

LOTTE MOTZ

Gullveig's Ordeal; a New Interpretation

The story of Gullveig-Heiðr, told in stanzas 21, 22 of the poem *Vqlospá*, is puzzling and mysterious. Burnt thrice in the hall of the highest god, she escapes unscathed and, now named Heiðr, she takes her path to human houses. There she unfolds her powers: by awakening magic forces she works her spells upon the minds of men.¹

She remembers the war
the first in the world,
when Gullveig
they steadied with spears
and burned her in Hárr's hall;
three times they burned her,
three times reborn,
often unscantingly,
yet still she lives.

Bright Heiðr they called her,
all the houses she came to,
a true and wise prophetess,
she conjured spirits.
She had skills in magic,
she bewildered the mind.
She was always the darling
of a bad woman.

Various interpretations have been offered for this enigmatic passage. The noun *veig*, with a primary meaning of 'drink', has a less frequently encountered sense of 'strength, force, gist'. The form *heiðr* 'gleaming, bright' is also given as a name to some sibyls of the Old Icelandic texts. Basing himself on these facts, Karl Müllenhoff translates the name as 'Force of Gold', and he sees in the woman the corruptive, evil influence of this metal. Her immolation would be analogous to both: the refinement of gold to its purest form and the burning of a witch. Müllenhoff furthermore believes that Gullveig might have been sent by the Vanir, with whom the gods are at war, to corrupt the ruling deities (Müllenhoff 1891:V, 96).

Rolf Pipping thinks that the evil magic of the witch might be related to

¹ vsp 21 – Þat man hon fólcvíg fyrst í heimi,
er Gullveigo geirom studdo
oc í holl Hárs hána brendo;
þrysva brendo, þrysva borna,
opt, ósialdan, þó hon enn lifir.

vsp 22 – Heiði hana héto, hvars til húsa kom,
vqlo velspá, vitti hon ganda;
seið hon, hvars hon kunni, seið hon hug leikinn,
ae var hon angan, illrar brúðar.

sexual behavior of a dubious kind: incest and homosexuality (Pipping 1928:226). This interpretation is endorsed by Jan de Vries, and he suggests that Gullveig had come to introduce the orgiastic rites which were practiced by her family, the Vanir (de Vries 1962). Turville-Petre, in his turn, understands her to be an emissary of the Vanir. Since, as he claims, we do not know how the goddess Freyja came to be a member of the household of the gods, Gullveig would be an avatar of Freyja.² Ursula Dronke shares this view. To her Gullveig–Heiðr–Freyja has arrived to teach the gods the mysteries of regeneration (Dronke 1988:227). Jenny Jochens interprets the figure, as well as others in the poem, as product of the fears aroused in men by women (Jochens 1989:362). Wolfgang Krause compares Gullveig to the Greek Pandora who brought misery into the world (Krause 1975). Heino Gehrts rejects the witchlike aspect, attributed to Gullveig; he interprets her immolation as the sacrifice of a maiden before battle. He finds cosmogonic significance in her ‘resting on spears’, and he believes that her presence has inexorably altered the shape of the world (Gehrts 1969:331). I shall now question the interpretations.

1 The Interpretations

1.1 *The Name*

Veig occurs only in its meaning ‘potion, drink’ in Eddic poetry. In a compound noun the first part modifies the second. A foothill is a hill and not a foot; a housecoat is a coat and not a house. As *minnisveig* means ‘brew of remembrance’, so *Gullveig* would mean ‘drink of gold, golden drink’. If the woman Gullveig is to personify a phenomenon she would personify a drink.

1.2 *The Evil Force of Gullveig*

In Norse tradition the desire for gold is not usually viewed as an evil emotion. It was partially the desire for Fáfnir's gold which inspired Sigurðr to the greatest of his achievements. Both words, *heiðr* and *veig*, possess mainly positive connotations. The phrase “to drink precious draughts” – *drecca dýrar veigar* – symbolizes all that is desirable in life. The form *veig* appears recurrently in women's names. It is not likely that the punitive burning of a witch would be executed, repeatedly, in a sacred place – ‘the hall of the High one’ – the dwelling of a god. The Icelandic texts do not

² Turville-Petre 1964:159. “It is not told that Freyja was one of the hostages surrendered by the Vanir after the war, but it is plain that she was established in the realm of the Aesir”.

describe the burning of witches.³ The powers of gold are not related to the sorcerer's craft – the *seiðr*.

