

Les Demoiselles D'Islande: On the Representation
of Women in the Sagas of Icelanders

by

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*As the sweetapple reddens on a high branch
 high on the highest branch and the applepickers forgot –
 no, not forgot: were unable to reach*
 - Sappho

*Words bounce. Words, if you let them, will do what they want to do and
 what they have to do.*
 - Anne Carson

*Conversation strives toward silence, and the listener is really the silent
 partner. The speaker receives meaning from him; the silent one is the
 unappropriated source of meaning. ... For the speaker speaks in order
 to let himself be converted. He understands the listener despite the flow
 of his own speech; he realizes that he is addressing someone whose
 features are inexhaustibly earnest and good, whereas he, the speaker,
 blasphemes against language.*
 - Walter Benjamin

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.
 - Ludwig Wittgenstein

mæli þarft eða þegi
 - Hávamál

For my grandparents,
Elizabeth and Ellis Crocker,
and Mary and W. I. Hann.

ABSTRACT

For much of the history of saga scholarship, questions of origins, the role of feud, kinship, and the structure of the society, and its institutions, have been fertile grounds for research. As such, the female characters – who were certainly less overtly prominent in the settlement of the country as outlined in the texts, as well as in the public and institutional structures – have often been overlooked as subjects of in depth scholarly enquiry. Turning a sharp gaze upon three particular characters, from three different sagas: Auðr from *Gísla saga*, Guðrún from *Laxdæla saga*, and Hallgerður from *Njáls saga*, and entering upon a comparative analysis of the introductions, marriages, and divorces – if applicable – of the characters, this study refutes the archetypical models under which these characters are sometimes studied, and examines the idea of marriage, contrary to its commonly perceived function, as largely a destabilizing force.

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CHAPTER I - EARLY SAGA SCHOLARSHIP

However, when true accounts of the past are given, it is not the things themselves, which have passed away, that are drawn forth from memory, but words conceived from their images. These images they implanted in the mind like footsteps as they passed through the senses.

- St. Augustine¹

... the investigator of an ancient piece of literature often apprehends no more of the work itself and of the spiritual world expressed in it than a worm gnawing the parchment on which it is set forth.

- M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij²

Although women's history has enjoyed a relatively long tradition in Old Norse studies,³ much scholarly energy has been focused on the heroic and mythological aspect as represented in the poetic, and legendary works, rather than the more earth-bound characters of the Sagas of Icelanders.⁴ While this has not always been the case, one must feel quite disoriented – and might possibly be stricken with a serious case of vertigo – upon completing a reading of *Gísla saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, or *Njáls saga*, to read the following statement:

The gallery of women in Celtic poetry is a remarkably rich one. Even Shakespeare has his Lady Macbeth and Cordelia of Celtic extraction. In the Icelandic saga, on the other hand, the men are more interesting. The most characteristic women are those who know no difference between good and evil, who attract men irresistibly by their unfading beauty, who by their vain and unbounded passion for revenge bring death and destruction upon friends as well

¹ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960) 291.

² M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, *The Saga Mind*, trans. Kenneth H. Ober (Odense: Odense University Press, 1973) 14-15.

³ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1996) 234.

⁴ The specific collection of medieval works considered in this piece are generally called The Sagas of Icelanders, but are sometimes referred to as the Icelandic Family Sagas. For the remainder of this study it is this collection of works that are intended when referred to simply as the sagas unless otherwise noted. For an overview of the Literary Background of the sagas, see Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of Icelanders*, trans. Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík: Heimskringla) 38-62, and G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), and for information regarding the various types of sagas other than the Sagas of Icelanders see Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf, eds., *Medieval Scandinavia (Garland Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages)* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993), and Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, eds., *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: a critical guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

as foes, but who themselves unharmed live on to a great age. To this type belong Hallgerd of Njal's Saga and Gudrun of the *Laxdæla*.⁵

