The Hávamál is one of the most famous works from The Poetic Edda. It is a collection of strophes on different themes ranging from the practical to the profound. The first section, which extols practical advice, is often treated as a piece of wisdom literature, or an ethical guide. Unfortunately for modern Heathenry, this first section of the Hávamál contains within itself contradictory values when compared to other parts of the work, and furthermore contains values which are not congruent with other works of Heathen literature. These divergent values render the first part of the Hávamál as suspect when treating it as a piece of wisdom literature or ethical guide in modern Heathenry.

Before the ethics of the Hávamál are analyzed and contrasted with other literature, it is best to give the Hávamál some context. It is contained within the Codex Regius, the principle source of The Poetic Edda, but is found in no other of the various related documents that contain elements of eddic poetry (Bellows 28). The poem is usually translated as “Sayings of the High One,” High One being an indirect name for Odin, the god who searches for wisdom. Odin speaks through his poets at first, but toward the end finds his own voice. It is presumed the poem is a compilation of different texts that were united by the god Odin and a general concern for wisdom (Larrington 14). Five distinct parts, presumably once separate poems, can be discerned: 1) wisdom for life in general 2) Odin’s (or the poet’s) attitude toward women 3) The
"Lay Of Loddfafnir," where Odin counsels a *thul* 4) The rune poems, dealing with how Odin won the runes 5) a list of 18 magic spells  (Hollander 14).

The poems are presumed to have a Norwegian origin, and at least some of its strophes were known to a 10th century audience (Hollander 14). 9th and 10th century Norway was however a time of rapid social change. The consolidation of a central monarchy, and its seizure of hereditary *odal* lands, created a new class of landless men. Some of them fled to other lands, others became beggars, still others might have joined outcasts or warrior cults dedicated to Odin (Turville-Petre 263-264).

The first part of the *Hávamál* does not in fact describe the particulars of Heathenry as a religion, and the only god it mentions is Odin. Instead it largely describes the practical advice of the individual wanderer, one forced to travel and deal with the realities of a hostile world (Turville-Petre 267). The advice contained within, rather than being communal or noble, is often individualistic and cynical (Turville-Petre 267). It is presumed the *Hávamál* was written by poets dedicated to Odin. If that is so, it is problematic to treat the *Hávamál* as an ethical guide for Heathenry. Odin’s cult was not widespread in Norway or Iceland until the social conditions of late Heathenry created a class of landless, itinerant men who were uprooted from their homes and traditional cults (Turville-Petre 66, 267-268).

To summarize, then, the *Hávamál* appears to be a Norwegian creation of no later than the 10th century. It is however a collection of at least five different texts, and thus presumably five different individuals. The individuals, as poets, are united by the patron of their art, the god Odin. However, the Odinic cult of 10th century Norway was composed largely of men who had been displaced from home and land by the tyranny of a centralizing monarchy. The words of the *Hávamál* reveal not the communal wisdom of ancient, landed cults, but the practical (even
cynical) advice of those who seemingly had to travel far and often to survive. With this in mind, we can begin examining the words of the Hávamál in more detail.

As an example of the Hávamál’s contradictory values, let us turn to strophes 54-56.

These strophes caution against pursuing excess wisdom:

Averagely wise a man ought to be,  
Never too wise; 
For he lives the best sort of life, 
The man who knows a fair amount.

Averagely wise a man ought to be,  
Never too wise; 
For a wise man’s heart is seldom cheerful, 
If he who owns it’s too wise.

Averagely wise a man ought to be,  
Never too wise; 
No one may know his fate beforehand, 
If he wants a carefree spirit  
(Larrington 21).

For a so-called wisdom document, this is a quite cynical message. Pursue wisdom only in moderation, because too much knowledge is a burden? There are those who might say that ignorance is indeed bliss, while wisdom is a burden, but those who pursue wisdom accept the burdens they bear because wisdom is an inherently noble value worth the sacrifice of happiness. But that is not what these passages describe. Prima facie, they seem to suggest the wisest course of action for a care-free mind is not to follow wisdom too closely.
Unfortunately this contradicts the spirit of the preceding passages, where much is made of a man who travels widely to gain knowledge. Strophes 5 and 18 read:

Wits are needful for someone who travels widely,
Anything will do at home;
He becomes a laughing-stock, the man who knows nothing
And sits among the wise
(Larrington 15).