1.3 *Gullveig as an Avatar of Freyja*

Freyja's presence among the Aesir is, in fact explained. She was born in Nóatún to her father Njǫrðr (gyl 24). And this happened after the war between the Vanir and the Aesir had been settled and not at its beginning. None of Freyja's epithets – *Gefn*, *Mqrn*, *Mardqll*, *Sýr*, *Skjqlf*, *Prungva* – show any linguistic closeness to the names *Heiðr* or *Gullveig*. Though the goddess has some destructive aspects and wields powers of enchantment – *seiðr* – she is also a *blótyðja*, the priestess of a temple (HKR I, ch. 4) who kept up the sacrificial rites (HKR I, ch. 10). As a priestess she would not be a witch. There is no record of Freyja's visits to human houses nor of any aggression she has suffered by the gods. The burning of *Gullveig*, moreover, takes place repeatedly – *opt*, *ósjaldan* – while Freyja's entry would be unique. And why would she be burned before she had committed any crimes?

2 A New Interpretation

While Gehrt's view is imaginative and in many ways convincing, I propose to offer yet another reading which also accounts for the activity of *Heiðr*.

I base myself on the fact that *veig* is a synonym for 'mead'. The word *heiðr*, in its turn, is brought into relation with the gleaming drink. The fermented liquid may be instrumental to attaining mantic vision and to the exercise of sorcery, both abilities possessed by *Heiðr*. A tale of how the mead was brought into existence through the killing of a living creature is recorded by Snorri Sturluson. This creature, also, bears a name which has the meaning 'fermented drink'. I suggest that the story of *Gullveig* 'Golden Drink' represents a parallel account of how the sacred mead became part of the world of men. Let us now consider the evidence.

³ Amira 1922:75–76. Under Swedish law the punishment of a witch whose sorcery caused death was death by the wheel or stoning. The west-Scandinavian sources only know banishment. The Gulapings law also demanded the death penalty (without qualification). In Old English law (Aethelstan) women convicted of witchcraft through which a person had died would be banished or killed (unspecified). In continental Germanic law there was no death penalty for witches. The Icelandic sources cite only *Gullveig* as a burned witch. They also speak of the burning of a group of sorcerers who had been lured into a house by Ólaf Tryggvason, which was then set on fire (HKR I, ch. 62). Such a procedure was also adopted in other acts of hostility. It was not until the end of the thirteenth century that the Inquisition included sorcery in its jurisdiction and it was not until the end of the fifteenth that the persecution and burning of witches started in earnest.

2.1 *The Noun veig*

2.1.1 *Veig* as a synonym or equivalent of 'mead':

in *Alvissmál* it is given as another name for 'mead' – together with *biórr*, *ql*, *sumbl*, *hreinalög*.

Veig is the equivalent of 'mead' in the poem *Grímnismál*; the goat Heið-rún, nibbling the leaves of the cosmic tree, dispenses the precious liquid from her udders:⁴

gm 25

She fills the vats with gleaming mead (*miqðr*)
so that this potion (*veig*) will never lack.

The valkyrie Sigrdrífa, who was awakened from her sleep, offers Sigurðr a potent drink:⁵

sgd prose

She took a horn filled with mead (*miqðr*) and offered
him the drink of remembrance (*minnisveig*).

Óðinn is told by a sibyl in the poem *Baldrs draumar* that the hall of Hel is festively prepared for the arrival of his son:⁶

bd 7

Here the mead (*miqðr*) is brewed for Baldr
the gleaming drink (*scírar veigar*).

Like 'mead' *veig* is employed in skaldic kennings as a referent to poetry:

Bjargs skjöldunga veig – the drink of the giants – poetry (skj 99, 14, 7)

Fjqlnis veigar – the drink of Fjqlnir – poem (skj 82, 53, 3);

Veigar rógs raesis – the drink of the creator of war – poetry (skj 46, 15, 7).