This particular view – Alexander Bugge's – is by no means systemic, and is in fact somewhat dated, but likewise, considering the more modern structuralist approach to saga analysis, is it not a severe simplification to reduce *Laxdæla saga* to a story built around a several-point narrative structure based on blood-feud and vengeance? Can this text that traces the biography of Guðrún Ósvífrdóttir, a character that never raises a weapon – apart from her sharp tongue, unbreakable will, and seemingly boundless cunning – really be reduced to one among many tales about quarrelling land-owners? Perhaps a sound method for approaching these questions is to first develop an historical context in which to discuss them, namely, by recounting a short history of saga-scholarship. Following this, I will examine closely the later development of structural and literary anthropological approaches to the texts, which will lead into a short summary of the historical, as well as some of the more recent scholarship on the women of the sagas. And then, to form the main part of this study, I will embark upon a comparative analysis of three characters within the saga texts themselves, Auðr Vésteinsdóttir from *Gísla saga*, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir from *Laxdæla saga*, and Hallgerðr Hǫskuldsdóttir from *Njáls saga*. The analysis will examine these characters through their marriages, the manner under which they are established, and the ways by which they can end. Focusing on the extent and the limits of their respective control and influence in this arena, will reveal some of the confluences as well as the wide gulfs in their individual characterizations, and, additionally, this in depth examination of marriage in the sagas

⁵ Alexander Bugge, “The Origin and Credibility of the Icelandic Saga” (*The American Historical Review*, 14.2 Jan. 1909) 257.

will provide interesting insights into the theoretical framework of gender in medieval Icelandic literature. But before embarking on any such journey, one must unfold and properly orientate the map.

ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES

It seems that much of the early scholarship concerning the sagas was concentrated not on the works themselves, but rather the circumstances surrounding their emergence, “questions of background and sources, in particular the relation of the preserved texts to oral tradition.”⁶ In the words of Carol Clover, the “history of saga scholarship is in effect the history of a hundred-year-old debate on origins.”⁷ A thick line is often drawn across the stage of this debate, on one side stand the supporters of the “free prose” theory, and facing them, a group of scholars who subscribe to what is known, in opposition, as the “book prose” theory. According to the scholar Thomas Bredsdorff, “Every introduction to the sagas of Icelanders – as well as many works that set themselves more ambitious goals – begins with an examination of the relative merits of “free prose” and “book prose.””⁸

The terms *Freiprosa* (“free-prose”) and *Buchprosa* (“book-prose”) were coined by the scholar Andreas Heusler in the nineteenth century, and they roughly correspond to, in the former case, the prominence of orality, and oral narrative traditions in the composition of the sagas, and, in the later case, placing greater value on the moment of

⁶ Carol J. Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)” (*Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, eds. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 239.

⁷ Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” 239.

⁸ Thomas Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love: The Philosophy of the Icelandic Family Sagas* (trans. John Tucker, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen 2001) 7. For a comprehensive overview on the early “book-prose” versus “free-prose” debate see Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins. A Historical Survey*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964) 65-81.

writing, and viewing the scribe as the primary authorial voice in the creation of a saga text.⁹ Thus, while both traditions acknowledge the extant texts debt to a long oral narrative tradition, their difference lies in their perceptions of the role of the scribe who first put pen to calf-skin. Under the banner of “free-prose,” the scribe was something akin to a court-room stenographer, but rather than recording verbatim testimonies, cross-examinations, etc. he, or she,¹⁰ was receiving, as dictated, a fully formed narrative. On the other hand, the adherents of the “book-prose” theory stressed the unique contributions of the scribe, and his own personal technique, in the development of the narrative, though still likely composed under a certain stylistic method. According to Gísli Sigurðsson,

The book-prose theory emphasized the importance of literary intertextuality, borrowings from particular authors, and the potential influence of European Latin culture; whereas the free-prose theory, and more recently formalism, laid greater stress on the role of oral tradition in accounting for apparently related passages in different sagas.¹¹

It cannot be known whether the scribes who first gave the sagas a manuscript form viewed fiction, often perceived as the product of creative invention, and history, the amalgamation of facts based on how things really were, as distinct, and mutually exclusive narrative categories. It is, however, very hard to avoid this dichotomy of

thought in some of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century saga scholarship,

⁹ Gísli Sigurðsson, “Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders” (*A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, London: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 285.