Only that man who travels widely
And has journeyed a great deal knows
What sort of mind each man has in control;
He who is sharp in his wits
(Larrington 16).

If wisdom is to be pursued only in moderation, why bother traveling widely to get worldly knowledge? There is a certain disconnect between these two messages.

For that matter, the adage to pursue wisdom with measured doses seems somewhat hypocritical for a poet to say, given that their divine patron obviously felt otherwise. In a later passage in the Hávamál, strophe 138, Odin describes how he hung on the world tree as an act of self-sacrifice to win the runes:

I know I hung on a windy tree,
Nine long nights,
Wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
Myself to myself,
On that tree of which no man knows,
From where its roots run
(Larrington 34).
Odin died, sacrificing himself in the pursuit of a particular piece of wisdom. For that matter, he also accepted mutilation as the price of wisdom. He gave an eye to Mimir’s Well for one draught of its wisdom, as described by strophe 28 of *The Voluspa*:

“…
Well know I, Ygg, where thy eye is hidden;
In the wondrous well of Mimir,
Each mourn Mimir his mead doth drink
Out of Fjolnir’s pledge: know ye further or how”
(Hollander 6)?

Odin raised the dead to consult them for knowledge (as he did in *Voluspa*). He travels in disguise through Midgard to interact with humans (such as in the *Grímnismál*). He commits murder, seduction and theft to win the mead of poetry from a giant (Sturluson, The Prose Edda 85–86). The divine patron of poets does not pursue wisdom in restraint, but with unbridled passion and sacrifice.

Thus far the first part of the *Hávamál* is not quite living up to its own values, or the values of the divine patron who allegedly presides over these sayings. If we understand the *Hávamál* as a creation of at least five different poets who presumably had different outlooks, we can begin to understand the internal contradictions.

But the contradictions run deeper than that. They are not commensurate with the values displayed by other sources of lore. The *Hávamál* urges the traveler to keep silent, be humble, and not make any rash moves, as strophes 6 and 7 illustrate:

About his intelligence no man should be boastful,
Rather cautious of mind.
When a wise and silent man comes to a homestead,
Seldom does shame befall the wary;
For no more trustworthy a friend can any man get,
Then a store of common sense.

The careful guest who comes to a meal
Keeps silent with hearing finely attuned;
He listens with his ears, and looks about with his eyes,
So every wise man informs himself
(Larrington 15).

To not stand out in a crowd or draw undue attention to oneself makes imminent sense for a wanderer who is a guest in someone else’s hall. That might be construed common sense, as the Hávamál itself proclaims.

The problem is that “common sense” does not lend itself well to the Germanic heroic tradition. The silent and wary do not have songs written about them. Only the bold and daring do. We find an outstanding example of the Germanic heroic tradition in Beowulf. This tale was written down in the language of Anglo-Saxon between middle of the 7th century and end of the 10th century. While composed in England, it concerns events in Scandinavia (Heaney ix).

Consider Beowulf’s proud declamation, when he enters Hrothgar’s hall for the express purpose of announcing his intent to slay the mighty Grendel:

“So every elder and experienced councilman
Among my people supported my resolve
To come here to you, King Hrothgar,
Because all knew of my awesome strength.
They had seen me bolstered in the blood of enemies
When I battled and bound five beasts.
Raided a troll-nest and in the night-sea
Slaughtered sea-brutes. I have suffered extremes
And avenged the Geats ….
Now I mean to be a match for Grendel,
Settle the outcome in single battle (Heaney 29).”

Unferth, the King’s *thyle*, whose job it is to challenge guests, openly doubts Beowulf and the exploits of his “awesome strength.” To this, Beowulf unabashedly recounts a tale illustrating his warrior prowess. Afterwards he openly chides Unferth and questions the *thyle’s* own manhood. Finally, our brave hero ends with a holy oath that he will slay Grendel (Heaney 41). If Beowulf knew of the values of restraint and moderation within the hall, as preached by the *Hávamál*, he chose to blithely ignore them. He is all fiery passion, confidence and unrestrained ambition.

