



# The Potion with the Poison, the Brew that is True

Ann Sheffield  
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“Any scholar who seriously studies the drinking rites of the Germans will quickly be impressed by the way in which women are frequently linked with liquor in all of the sources. So common and internally consistent is this pattern as to be practically impossible to overlook [...] It reflects a deep-seated attitude, a pattern of thought which lies at the basic core of the culture.”

— Michael Enright, *Lady With a Mead Cup*, p. 80

“The lady of the hall is an instrument of her husband used to express his lordship.”

– Enright, p. 14

“The gestures of offering [drink], accepting, and drinking seem to have been the archetypical method of acknowledging lordship and accepting subordination.”

– Enright, p. 260

- Drinks of Power

- Poisons
- Drinks of Sexual Coercion
- Drinks of Memory and “Un-Remembering”

- Women, Brewing, and Magic





Poison

## Poison: *Frá dauða Sinfjötla*

“And at the funeral feast, Borghild carried the ale. She took poison, a great horn full, and carried it to Sinfjotli. But when he looked in the horn, he perceived that poison was inside [...] And still a third time she brought the horn to him, but with words of scorn if he should not drink it up [...] Sinfjotli drank and was dead at once.”

*En at erfinu bar Borghildr öl. Hon tók eitr, mikit horn fullt, ok bar Sinfjötla. En er hann sá í hornit skilði hann eitr var í [...] Ok enn it þriðja sinn bar hon honum hornit ok þó ámælisorð með, ef hann drykki eigi af [...] Sinfjötli drakk ok varð þegar dauðr.*

## Poison: *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*

“The queen [i.e., Gunnhild] and Bard mixed poison into the drink and brought it in. Bard made a sign over the draught and handed it to the serving-woman, who took it to Egil and offered him a drink.” (Trans. Scudder)

*Dróttning ok Bárðr blönduðu þá drykkinn ólyfjani ok báru þá inn. Signdi Bárðr fullit, fekk síðan ölseljunni. Færði hon Agli ok bað hann drekka.*

## Poison: *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*

“Hálfðan the Black died suddenly inland in Trondheim at a certain feast, and people said that Gunnhildr Kings’-Mother had made a deal with a woman skilled in magic to brew him a death-drink.” (Trans. Sheffield)

*[V]arð Halfdan svartir bráðdauðr inn í Þrándheimi at veizlu nokkurri, ok var þat mál manna, at Gunnhildr konungamóðir hefði keypt at fjölkunnigri konu, at gera honum banadrykk.*





Sex  
magic

## Sex magic: *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*

“There Svási’s daughter Snæfríðr, a most beautiful woman, rose and served the king a goblet full of mead, and he took all into his grasp, including her hand, and it was immediately as if a fiery heat came into his flesh, and wanted to have her straight away that night. [...] The king betrothed himself to Snæfríðr and married her and loved her so madly that his kingdom and all his duties he then neglected.”

(Trans. Finley & Faulkes)

*Þar stóð upp Snæfríðr, dóttir Svása, kvinna fríðust, ok byrjaði konungi ker fult mjaðar, en hann tók alt saman ok hönd hennar, ok þegar var sem eldzhiti kvæmi í hǫrund hans, ok vildi þegar hafa samræði við hana á þeiri nótt [...] Konungr festi Snæfríði ok fekk, ok unni svá með ærslum, at ríki sitt ok alt þat, er honum byrjaði, þá fyrir lét hann.*

## Sex magic: Gøtvara

“The envoys’ hopes flagged and they entrusted a further attempt to Gøtvara’s subtlety. She set about weakening the girl, not just with words but by an aphrodisiac preparation [...] The love-potion turned the girl’s inflexibility to desire, destroyed her prejudice and substituted erotic passion. [...] Drawn into loving her suitor by the secret workings of the philtre, she answered that she expected more from Frothi’s talents in the future than his present reputation indicated”

—Saxo Grammaticus, trans. Fisher

## Sex magic: Kraka

Erik “promised that she [Alvild] should be a queen surpassing all others in wealth. This altered all her reluctance, for she was taken no less by the prospect of riches than the glory. The story goes that Kraka also offered her a drink mixed with something which channelled the girl’s desires into love for Frothi.”