¹⁰ Though it is often considered a given that the sagas were recorded in written form by the men of 12th and 13th century Iceland, some scholars, citing the author of *Laxdæla saga*'s focus on women in leadership roles, its representation of female psychology, its focused attention on the details of women's routine lives, and its general insight into the position and experience of women, highlight the possibility of female authorship of this particular saga. See Loren Auerbach, “Female Experience and Authorial Intention in *Laxdæla saga*,” (*Saga-Book*, 25, 1998) 30-52; Helga Kress, “You will find it all rather monotonous!; on literary tradition and the feminine experience in *Laxdæla saga*” (trans. Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, *The Nordic Mind: Current Trends in Scandinavian Literary Criticism*, eds. Frank Egholm and John Weinstock, Lanham: University Press of America, 1986) 181-95.

¹¹ Gísli, “Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders,” 285-6.

which was very much concerned with “the indubitable distinction between the two, between what is historical and what is literary in the saga ... into what constitutes “free-prose,” and what “book-prose.””¹² And, as it still can be in many ways today, the scholarly debate over the historicity of the sagas was unfortunately deeply entrenched in the issue of what Albert Einstein called “the measles of mankind,” and that which William Faulkner believed would stop literature from being literature if given credence; that is, Nationalism.

In a series of lectures on the sagas at the University of Copenhagen in 1848-1849, Carsten Hauch argued that, based on a discernible artistic structure or design, the working of an artistic spirit could be detected in a given work, and, more specifically, he argued, in *Njáls saga* and in other sagas.¹³ An obvious question that this argument might raise, as applied to the sagas, is whether or not such artistic design precludes the historicity of the texts? Texts that, only a few years earlier, had been published under the title: *Historical Narratives Concerning the Icelanders' Deeds at Home and Abroad*.¹⁴ However, perhaps this question is raised only by an audience of a more modern sensibility, one that is more inclined to draw a strict division between what is called fiction, and what history. If scholars in the Romantic period had little difficulty in uniting a historical, as well as a poetic, literary approach to the sagas, it seems that late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century scholars, and the climate in which they found themselves, were compelled to adopt an exclusively either/or position.¹⁵ This climate of

¹² Bredsdorff, 130.

¹³ Bredsdorff, 7.

¹⁴ Bredsdorff, 7.

¹⁵ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, “Some methodological considerations in connection with the study of the sagas” (*From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson, Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992) 27.

extremes – one might even call it bipolar – bred division, giving rise to great tension, which manifested itself in an emotionally-fuelled scholarly dialogue. And, in the first half of the twentieth-century, after the founding of the University of Iceland in Reykjavík, all signs pointed toward the ascendancy of the view that the sagas were not historical, but rather primarily a literary, poetic creation, a view espoused by what later came to be known as the Icelandic School, led by the professor Sigurður Nordal.¹⁶

However, before things reached this point, in the later nineteenth-century, Gísli Sigurðsson notes, many of the early “free-prose” advocates were Swedes and Norwegians, who argued that Eddic poetry, myths, and the king's and the legendary sagas were Swedish and Norwegian creations. They were convinced that these stories had been transmitted orally on the continental mainland long before reaching the shores of Iceland, and that the “Icelanders had done little more than write down these memorized texts during long winter nights spent on their lonely and isolated North Atlantic island.”¹⁷ If it was the case that these texts were the product of an original oral composition, and transmitted as such, then, to nineteenth-century Icelandic scholars, it seemed that it must have been the case that the Sagas of Icelanders had been Icelandic oral compositions, rather than of continental Scandinavian stock, as they tell stories of Icelanders during the settlement period. Thus, this understanding of the sagas as purely orally derived texts allowed traditional Icelandic scholars to “claim that the saga representations of their colourful ancestors should be accepted as essentially true,” that rather than medieval novels, the sagas formed factual accounts of the settlement age, of the early Icelandic

¹⁶ I must also mention here the first rector of Háskóli Íslands (The University of Iceland), Björn M. Ólsen, who preceded Nordal not only professionally, but also in his intention to view the sagas as literary works of great merit.