2.1.2 *Veig* parallels the function and the action of the mead:

as a drink of welcome: when Þórr and Týr arrive in Hymir's hall they are offered a potion (a drink of beer);⁷

hym 8

she stepped forward, the golden maid,
the white-browed, to bring beer (*biórveig*)
to the son.

⁴ gm 25 – scapker fylla hon scal ins scíra miaðar,
knáat sú veig vanaz.

⁵ sgd prose – Hon tók þá horn, fult miaðar, oc gaf hánom minnisveig.

⁶ bd 7 – Hér stendr Baldri af brugginn miqðr,
scírar veigar . . .

⁷ hym 8 – Enn qnnor gecc, algullin fram,
brúnhvít, bera biórveig syni.

As a drink of revelry: Guðrún, who has set the flesh of her murdered sons as food before the king's retainers, pours the drink for the banquet.⁸

akv 35

The bright-faced woman moved swiftly, to bring them drink (*veigar*).

Like the mead the *veig* possesses magic powers; we thus encounter the noun *minnisveig* 'drink of remembrance' (sgd 2) and *ó-minnisveig* 'drink of forgetfulness' (*Drap Niflunga* in *Edda*).

2.1.3 *Veig* as the symbol of the good things of life:

Freyja, who protects and guards her human friend and lover Óttarr, declares that he shall drink *dýrar veigar* (hdl 50).

When the slain Helgi realizes that his wife has entered his tomb to embrace him he cries out in joy and exultation.⁹

HH II 46

We shall drink precious draughts (*dýrar veigar*)
though we are shorn of life-blood and land.

2.2 *The Word heiðr*

The adjective *heiðr*, meaning 'gleaming, bright', as in *sólheiðr* 'bright as the sun', is also brought into relation with the 'gleaming' mead. A goat, named *Heiðrún*, fills the cups of men with mead (gm 25); the adjective *heiðvanr* 'used to gleaming (mead)' describes the tree, rising above the well of mead (vsp 27). Sacred drops fall from the skull of the being *Heiddraupnir* 'Dripper of *Heiðr*', and from this substance runes are made:¹⁰

sgd 13

The runes of thought (*hugrúnar*) . . .
are shaped by Hroptr, from the liquid
which dripped from Heiddraupnir's skull.

The poem speaks later of the staves carved into various surfaces, which are then scraped off, mixed with the holy mead, and sent to many distant places

⁸ akv 35 – Scaevaði þá in scírleita, veigar þeim at bera . . .

⁹ HH II 46 – Vel scolom drecca dýrar veigar,
þótt mist hafim munar oc landa;

¹⁰ sgd 13 – Hugrúnir . . .
. . . þær of reist,
. . . Hroptr,
af þeim legi er lekið hafði
ór hausi Heiddraupnis . . .

(sgd 18). It is likely that this mead is the equivalent of the gleaming drops which issue from Heiddraupnir's skull (Lieberman 1988:34).

Heiðr is also the name of an Icelandic sibyl; she advised the new arrivals which of the lands they were to take.¹¹ A close relation between the sibyl and the mead is indicated by the kenning *Heiðr's hrqnn* 'Heiðr's wave' – mead – poem (skj 183, 1, 3–4).

2.3 *Heiðr and the Mead*

If we wish to affirm that the woman *Heiðr* personifies the intoxicating draught we must be able to point to parallels between the actions and the functions of the two. In my perusal of this aim I include the qualities of the synonyms of *miqðr*: *biórr*, *veig*, and *ql*.

2.3.1 Mantic Inspiration

The foremost gift of a wise woman, a *vqlva*, is her ability to foretell the future and her understanding of the hidden order of the world. *Heiðr* thus is called a *vqlva velsþá*. In some Eddic poems the intake of the fermented liquid indeed precedes the experience of a mantic vision. After the initiatory ordeal of hanging for nine nights from a wind-swept tree Óðinn received the knowledge of magic songs and a drink of the precious mead:¹²

hav 140

Nine mighty songs I learned from the famous son
of Bqlþorr, Bestla's father and I received a sip of the precious mead.

It was then that he began to recite his magic chants.