—Saxo Grammaticus, trans. Fisher



Wisdom and Memory

# “Liquid Knowledge”

Text	Giver	Recipient	Liquid
<i>Hávamál</i>	Gunnlǫð	Óðinn	<i>dýrr mjǫðr</i> (st. 105.3, 140.5)
<i>Sigrdrífumál</i>	Sigrdrífa	Sigurðr	<i>minnisveig</i> (prose); <i>bjór [...] magni</i> <i>blandinn</i> (st. 6.1, 6.3)
<i>Hyndluljóð</i>	Hyndla	Óttarr	<i>minnisgl</i> (st. 45.1), <i>dýrar veigar</i> (st. 50.6)

“[K]nowledge [...] is conceived to be [...] a liquid that can be offered in a drinking horn. This seems to be the broad conception exhibited by early poetry and mythology in Scandinavia, that knowledge can be understood as a drink that can be prepared, offered, and imbibed.”

– Judy Quinn, “Liquid Knowledge,” p. 209.

# “Liquid Knowledge”

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<i>Hyndluljóð</i>	Hyndla	Óttarr	<i>minnisgl</i> (st. 45.1), <i>dýrar veigar</i> (st. 50.6)



# Drinks of “Un-remembering”

Text	Giver	Recipient	Liquid
<i>Guðrúnarkviða II</i> (& <i>Völsunga saga</i> )	Grímhildr	Guðrún	<i>óminnisveig</i> (prose; cf. st. 21–24)
<i>Völsunga saga</i>	Grímhildr	Sigurðr	<i>meinblandinn</i> <i>mjöðr</i> (Ch. 25)
<i>Sörla þáttur</i>	Freyja	Heðinn	<i>öl</i> (Ch. 7)

*Guðrúnarkviða II, st. 21.1–4*

*Færði mér Grímhildr  
full at drekka,  
svalt ok sárligt,  
né ek sakar munðak[.]*

Grímhildr brought me,  
a cup to drink,  
cool and bitter –  
I did not remember my  
grievances.

# Drinks of “Un-remembering”

Text	Giver	Recipient	Liquid
<i>Guðrúnarkviða II</i> (& <i>Völsunga saga</i> )	Grímhildr	Guðrún	<i>óminnisveig</i> (prose; cf. st. 21–24)
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<i>Sörla þátr</i>	Freyja	Heðinn	<i>öl</i> (Ch. 7)

## *Sörla þáttr, Ch. 7*

“Heðinn was so taken by wickedness and forgetfulness from the ale that he had drunk, that no other course seemed right to him, and he did not remember that he and Högni were sworn brothers.”

*Svá var Heðinn fanginn í illsku ok óminni af öli því, er hann hafði drukkit, at honum sýndist ekki annat ráð en þetta, ok ekki mundi hann til, at þeir Högnit væri fóstbrædr.*

# Brewing



## Brewing: *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*

“King Alrek could not stay married to both Signy and Geirhild, because they couldn’t get along. He said that he would keep the one who could brew better ale for him [...] They contended with each other in brewing ale.”

(Trans. Waggoner)

*Alrekr konungr mátti eigi eiga þær báðar fyrir ósamþykki þeira ok kveðst þá þeira eiga skyldu, er betra öl gerði mót honum [...]. Þær kepptust um ölgerðina.*

## Brewing: *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*

“Geirhildr, girl, this ale is good, if there are no faults connected with it. I see your son, woman, hanging on the gallows, handed over to Óðinn” (Trans. Seelow)

*Geirhildr, getta, gott er öl þetta,  
ef því annmarkar öngvir fylgja.  
Ek sé hanga á háum gálga  
son þinn, kona, seldan Óðni.*

# Brewing: *Oddrúnargrátr*

## Stanza 16:

*Man ek hvat þú  
mæltir enn um aptan,  
þá er ek Gunnari  
gerðak drekku[.]*

I remember what you  
said in the evening,  
when I for Gunnar  
was brewing drink.

## Stanza 29:

*Var ek enn farin  
einu sinni  
til Geirmundar  
gørva drykkju[.]*

Yet I had gone,  
one time,  
to Geirmund's  
to brew drink.



## Brewing: *Guthlac B* (late 10<sup>th</sup> century)

“The brew, which Eve fermented for Adam at the beginning of the world, was being prepared [for Guthlac].”

*þætte Adame*                      *Bryþen wæs ongunnen*  
*æt fruman worulde.*              *Eue gebyrmd*

What about Aegir?

- Questions?
- Other examples?
  - Poisoning
  - Sex magic
  - Drinks of wisdom/forgetting
- Evidence for brewing?
- UPG re: magic and brewing?

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- *Guðrúnarkviða II* (*Eddukvæði*, II.352–361).
- *Hávamál* (*Eddukvæði*, I.322–55).
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