¹⁷ Gísli, “Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders,” 286.

free-state, and of the Icelandic Conversion,¹⁸ a reinforcement and continuation of the wide-spread seventeenth and eighteenth century perception of the sagas as primarily historical texts.¹⁹

However, like most scholarly fields, saga-scholarship was by no means a continuously homogeneous mixture, and there were other European scholars who preferred to view the sagas as the culmination of a history of oral tradition, but extended, and manifested as a primarily artistic, literary, and poetic creation. In 1909, the Norwegian scholar Alexander Bugge, ruminating on the roots of the sagas in oral tradition, wrote, “Even where several stories are joined together we have as yet no saga. There is still lacking that which makes the individual narratives into the artistically completed whole which we call a saga.”²⁰ And, further, commenting on the scholarly view of the sagas as purely historical narratives, he writes,

Finnur Jonsson (in his history of Icelandic literature) constantly emphasizes their [the sagas] historical value. They are, however, neither romances nor histories, but, as the name indicates, *sogur* (narrations), artistic reproductions of tradition. The historical and unhistorical are indissolubly blended. Some sagas are more, and some less, historical.²¹

Bugge, concludes his essay, *The Origin and Credibility of the Sagas*, by stating that,

Oral saga-narration originated between 950 and 1000 in the Viking settlements on the British Isles. During the next fifty years these sagas became known in Iceland as well as in Norway. Then the Icelanders in the second half of the eleventh century began to collect the oral traditions. The oral saga had its rise during this time in Iceland, to be written down eighty or a hundred years later.²²

¹⁸ Gíslí, “Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders,” 286.

¹⁹ Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society Sagas and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 45. See also Anderson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins*, 1-64: “That the sagas were essentially historical was an assumption that had survived with only minor revisions since the discovery of the Icelandic codices.” [Anderson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins*, 41.]

²⁰ Bugge, 251.

²¹ Bugge, 260.

²² Bugge, 261.

Responding to this, and to other similar positions, Finnur, in 1923, wrote, “I will uphold and defend the historical reliability of the sagas, however 'grand' this may sound, until I am forced to lay down my pen.”²³ In the view of traditional Icelandic scholars, it seems, treating the sagas as works of fiction rather than works of history “struck the descendants of the saga folk as a devaluation of their national history,” and, as though pouring salt into the open wound, if “the sagas did not arise from native origins, but had literary roots on the European continent, this struck some as a radical diminishment of the Icelanders' past.”²⁴ And thus it seems that those who held onto the traditional scholarly view of the sagas as historical sources were not only driven by their love of truth, but were in no small part also driven by Icelandic-nationalist feelings.²⁵ However, if this is in fact true, can one then infer that the Icelandic School, who later arrived at a very different conclusion regarding the historicity of the sagas, were driven by anti-nationalist feelings? Were they also driven by an abhorrence of truth?

AUTHOR! AUTHOR!

It is by no means a necessary condition that, despite asking the same questions, and having the same evidence, those who arrive at different conclusions are driven by contrary motivations.²⁶ In fact, according to Jesse Byock, the Icelandic School's strong

²³ Finnur Jónsson, “Norsk-Islandske kultur- og sprogforhold I 9. og 10. årh,” (*Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser* 3, 2, Copenhagen: Bianco Lunos, 1923). as cited in Jesse L. Byock, “History and the sagas: the effect of nationalism” (*From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson, Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992) 54.

²⁴ Bredsdorff, 132-3.