In the *Grímnismál* Óðinn is tortured by fire. After he was comforted by drinking from a horn (though the drink is not named) he gives voice to his visionary knowledge (gm prose).

Sigurðr received from the valkyrie, whom he had awakened from her sleep, a horn filled with mead – the 'drink of remembrance' (sgd prose). Later in the poem the drink is designated as *biórr* (sgd 5). After this she imparted to him the wisdom of beneficial and healing runes.

¹¹ *Íslendinga Sögur* 1947 I, 138; she was clearly a well respected person.

¹² hav 140 – Fimbulliód nio nam ec af inom fraegia syni
Bqlþors, Bestlo fðður,
oc ec drycc of gat ins dýra miaðar . . .

2.3.2 Shared Qualities

The talents of the woman *Heiðr* enable her to rouse agents of magic effectiveness – *vitti hon ganda*. Such powers also dwell in the liquid of the horn of *Sigrdrífa*:¹³

sgd 5

A draught (beer) I hand you, tree of the fight (warrior),
filled with strength and mighty fame,
with magic songs and healing runes,
with helpful charms and staves of delight.

By chanting her charms a sibyl could have saved *Pórr* from his affliction, and she is named *ql-Geffjun* ‘Goddess of the intoxicating drink’ (skj 18, 20, 2).

Heiðr, however, is also a mistress of harmful sorcery. She may bewilder and confuse the minds of men – *seið hon hug leikinn*. This action, likewise, may be carried out by the fermented brew. *Guðrún* describes the liquid – *biórr* – brought to her by *Grímhildr* to make her wed King *Atli* of the Huns:¹⁴

gðr II, 22

Signs of every kind were in the horn
carved and reddened with blood – which I could not read –
a huge snake, of the Haddings’ land
uncut corn, the innards of beasts.

23

There was much evil in the beer
roots of trees and wild roasted nuts
the dew of the hearth and bloody guts
cooked liver of pig . . .

The effect produced by the noisome potion, the beguiling and bewildering of the mind, is fully shown in a passage of *Sörla þáttur*. The warrior *Heðinn* had been handed a draught by the witch *Göndul*, and, after he had swallowed it,

¹³ sgd 5 – *Biór foeri ec þér, brynþings apaldr,
magni blandinn oc megingtíri;
fullr er hann líóða oc lícnstafa,
góðra galdra oc gamanrúna.*

¹⁴ gðr II, 22 – *Vóro í horni hvaers kins stafir,
ristnir oc roðnir – ráða ec né máttac –
lyngfiscr langr, lanz Haddingia
ax óscorit innleið dýra.*

gðr II 23 – *Vóro þeim bióri þol mǫrg saman,
urt allz viðar oc acarn brunninn,
umdǫgg arins, iðrar blótnar,
svíns lifr soðin . . .*

a strange thing happened, for he could not remember anything that had occurred in the past:¹⁵

Heðinn was seized so forcefully by his bewilderment and lack of remembrance through the ale (*q/l*), which he had drunk, that he could do nothing else but to follow her counsel; and he did not remember that he and Högni had been joined as blood brothers.

In this way an unending war commenced.

In the cited instances the poisonous liquid was handed out by women: Göndul and Grímhildr. This observation would illuminate the last line of stanza 22 – She was always the darling of an evil woman. The fermented brew may become the favorite tool in the hands of an evil sorceress.

2.3.3 Summary

2.3.3.1 The Action of the Fermented Drink and of Heiðr

Let us summarize in what ways the action of the potent drink parallels the action of the *vqlva* Heiðr. It finds its way to human dwellings; it induces mantic vision and the working of beneficial or destructive magic. It may be cherished by an evil sorceress.

2.3.3.2 The Creation of the Fermented Drink and the Fate of Gullveig

The performance is repeatedly enacted and takes place in a sacred precinct. We may deal with a cultic event. She is burned by flames just as the process of drying grain or of fermentation is hastened by fires lit beneath the vessels. My reading of the stanzas explains why the burning occurs before and not after she committed crimes.

