in at least some contexts) as independent-minded seductresses wanting to break free of paternal control and interact with human males. Judy Quinn has recently shown that in skaldic praise poetry the use of the valkyrie motif and the fantasy afterlife she represented was a source of comfort for warriors, even (as a poetic trope at least) into the Christian period.<sup>71</sup> It could be that something similar pertained to seafarers, but in this case it is disconcerting that, as we are told in Gestumbl *Heiðr* 24/4, the wave-maidens’ bed is *harðan* “hard.”

The wave-riddles and their variants and analogues, then, reveal a flexible oral tradition and an immanent discourse available for the discussion of supernatural females, particularly those with a fate-deciding role. I do not suggest that wave-maidens should be equated with valkyries, or norns, giantesses or swan-brides; the wave-maidens clearly have their own characteristics and were thought of as separate. The wave-maidens, for example, are always hostile or at least destructive, whereas other supernatural females can also be beneficent, *hamingjur* “guardian spirits”; in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (st. 29; *NK* p. 134), Helgi is caught in a storm but saved by the valkyrie Sigrún from *ógorlig Ægis dóttir* “a terrible daughter of Ægir.” Likewise, it is not necessary to read this immanent tradition into the wave-riddles to make sense of them or understand the perspective they convey about the prevailing essence of waves: that they are, like Ægir’s daughters, both seductive – a source of food and of adventure – and dangerous and unpredictable, taking lives at will.

But while, as we saw, the ptarmigan-riddle seems to draw on this field of reference essentially meaninglessly, the wave-riddles are enhanced by consideration in its light. The wider cultural significance of, and reason behind the tradition seems to be the exploration

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<sup>70</sup> Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Lexicon Poeticum: ekkja*; Fritzner, ed., *Ordbog: ekkja*.

<sup>71</sup> ““Hildir Prepares a Bed,” *passim*.

of uncontrollable natural forces, particularly those which affect human lives. Like Sigurðr, who wonders why some sons are stillborn, or Óðinn, who worries about the fate of his son Baldr, the wave-riddles are concerned with the untimely deaths of men. The elusive but evocative language they draw on stimulates association with other supernatural women and other fatalistic forces. Perhaps understanding the waves as part of this scheme was soothing to seafarers and their families. Perhaps the thought of seduction by attractive, mysterious young women was a comfort, or perhaps it explained and cautioned against the dangerous allure of the sea. The myriad uses of riddling discourse to describe the waves suggests they are, ultimately, unknowable; and perhaps this was consolation in itself. As the Israeli poet Dan Pagis noted, “while a riddle that has been solved ceases to be a *riddle* for the solver, it does continue to exist for him as another kind of poem.”<sup>72</sup> While the wave-riddles’ solutions may not be in doubt, then, there remains much to contemplate. The language and traditions they draw upon build up multiple layers of suggestion, compelling the audience to consider and reconsider, define and redefine, the complex, multifaceted and ever-changing nature of the sea itself.

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<sup>72</sup> “Toward a Theory of the Literary Riddle,” in *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes*, ed. Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 81–108, at p. 98; italics mine.

## Appendix A: Wave-riddles by redaction

2845 (R-redaction)		281 and 597b (H-redaction)		R715 (U-redaction)	
A	Hverjar eru þær snótir er ganga (margar) syrgjandi at forvitni föður?	A	Hverjar eru þær snótir er ganga syrgjandi at forvitni föður?	B	Hverjar eru þær meyjar er ganga margar saman at forvitni föður?
A	Mörgum mönnum hafa þær at meini orðit;	B	Hadda bleika hafa þær inar hvítföldnu,	A	Mörgum mönnum hafa þær at meini orðit;
A	við þat munu þær sinn aldr ala.	C	ok eigu þær í vindi vaka.	A	við þat munu þær sinn aldr ala.
	<i>Eðlis brúðir</i>		<i>Bylgjur, er heita Ægis meyjar</i>		<i>Hlæs meyjar</i>
B	Hverjar eru þær meyjar er ganga margar saman at forvitni föður?	B	Hverjar eru þær meyjar er ganga margar saman at forvitni föður?	C	Hverjar eru þær ekkjur er ganga (margar) saman at forvitni föður?
B	Hadda bleika hafa þær inar hvítföldnu,	A	Mörgum mönnum hafa þær at meini orðit;	C	Sjaldan blíðar eru þær við seggja lið
B	ok eigut þær varðir vera.	B	ok eigut þær varðir vera.	C	ok eigu þær í vindi vaka.
	<i>Bylgjur</i>		<i>Bárur</i>		<i>Ægis dætr</i>
C	Hverjar eru þær ekkjur er ganga allar saman at forvitni föður?	D	Hverjar eru þær brúðir er ganga í brimskerjum ok eiga eptir firði för?	A	Hverjar eru þær snótir er ganga syrgjandi at forvitni föður?
C	Sjaldan blíðar eru þær við seggja lið	D	Harðan beð hafa þær inar hvítföldnu,	B	Hadda bleika hafa þær inar hvítföldnu,
C	ok eigu þær í vindi vaka.	D	ok leika í logni fátt.	B	ok eigut þær varðir vera.
	<i>Ægis ekkjur svá heita öldur</i>		<i>Enn Ægis meyjar</i>		<i>Haf bárur</i>