²⁵ Bredsdorff, 132.

²⁶ It is likewise not a necessary condition that those who reach the same conclusion began with similar assumptions. Case in point, Finnur Jónsson's comment on the excellence of *Hrafnkatla*, that it is “a spotless pearl among the Family Saga,” and his assurance of its twelfth-century composition, attests to his view the earlier a saga was written down, the better its construction. [Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske Litteraturs Historie*, ii ([2nd edition] Copenhagen, 1923) 516-7, as cited in Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða: A Study*, trans. R. George Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958) 61] Contrast this with Sigurður Nordal's own views on Icelandic authorship: „Saga flestra íslenzkra

opposition to the use of sagas as historical sources resulted from their own brand of twentieth-century Icelandic-nationalistic pride, and was tightly wound about the contemporary political climate, the atmosphere of urbanization, and the emerging nationhood of the country.²⁷ For these scholars, Byock adds,

the sagas were not simply validations of national greatness, but evidence of cultural uniqueness. If they could be shown to be products of “one of the most powerful literary movements in recorded history,” then the emerging Icelandic urban culture would no longer be a poor cousin of the Danes' culture. In fact, Iceland with its sagas would have reached a state of cultural sophistication centuries in advance of anything the Danes achieved before the nineteenth century.²⁸

In fact, the sagas were used as a point of national pride far beyond the borders of literary scholarship.²⁹ In an article from 1929, entitled *Icelandic Independence*, the Arctic explorer, and Western Icelander, Vilhjalmur Stefansson³⁰ writes that, “Icelandic literature has exerted an influence upon Iceland much greater than the combined influence of

aðburðamanna frá siðari öldum er tilbreyting sama stefs. Það er eins og þessir menn séu tilraunadýr alvískunnar til þess að sýna, hversu mikils göfugur og frjálsborinn andi getur mátt sín, jafnvel þegar allt umhverfis er upp á móti. Þess vegna verða ævisögurnar í íslenskri bókmenntasögu, þegar þær verða rétt skildar og skrifaðar, ef til vill enn merkilegri en ritin sjálf. Og að sumu leyti má við það una, því af öllum verðmætum, sem vér fáum að kynna, er mannssálin sjálf, afklædd öllu því, sem menn eiga, afreka og sýna, vafalausast og aðdánlegast. Öll verk eru einungis brot úr sálarlífi höfundar, hann sjálfur er heildin, sem tengir brotin saman og varpar ljósi á þau. Því er þeim, sem verkunum unna, eðlilegt að leita mannsins.“ [Sigurður Nordal, “Grímur Thomsen: Erindi flutt í Reykjavík 15. maí 1920,” (*Grímur Thomsen: Ljóðmæli*, [2nd edition] ed. Sigurður Nordal, Reykjavík, 1969), 27] It seems that both men see the extant text as a pale imitation of some lost original, for Finnur Jónsson it is the point of origin of the orally composed saga, that is historical reality itself, whereas for Sigurður Nordal, as for the Romantics, it is the unwritten text, the genesis of the unmolested artistic creation as it exists within the author himself, within the soul of man, before the primary transgression, before the violation of tangible form. (See also n.34 below)

²⁷ Jesse L. Byock, “History and the sagas: the effect of nationalism” (*From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson, Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992) 46-7.

²⁸ Byock, “History and the sagas,” 55.

²⁹ For further reading on the role of Old Icelandic literature's role in Icelandic nationalist-ideology, as well as its role in the 'Iceland-myth' in other European cultures see Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, “The Renovation of Native Pasts. A Comparison between Aspects of Icelandic and Czech Nationalist Ideology”, (*The Slavonic and East European Review*, 78.4, Oct. 2000) 688-709, and Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 106-48.

³⁰ For further reading on Vilhjalmur Stefansson see Gísli Pálsson, *Travelling Passions: The Hidden Life of Vilhjalmur Stefansson*, trans. Keneva Kunz (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2005), and his autobiography, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *Discovery: The Autobiography of Vilhjalmur Stefansson*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964).