The image of Gullveig's being "supported by spears" – *geirom studdo* – is not obvious or easy to understand, regardless of the interpretation. One might possibly assume that the kettle was hung upon a scaffolding of spears thrust into the ground.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Sörla þáttur*, ch. 7 – Svá var Heðinn fanginn í illsku ok óminni of öli því er hann hafði drukkit at honum sýndist ekki annat ráð en þetta, ok ekki mundi hann til, at þeir Högni væri fóstbraeðr.

¹⁶ A folk custom cited bei Heino Gehrts may throw light on this passage. In the province of Slesvig-Holstein people gather on the Eve of St. John; a fire is lit in an open field; a cauldron is placed above the fire, hanging from a cross beam which rests on side supports: beer is heated in the vessel and then drunk by the assembled. The procedure is named 'the burning of witches' (*Hexenverbrennen*). Gehrts 1969:353.

The association between the intoxicating drink and blazing flames is also noted in an Icelandic saga: "... at that time it was custom to drink beer by the fire." *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*, cited by Jochens 1991:312.

3 Germanic and Non-Germanic Analogues

Kvasir's experience is described by Snorri Sturluson (sk 1). His name appears related to Russian *kvas*, Norwegian *kvase*, a fermented drink, brewed from berries. This being was created when the war between the Aesir and the Vanir was concluded with a treaty. He was the wisest of all men and went far and wide to spread his knowledge. One day he was murdered and his blood, mixed with honey, turned into the drink of inspiration.

Robert Burns relates the story of John Barleycorn. This creature was killed by three kings, the marrow of his bones roasted above a fire, and then his murderers drank his blood (Krappe 1928:66).

And they hae ta'en his very heart's blood
 And drank it round and round:
 And still the more and more they drank
 Their joy did more abound.

Here the drink of merriment, apparently beer, derives from barley, mashed and cooked above a flame.

Bloody incidents abound in Greek narratives concerning the art of making wine which was introduced by Dionysus. In classical times already the Greeks tended to equate the two so that they would be drinking the god's blood; thus it is stated by Euripides:

And when we pour libations
 to the gods, we pour the god of wine himself . . .
 (*Bacchae* 283).

For when the god enters the body of man
 he fills him with the breath of prophecy . . .
 (*Bacchae* 299).

The account of the god's suffering, his being torn to pieces and eaten by the Titans, is said by Diodorus to allegorize the production of the drink (Burkert 1983:244; Diodorus Siculus 3.62.7).

The Indian Vedas know the counterpart of the Germanic mead as *soma*. This potion holds a role of towering significance in Indian belief. By drinking it the god Indra acquired the courage and the strength to slay the monstrous Uritra. This deed released the waters of life, and thus the cosmos was created. *Soma* was personified and made into a god. He is addressed in no less than 114 hymns which frequently stress the process of his formation.¹⁷ Thus he is "bruised by the pressing stones" (IX, 67, 20); he is "purified in his

¹⁷ The entire ninth book of the *Rigveda* is dedicated to this god. My references are to the translation by Griffith. For interesting linguistic relations, see: Polomé 1954.

fleecy garb, attaining every beauty (strained through a woolen cloth)" (IX, 16, 6); "ten Dames (the fingers)" have sung a song of welcome (IX, 56, 3). He then became "the visitor of living men" (IX, 25, 5), a "winning thunderbolt" (IX, 47, 3), "the tawny bull" (IX, 82, 1), the "mountain-haunting steer" (IX, 85, 10), "the well-armed God" (IX, 87, 2). "He takes his weapons, like a hero, in his hands, fain to win the light" (IX, 86, 2). Thus Soma gains his victory: "His task is done; his crushings of the Dasyus are made manifest" (IX, 47, 2).

And, as mead, the drink of ecstatic vision, is personified as a prophetic, so the *soma*, which imparted strength to Indra, is personified as a warrior. It is true that images of the *soma* in its concrete form are everpresent; it is the "tawny-colored" liquid (IX, 37, 2), "a current of sweet juice" (IX, 75, 4). Yet simultaneously it is seen in human terms.