Nor was Beowulf the only one in that tale who did not conform to the standards of the *Hávamál*. Many years after his victories over Grendel and Grendel’s mother, King Beowulf fights his last battle with a monstrous dragon. He goes into the dragon’s lair himself to meet his destiny. When his retainers hear the din of battle, they flee to some nearby woods. All, that is, except a noble youth named Wiglaf. Wiglaf chides his comrades for their cowardice, and turns to enter the lair to assist Beowulf. He tells his fellow men-in-arms that death in battle is to be preferred to life and safety:

*I would rather my body were robed in the same
Burning blaze as my gold-giver’s body
Than go back home bearing arms* (Heaney 179).

A heroic sentiment – but not one echoed by the *Hávamál!* Strophe 16 does inure a man not to flee battle, because old age will claim him anyway (Larrington 16). But then strophe 71
mitigates that bold sentiment when it proclaims that to be alive and crippled is better than to be dead:

The lame man rides a horse, the handless man drives herds,
The deaf man fights and succeeds;
To be blind is better than to be burnt;
A corpse is of use to no one
(Larrington 23).

Wiglaf would disagree. He seemed to think that it was, in fact, better to be burned than to live, if the alternative was to abandon his liege lord to a vile monster. Wiglaf, son of the famous Weohstan, was a highborn youth who sought to carry on his father’s legacy (Heaney 177). The contrast between the heroic values of the landed aristocrat of Beowulf and the cautious values of the landless itinerants of the Hāvamál could not be more extreme.

On the theme of whether a brave death is better than life, we can also turn to The Saga of the Volsungs. This prose tale was composed by an unknown Icelandic author in the 13th century from older material found in Norse poetry (Byock 1). The whole tale is one of Odinic warriors who win fame and repute in life, but who die violently at the behest of Odin, their souls presumably reaped as Einherjer for Ragnarok.

One of the most telling examples of preferring a brave death to life is demonstrated by the man who lends his name to the saga. King Volsung is about to be betrayed by his son-in-law, who has amassed an army against him. Volsung’s daughter, Signy, informs him of the plot and cautions a retreat. King Volsung scoffs at the idea. Fleeing a battle may earn him his life, but it would also damn him and his progeny to shame and cowardice:
All peoples will bear witness that unborn I spoke one word and made vow that I would flee neither fire nor iron from fear, and so have I done till now. Why should I not fulfill that vow in my old age? Maidens will not taunt my sons during games that by saying that they feared their deaths, for each man must at one time die. No one may escape dying that once, and it is my counsel that we not flee, but for own part act the bravest (Byock 40).

King Volsung is clearly of the opinion that to be a corpse is indeed preferable to a life of no valor or honor. King Volsung died an Odinic death in an Odinic tale, yet the Hávamál and its somewhat contradictory values also claim to derive from Odin. The events of Saga of the Volsungs originates from an earlier time when Germanic tribes were rampaging across what remained of Roman Europe, and historic deeds and people became infused with legend (Byock 2). The Hávamál is the later work, when Heathenry was in decline as Christianity ascended. The Odinic cult who wrote its words were wanderers and beggars living in uncertain circumstances and with uncertain means. We can then understand why the die-hard heroic spirit of earlier times had given way to caution, wariness and cynicism.

Moving forward, let us look at another theme, this one of sacrifice. Strophe 145 curiously cautions against one making too many offerings or being overly votive in one’s religion:

Better not to pray than to sacrifice too much.
One gift always calls for another;
Better not dispatched than to slaughter too much.
… (Larrington 35).
This is a strange passage. The defining theology of pre-Christian religions has always been *do ut des*, gifting (cynics might say, “bribing”) the gods and entreating them into giving back to their supplicants (Dowden 170). It seems to follow that the greater and more frequent the gifts, the greater and more frequent the return. The Hávamál passage confusingly renders this vital part of pre-Christian theology on its head for no particular reason.