Shakespeare and the King James Bible upon England,” and that,

The Dark Ages descended in full gloom upon the rest of Scandinavia but only the penumbra of their shadow fell on Iceland. Throughout that dull and, in the rest of Europe, unliterary time, the Icelanders alone remained in their literary tastes if not in productive genius. ... It was through these evenings of prose and verse, fashionable in Iceland as never in Norway, Sweden or Denmark, that the literature secured the effective stabilizing hold on the language that makes the present vernacular almost identical with the classic records, and makes the Icelanders still so passionately aware of their former independence and their former literary and political importance.³¹

The explorer, like literary scholars at the time, must have felt compelled to mention Norway, Sweden and Denmark as Icelandic literature had for a long time been claimed by the mainland Scandinavian countries, and they had long incorporated Old Icelandic texts into their own national cultural heritages, viewing the written texts as the remnants of Viking traditions that were not created in Iceland, but merely recorded and preserved there by Norse immigrants.³² It seems that, while the scholars of the newly formed Icelandic School were quite willing to share the Eddic and Skaldic poetry, as well as some of the other vernacular literatures, with the mainland Scandinavians, like their traditional forebears, they declared the sagas exclusively Icelandic. According to Sigurður Nordal,

The national literature of the Icelanders before 1300 is divided into three parts, if one does not count the laws. Two (Eddic and Skaldic verse) are of common Scandinavian heritage, while one (the family sagas) is spun of entirely Icelandic thread.³³

However, the difference seems to lie in the fact that rather than finding pride in their

³¹ Vilhjalmur Stefánsson, “Icelandic Independence” (*Foreign Affairs*, 7.2 Jan. 1929) 274.

³² Byock, “History and the sagas,” 57.

³³ Sigurður Nordal, “Samhengið í Íslenskum bókmentum,” (*Íslensk lestrarbók*, Reykjavík: Bókaverzlun Sigfússar Eymundssonar, 1924), as cited in Byock, “History and the sagas: the effect of nationalism,” 58. One might also note here that, while Nordal and the Icelandic School would not shy away from grouping the sagas together as a certain type of literature, in their analysis, according to Clover, “they seldom consider the “sagas” (in the plural) at all. They have preferred to proceed saga by saga, indeed part by part, hewing to what is demonstrable in the individual work.” [Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” 242]

medieval ancestors, that is, those ancestors represented as characters in the saga narratives, Nordal, and the Icelandic school, sought pride rather in those nameless, younger ancestors, those who first gave the sagas a written form.³⁴ According to Byock, the task facing Nordal, and the other members of the Icelandic School, was “to lift the sagas from their status as traditions of unlettered storytellers and elevate them to the front rank of world literature,” to “reinterpret them in the light of standard European concepts of literary development,” giving them a seat at the table reserved for “the artifacts of European high culture.”³⁵

In Bredsdorff's telling, the members of the Icelandic School “were engaged in a polemical war,” one that “to a large extent they won,” and the prize: the opportunity to begin legitimately regarding the sagas as works of artistic and literary creation.³⁶ But, Byock contends, if it is then the case that the sagas belong only to the inventiveness of those thirteenth century Icelanders who wrote them down,³⁷ then in redefining the sagas

