Atlaqviða´s[1] harrowing rendition of Guðrún´s perverted retaliation against Atli is drenched in grotesque imagery, perverse humor, and meticulous word choice—a brilliant combination of features that makes it one of the most dynamic, albeit disturbing passages in the Völsung series. The artistic manipulation of text involved in this version of Guðrún’s revenge makesAtlaqviða especially significant because it empowers the heroine without forcing her to sacrifice her distinct femininity. In Skáldskaparmál,the woman is defined as “the giver or disposer of the thing that she shares.” This statement is supplemented by the original wordsseljia and log, meaning “tree” and “log” respectively.[2] She is referred to as “tree” because she is fertile and capable of sustaining life. By referring to her as a “log,” one acknowledges that she possesses the power to sever a tree from its roots. It is further explained that a woman can be referred to in terms of “ale, wine and other beverages that she pours or serves [or] in terms of receptacles for ale and all the things that it is fitting for her to do or provide.”[3] Throughout Atlaqviða,Guðrún offers a variety of beverages and edibles that serve to make a mockery of the established hierarchy. By adhering to the defined boundaries of female identity, Guðrún distinguishes herself from the category of unsexed, ambiguous, transvestite warrior maidens. She becomes a super-woman—an exaggeration of the feminine ideal.

The passage begins by establishing a sense of social order, cohesion and conventional hierarchy. Guðrún fulfills her conventional duties as a woman by serving drinks and preparing the food, while the men situate themselves in the hall and prepare to feast. The movement of bodies is deliberate and orderly:

as **all together** in the hall the Huns **assembled**,

men with long moustaches, **each one came in[4]**

The phrases “all together” and “assembled” convey communal unity. In the second stanza, Guðrún carefully “arranged morsels with the ale.” This repetitive visual of men with long moustaches filing into the hall one by one reinforces a sense of established control and uniformity. In Norse literature, the hall typically represents a physical space in which social norms are reinforced and celebrated. The hall is a nucleus, a womb—it nourishes the community with food and good company. More specifically, it is the place of the after-battle. Whether he attends a celebratory feast in his earthly hall, or an inaugural banquet in Valhalla, the warrior invariably participates in hall-feasting after battle:

All the Einherjar

in Odin’s home fields

fight among themselves each day.

The slain they select

then ride from the battlefield;

reconciled, they sit again together.[5]

The hostility of war is diffused by the act of sharing a meal. Conflict can remain in the realm of normative behavior because its resolution is anticipated. But the idealized harmonious hall is elusive in heroic narratives. More often than not, scenes of feasting and hall activities that appear in these narratives are hijacked by unconventional characters, recurrently female.[6] In “Food, drink and feast in Anglo-Saxon and Germanic literary tradition,” Hugh Magennis asserts that “The world of the hall and its feasting is a patriarchal world in which women have an honoured but essentially supportive role.”[7] On the contrary, the hall is the one area in which women can actually exaggerate their femininity to transcend Carol Clover’s theorized “one-gender model.”[8] During the feast, the woman is always a potential threat, subtly occupying positions of authority. The hall is gendered, and its sexuality is unmistakable. The description of the hall of the Volsungs is particularly suggestive: “a huge tree stood with its trunk in the hall and its branches, with fair blossoms, stretched out through the roof.”[9] Chalices, bowls, hearths, and indeed the hall itself, are all femininely gendered. Magennis notes that women are not invited to sit at the table, but rather, provide food and drink for the men who dominate the benches. However, this does not preclude the presence of women in the hall. The hall is a physical space in which gendered worlds collide. The men are stationary, seated at longitudinal benches while the women are mobilized carrying food to and from their guests, thus becoming potent characters without having to be “un-sexed.” The first stanzas situate the reader in a familiar environment that evokes both idealized visions of community as well as an expectation of revolt against the ideal. Convention is emphasized because it is the exaggerated contrast between order and disorder that drives the narrative, exposing the brilliant, transformative power Guðrún possesses.

            Social order rapidly disintegrates by the end of the second stanza as the verses begin to falter, interrupted by a string of syntactic interruptions. The physical mutilation of Guðrún’s sons is reflected in the text, which becomes both somatically and visually choppier. Disembodied from the narrative, the words operate primarily on a graphic level: “’Your own sons’—sharer-out of swords—hearts, corpse-bloody, you are chewing up with honey.”  Eating is a transformative, disfiguring ceremony—one that imitates and privatizes the violence of battle. And although the social construction of “communal feast” attempts to humanize this animalistic ritual, eating is nevertheless a bodily function, inherently grotesque. The mysterious phrase, “sending it to the high seat” is somewhat lost in translation, but commentators have suggested that “oc í öndugi at senda” is a form of ancient toilet humor.[10] In theory, eating is a perverse inversion of childbirth:

The man supplies woman with seed

The woman supplies man with food and drink

Pregnancy

Digestion

Production of child

Production of feces

Fertility

Infertility

It would be careless to draw any firm conclusions from such simplistic parallels, but it is nevertheless possible that feasting is an inherently subversive activity. The reference to human waste not only completes the process of digestion, but also adds an element of cruel comedy to the passage. The juxtaposition of the crude and the refined is central to this verse. Bloody corpses denote mortality and decay, whereas honey is the nectar of gods and has historically been used as a preservative.[11] The use of the word “savoring” is particularly sadistic. Guðrún takes a perverse pleasure in Atli’s pain, savoring the gory details of his unwitting cannibalism. She deprives Atli of his humanity; by consuming human flesh, Atli and his men are transformed into animals. The physical aspects of eating are emphasized, especially in Atlamál: ”you wouldn’t leave any scraps, chewed it up greedily, relying on your back teeth.”[12] As soon as Guðrún’s curse is consummated, the men are reduced to the animalistic sounds that emanate from their throats: “There was moaning on the benches […] howling under the battle-cloaks.”[13] It is no coincidence that the transformative power of women lies in her role as food-bringer or cup-bearer. Eating is an intimate process that takes place internally, and food is the feminine vessel, that invades the male body and transforms him. 

            Atlaqviða is unique because it proposes a creative solution to the Nordic paradox of the violent female. In this passage, Guðrún defeats Atli both mentally and physically while remaining distinctly feminine. The clever manipulation of wording unexpectedly reinforces the established female gender role but inserts an element of comedy to subvert male authority. As previously demonstrated, the first two stanzas depict Guðrún fulfilling the expected duties of a woman such as bringing food and drink to the tables. She scatters gold, ironically satiating Atli’s devastating thirst for wealth. Described as a “shining metal flow,” the gold becomes an object of consumption, with which “Unaware, Atli […] drunk himself to exhaustion.”[14] Guðrún serves her doomed husband intoxicating beverages that render him defenseless against her mechanisms. The power of the Valkyrie as bringer of food and drink is fully realized.In the final stages of her triumph, Guðrún’s adherence to the ascribed female role defies social expectations:

With a sword-point she gave the bed blood to drink

[…]

She gave to the fire all who were in there.[15]

Even in these crucial moments of her victory, Guðrún does not transgress her role as bearer of food and drink. She doesn’t stab Atli in bed, she nourishes the bed with his blood. She does not burn Atli’s men, she feeds them to the fire. She does not escape the boundaries of the feminine, she expands them. In other versions of the same story, Guðrún is aided by Högni’s son, but the Atlaqviðaversion preserves Guðrún’s femininity and autonomy. She alone is credited with extinguishing the Budli line. Her legacy is impressive and, despite the heinous nature of her actions, registers positively with the reader.

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[1] Carol Larrington, trans., “The Lay of Atli,” in The Poetic Edda(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 210-216.

[2] Sturluson Snorri, “SKALDSKAPARMAL: References to Women.”inThe Prose Edda.(London, Penguin Classics, 2005), 114.

[3] Snorri, The Prose Edda, 114.

[4] Larrington, “The Lay of Atli,” in The Poetic Edda, 210-216, st. 34-52.

[5] Sturluson, Snorri. “GYLFAGINNING: The Daily Battle at Valhalla,” inThe Prose Edda.(London, Penguin Classics, 2005), 49-50.

[6] Some examples of this in The Saga of the Volsungs: Borghild poisons her son Sinfjotli, Grimhild serves Sigurd the fateful potion that renders him helplessly infatuated with Guðrún.

[7] Hugh Magennis, “Food, drink and feast in Anglo-Saxon and Germanic literary tradition.” In Anglo-Saxon Appetites. (Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1999), 20.

[8] Carol Clover, “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe.” Journal of English and Germanic Philology, vol. 85.1, Jan., (1986): 35-49

[9] William Morris, trans., “The Birth of Volsung,” The Saga of the Volsungs(London, Penguin Books. 1990), 37.

[10] Magennis, “Eating and Eaters.” Anglo-Saxon Appetites, 51-2.

[11] Honey was an ingredient in the ancient Egyptian mummification process.

[12] Larrington, “Atlamál.”The Poetic Edda, 230.

[13] Larrington, The Lay of Atli,” The Poetic Edda, 216.

[14] Larrington, The Lay of Atli,” The Poetic Edda, stanza 39, 216.

[15] Larrington, The Lay of Atli,” The Poetic Edda, stanza 42-3, 216.