	[2 riddles on different subjects]			[10 riddles on different subjects]
D	Hverjar eru þær brúðir er ganga í brimskerjum ok eiga eptir firði för?		D	Hverjar eru þær brúðir er ganga í brimskerjum ok eiga eptir firði för?
D	Harðan beð hafa þær inar hvítföldnu (konur),		D	Harðan beð hafa þær inar hvítföldnu,
D	ok leika í logni fátt.		D	ok leika í logni fátt.
	<i>Bárur</i>			<i>Bárur</i>

	2845 (R-redaction)	281 and 597b (H-redaction)		R715 (U-redaction)	
A	Who are those ladies who go (many) sorrowing to the curiosity of their father?	A	Who are those ladies who go sorrowing to the curiosity of their father?	B	Who are those girls who go many together to the curiosity of their father?
A	To many men they have caused harm;	B	They have pale hair, the white-hooded ones,	A	To many men they have caused harm;
A	with that they must spend their lives.	C	and they have to wake in the wind.	A	with that they must spend their lives.
	<i>?Nature's brides</i>		<i>Billows, which are called Ægir's maids</i>		<i>Hlér's (=Ægir's) maids</i>
B	Who are those girls who go many together to the curiosity of their father?	B	Who are those girls who go many together to the curiosity of their father?	C	Who are those women who go (many) together to the curiosity of their father?
B	They have pale hair, the white-hooded ones,	A	To many men they have caused harm,	C	They are seldom gentle with the host of men,
B	and those women do not have husbands.	B	and those women do not have husbands.	C	and have to wake in the wind.
	<i>Billows</i>		<i>Waves</i>		<i>Ægir's daughters</i>

C Who are those women who go all together to the curiosity of their father?	D Who are those brides who walk in the surf-skerries and have a journey along the fjord?	A Who are those ladies who go sorrowing to the curiosity of their father?
C They are seldom gentle with the host of men,	D They have a hard bed, the white-hooded ones,	B They have pale hair, the white-hooded ones,
C and have to wake in the wind.	D and play little in the calm.	B and those women do not have husbands.
<i>Ægir's women, as the waves are called</i>	<i>Again Ægir's maids</i>	<i>Sea-waves</i>
[2 riddles on different subjects]		[10 riddles on different subjects]
D Who are those brides who walk in the surf-skerries and have a journey along the fjord?		D Who are those brides who walk in the surf-skerries and have a journey along the fjord?
D They have a hard bed, the white-hooded (women),		D They have a hard bed, the white-hooded ones,
D and play little in the calm.		D and play little in the calm.
<i>Waves</i>		<i>Waves</i>

## Appendix B: Edited wave-riddles

### Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gátur*, 21 (*Hervarar saga* st. 68; hereafter *Gestumbl Heiðr 21*)

*Hverjar eru þær snótir, er ganga syrgiandi  
at forvitni föður?  
Hadda bleika bafa þær inar hvítföldnu,  
ok eigut þær varðir vera.  
Heiðrekr konungr, byggðu at gátu.*

“Who are those ladies, who go sorrowing, to the curiosity of their father? They have pale hair, the white-hooded ones, and those women do not have husbands. King Heiðrekr, think about the riddle.”

### Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gátur*, 22 (*Hervarar saga* st. 69; hereafter *Gestumbl Heiðr 22*)

*Hverjar eru þær meyjjar, er ganga margar saman  
at forvitni föður?  
Mörgum mönnum bafa þær at meini orðit;  
við þat muna þær sinn aldr ala.  
Heiðrekr konungr, byggðu at gátu.*

“Who are those girls, who go many together to the curiosity of their father? To many men they have caused harm; with that they must spend their lives. King Heiðrekr, think about the riddle.”

### Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gátur*, 23 (*Hervarar saga* st. 70; hereafter *Gestumbl Heiðr 23*)

*Hverjar eru þær ekkjur, er ganga allar saman  
at forvitni föður?  
Sjaldan blíðar eru þær við seggja líð,  
ok eigu í vindi vaka.  
Heiðrekr konungr, byggðu at gátu.*

“Who are those women, who go all together to the curiosity of their father? They are seldom gentle with the host of men, and have to wake in the wind. King Heiðrekr, think about the riddle.”

**Gestumblindi, Heiðreks gátur, 24 (Hervarar saga st. 71; hereafter Gestumbl Heiðr 24)**

*Hverjar eru þær brúðir,                   er ganga í brimskerjum,  
    ok eiga eptir firði för?  
 Harðan beð                                   bafa þær inar hvítföldnu,  
    ok leika í logni fátt.  
 Heiðrekr konungr,                       hyggðu at gátu.*

“Who are those brides, who walk in the surf-skerries, and have a journey along the fjord? They have a hard bed, the white-hooded ones, and play little in the calm. King Heiðrekr, think about the riddle.”