³⁴ “As for the honour of our nation, we must assert that on to the stage which will be left empty by the withdrawal from the pageant of history of so many fictitious killers and strong men from the Saga Age, a new kind of character will step forth from the wings where he has hitherto been hidden, the author of the saga. Is there any loss in such an exchange? Surely it is an honour for Icelanders to have produced the men who wrote such books and who knew what they were about when they composed them. I believe there is no example in the history of literature of men of such genius being rewarded for their labours with such ingratitude.” Sigurður Nordal, (1958) 64-5. Similarly, Halldór Laxness, “an avid critic of romanticized heroes such as Gunnar Hámundarsson and Skarpheðinn Njálsson, he admired the sagas far more for their artistic qualities than for their sometimes violent ethics.” Jón Karl Helgason, “Continuity? The Icelandic Saga in Post-Medieval Times” (*A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, Malden, MA, Oxford and Victoria, Australia, 2005) 79. Halldór, in 1952, published his own “archaic work of art for modern people,” with *Gerpla* [The Happy Warriors], wherein he continued to admonish the glorified brutality of the saga heroes, but held the saga authors in a high position of reverence. See Halldór Guðmundsson, *The Islander: A biography of Halldór Laxness*, trans. Philip Roughton (London: MacLehose Press, 2008) and Steingrímur Þorsteinsson, “Halldór Laxness and the Icelandic Sagas” (*Scandivica*, Supplement May, 1972) 101-116.

³⁵ Byock, “History and the sagas,” 52, 58.

³⁶ Bredsdorff, 136.

³⁷ It is important to note again that this is Byock's contention, that the sagas under the Icelandic School were considered “as the creative product of thirteenth-century Icelandic fiction writers,” and “belonging to Icelandic inventiveness alone.” [Byock, “History and the sagas,” 58] And, that they produced a theory of saga origins in which the sagas became “scarcely anyone's history – not even Iceland's before the thirteenth century.” [Byock, “History and the sagas,” 58] Juxtapose this view with Carol Clover's more moderate

as the product of this later literary movement, the Icelandic School produced a theory in which the sagas origins went from being the historical memory of all Scandinavia, to becoming hardly anyone's history at all, and “in redefining the sagas as the fruit of a late literary movement, [they] reassessed the Icelandic national heritage in a way that ultimately stunted its own cultural maturity.”³⁸

It is very important to note here that it is possible that the Icelandic School is not solely responsible for this consequence – if it was in fact an actual outcome of their work as Byock suggests – for, according to Bredsdorff, the stance of the Icelandic School was largely determined by the stance of their adversaries, and, because of this, “they were so preoccupied with insisting that the sagas are fiction, not history,” that they found little opportunity to speak about the specific artistic features of the sagas themselves, and “did not get far beyond calling them “good stories.”³⁹ While it might be true that the Icelandic School's injunction against the study of the sagas in an historical perspective seems limited by contemporary standards, their contribution to saga scholarship in the direction of literary studies, their consideration of the sagas as works of art rather than purely historical accounts, should not be overlooked.⁴⁰ And, contemporary scholarship, which seems to have developed an amalgam of literary, and anthropological methods to study the sagas as both of oral composition, and written-literary stock, and as historical texts in

description of the Icelandic School's relationship with the traditions of oral narratives: “To the extent that bookprosists acknowledged its ([oral traditions]) existence, they saw it as matter not form. The source analysts of the Icelandic School, on the other hand, concede that oral tradition is in some degree not only responsible for points of content but also for some features of style and composition.” [Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” 242] She continues to describe the seeming reluctance of this concession in practice, but nonetheless, countering Byock's claim, it does seem to exist.

³⁸ Byock, “History and the sagas,” 58.

³⁹ Bredsdorff, 136.

⁴⁰ Carol Clover, and Thomas Bredsdorff cite the 1933-54 publication of the *Íslensk fornrit* editions of the Sagas of Icelanders as, by common consent, the Icelandic Schools greatest achievement. [Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” 241.; Bredsdorff, 135]

light of both the period they depict in their narratives, as well as the historical period of their composition, is perhaps more indebted to the Icelandic School than it would sometimes care to admit.