An extreme example of *do ut des* can be found in the Ynglinga Saga, a mythical “history” of Norwegian royalty composed by Snorri Sturluson circa 1230. An aging King Aun sacrifices, in turn, nine of his ten sons to Odin in exchange for prolonged life. Odin clearly has the power to grant this, and clearly has the desire to do it, provided that King Aun makes good on those sacrifices. King Aun, however, makes the mistake of not asking for extended youth along with extended life, and the increasingly decrepit sovereign is ultimately deposed by his disgusted subjects before the tenth son can be sacrificed (Sturluson, Heimskringla or The Lives of the Norse Kings 17-18). But the latter is beside the point. The point is that religion is a cycle of gift-giving, with sacrifice as the ultimate act, a bargain that unites god and supplicant to each other.

Here is another case of Odin versus Odin: the Odin of a more heroic Heathenry versus the Odin of the poets who wrote the Hávamál. If, once again, we understood the poets of the Hávamál as itinerant men of dubious means and circumstances, then the cynicism against sacrifice becomes more understandable.

In the interests of objectivity and balance, before we completely dismiss the poets of the Hávamál as gloomy cynics of bad circumstances who turned Heathenry on its head, we must acknowledge there is at least one strand of Heathenry that carries over from other times and finds its voice in the Sayings of the High One. In perhaps the most cited lines of the Hávamál
(strophes 76-77), the poets decree that the most important thing in life is how one lives it, for one’s reputation survives death:

Cattle die, kinsman die
The self must also die;
But glory never dies,
For the man who is able to achieve it.

Cattle die, kinsman die,
The self must also die;
I know one thing which never dies:
The reputation of each dead man
(Larrington 24).

The glory and honor won in life that survives death is one of the principle differences of ideology that separates Heathenry from Christianity and other world religions. It is one of the defining items of a Heathen worldview. Heathens might believe in a kind of afterlife in a barrow mound, or they might believe in afterlife of a divine hall like Valhalla, but all this pales in comparison to the name they forged which their descendants can carry on.

This is reflected in other sources. Grammaticus Saxo, a Danish bishop, wrote *Gesta Danorum* around 1200 CE. Consider Saxo’s tale of the warrior Bjarke, and his powerful words: “while life lasts, lets us strive for the power to die honorably and to reap a noble end by our deeds (Saxo 96).” Clearly Bjarke would have agreed with the above strophes of the *Hávamál*. So too would have Beowulf: “Let whoever can win glory before death. When a warrior is gone, that will be his best and only bulwark (Heaney 97).” And one might recall the previous quote of King Volsung, who was more concerned with the possibility of maidens taunting his sons for cowardice than their meeting a gruesome death in battle.
The poets of the *Hávamál* were able to retain this supremely important ethos of Heathenry. But even here the exception may prove the rule. Given the cautious, even cynical values they expressed elsewhere, one wonders how they went about winning fame, or even if they felt they could. Strophe 72 seems to suggest the best they can hope for is that their sons will raise a burial monument for them (Larrington 24). Glory after death in the *Hávamál* is sought after and acknowledged, but it seems to be considerably less robust in scope than in other works of Heathenry.

This paper has attempted to argue several points. First, it is beyond a reasonable doubt that the *Hávamál* is a collection of different works, presumably with different authors and different viewpoints. Second, the poems contained within the *Hávamál* were the creation of men who were from a particular time and social milieu. They seem to have been uprooted from land and ancestral cults, forced to beggar and travel for their livelihood. From this follows the third point: the practical advice expressed by these poets in the first part of the *Hávamál* is often at odds with the values expressed in other Heathen works. To make a very simplified statement, the *Hávamál* tends to wariness, cynicism and caution whereas Heathenry in general is bold, courageous and idealistic. The first part of the *Hávamál* must therefore be placed in critical context before it is extolled as an ethical guide or piece of wisdom literature for modern Heathenry.
Works Cited


Dowden, Ken. *European Paganism: The Realities of Cult from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*. 


Free Shipping on orders over $35. Buy Our Troth: History and Lore at Walmart.com. If you want NextDay, we can save the other items for later. Yesâ€”Save my other items for later. Noâ€”I want to keep shopping. For example: NextDay + NextDay = NextDay!