We may view Gullveig's fate in an even wider frame: that of a god who gives his body so that mankind may benefit. The belief in a being through whose death the staff of life is generated is widely spread within the western hemisphere (Hatt 1951). It is strongly present among the Eskimo. According to this tradition a girl was hurled from a boat in a sea storm. When she clung to the side of the vessel her fingers were hacked off by her father's knife. In the severed digits originated the animals of the sea which are vital to Eskimo survival (Hultkrantz 1962:393).

4 The Gullveig Story and the Structure of the *Vǫluspá*

We shall now consider how my reading of the episode fits into the composition of the poem. The first part of *Vǫluspá* describes the creation of the cosmos by the gods. This process was accomplished by peaceful means in its initial stages (vsp 4–8). The globe was lifted from the abyss and then the earth grew green with vegetation.¹⁸ The Aesir regulated the order of the celestial bodies and through this the course of time. As craftsmen they shaped shrines and temples and the tools of artisans. They enjoyed the abode which they had formed until the harmony was shattered by the arrival of three girls from Giantland.

These maidens are described as *ámátcar mioc* 'exceedingly powerful', and it is generally assumed that, as harmful creatures, they brought pain and unhappiness into the realm of peace and order. If this were the case one

¹⁸ That the earth arose from the bottom of an ocean appears as a very widely spread theme, especially in northern Eurasia. Paulson 1962:32–35. Thus a bird may bring a bit of mud from the bottom of the sea and deposit it on its surface, as among the Kets of Siberia. Sometimes the creation of the earth is the result of a contest between God and an adversary, as among the Yakuts.

would expect to find a description of the misery which befell the world after their arrival. Instead, the poem lists a new set of creative acts (vsp 9–22). The race of dwarfs came into being, followed by the family of man. The sacred tree is pictured, rising above a well, and goddesses went forth to determine human fate. Finally, in the view of this paper, the sacred mead was brewed by the gods.

We may wonder what spurred the Aesir to their generative action after their peace had been destroyed. I suggest that the ‘mighty maidens’ are goddesses of fate (other goddesses of fate, the *hamingior*, also originated in Giantland, vf 49). And they arrived to decree what kind of world it was to be: not a static realm of harmony and peace, but one of continual change, of strife and toil, of death and birth, of decay and regeneration, of violence and creativity. Undoubtedly they decreed the death of Baldr and the final holocaust.

Indeed the new forms arise differently from those earlier shaped: the dimensions of death and transmutation are added to the cosmos. The dwarfs grow in the blood of a slaughtered creature; the world ash rises from the realm of death to heaven;¹⁹ the Norns apportion life and thus determine the time of death; the sacred mead originates in the burning of a woman.

Boundaries are broken through shifts and transfigurations; the wood of trees changes into the flesh of men and women. The leaves of the cosmic ash, nibbled by a stag, turn into the rivers of the world (gm 35). Mead, itself transmuted and thrice reborn, a symbol of life renewed, raises men from temporal existence to visions of eternity.

In the view of this paper the brewing of the mead forms the last act of creation.²⁰ It is fitting that the mead is included, for it belongs intrinsically with the cosmos, as seen in *Alvíssmál* where it is named with the stars, the sun, the sky, the fire, and in the *Grímnismál* where it is named with the rivers of the world.

The last act of creativity coincides in time with the first war – She remembers the war, the first in the world. Now the forces which inhabit the

¹⁹ Elsa Mundal views the giant-maidens as forces of creativity which allow the shaping of the race of men by the gods and the originating of the family of dwarfs from blood and bones. For the world ash as sign and symbol of renewal and transmutation, see Motz 1991.

²⁰ We may observe that the noun for ‘mead’ is not found in vsp until after the coming of Gullveig. It is not drunk by the Aesir during the Golden Age. It is first noted in vsp 28:

Mead Mimir drinks every morning
of Valfather’s pawn . . .
Dreccr miqð Mimir morgin hverian
af veði Valföðrs . . .

* * *

cosmos are set in motion and unleashed, and the events unroll inexorably to their fated end.

The presence of mead is not noted in the Golden Age, nor is it cited in the description of the world which rises from destruction, where harvests grow without labor. As the golden board game belongs to the era of changeless peace, so the golden drink – Gullveig – belongs to the era of turbulence and transmutation.

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