SCHOOLHOUSE ROCK

According to Clover, the priorities of the scholars of the Icelandic School were most clearly spelled out in the introductions to the *Íslenzk fornrit* editions of the sagas,

which consider such matter as the individual saga's literary sources,..., use of skaldic stanzas, manuscript transmission, dating, authorship, and provenance, but which do not consider, or consider only in passing, its oral background, its social and political biases, or its narrative art.⁴¹

She provides a succinct summary in stating that, in their scholarship, “they are interested in the sources of parts, not the shape or significance of the whole.”⁴² If it seems to this point that I have spent much space discussing the Icelandic School, and their approach to the sagas, it is primarily because much of the saga-scholarship that has appeared since the school reached its full international momentum after the 1960s either stems from the work of the school, or stands in strong opposition to it.⁴³ Perhaps then, in other words – to borrow a phrasing from Fernando Pessoa – whether or not it exists, we are slaves to the Icelandic School.⁴⁴

Thomas Bredsdorff describes three schools whose work both counters, and borrows from, the Icelandic School – which still finds its space among contemporary scholarship⁴⁵ – citing the *European School*, the *Norwegian School*, and the *Ethical-*

⁴¹ Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” 241.

⁴² Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” 241.

⁴³ Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, 39.

⁴⁴ “Whether or not they exist, we're slaves to the gods.” [Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (New York: Penguin Group, 2001) 26.] Likewise, from Euripedes' *Orestes*: “ORESTES: We are slaves to the gods. Whatever gods are.” [Aiskhylos, Sophokles, and Euripedes, *An Oresteia*, trans. Anne Carson (New York: Faber and Faber Inc., 2009) 200.]

⁴⁵ Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” 241.

Aesthetic School.⁴⁶ He contends that the primary text of the *European School* – which might be characterized as something akin to modern Europe itself, where state borders are now mostly open, and traffic can flow unhindered by national security forces – is Paul V. Rubow's essay “Den islandske Familieroman” (1930) – noting that it likewise serves as a text for the Icelandic School. The school's distinct feature, according to Bredsdorff, is its “keen interest in influences from European continental literature,” viewing the sagas in the context of a literary evolution, granting the influence of both vernacular Icelandic, as well as continental European literature as highly influential upon the saga-style and form.⁴⁷ This, and other similar views, can be perceived in the works of the scholars G. Turville-Petre, Lars Lönnroth, and Hermann Pálsson,⁴⁸ and Clover highlights three important ways in which the work of the members of this school distinguished itself from earlier scholarship,

(1) In its deemphasis in what are conventionally viewed as the “main” genres (family and kings' sagas) and its corresponding emphasis of such neglected genres as saints' lives and learned history writing; (2) in its effort to obliterate the traditional sharp distinction between “native” and “foreign” or “learned” literature; and (3) in its general assumption that the medieval Icelanders were considerably more conversant with, and indebted to, contemporary European culture, or sectors of it, than the traditional scholarship has been inclined to allow.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Bredsdorff, 137-40. Bredsdorff admits that this nomenclature is only useful in terms of a short summary, and I add that these “schools” are by no means characterised by their exclusivity, nor their inflexibility. Also, in this vein, one should keep in mind the words of Ezra Pound, that, “Confusion is caused by package-words. You call a man a Manichaeon or a Bolshevik, or something or other, and never find out what he is driving at,” and realize that the best way to discover what any scholar is “driving at” is not to attempt to uncover under which label, theory, or school his or her work best fits, but rather to read the work for itself. [Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984) 649.]

⁴⁷ Bredsdorff, 137.

⁴⁸ See Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, 1953; Lars Lönnroth, *European Sources of Icelandic Saga-Writing. An Essay Based on Previous Studies*, (Stockholm: Boktryckeri Aktiebolaget Thule, 1965); Hermann Pálsson, *Oral Tradition and Saga Writing*, (Vienna: Fassbaender, 1998).

⁴⁹ Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” 251. Although Clover cites these three points in specific relation to the collaborative volume *Norrøn fortællekunst*, eds. Hans Bekkir-Nielsen, Thorkil

Many scholars were not content to merely acknowledge that a continental European influence existed but sought, and still seek, to examine individual texts for their very specific sources of influence.⁵⁰ It is quite easy to see how the three points mentioned above openly subvert the Icelandic School's early theory of, perhaps at worst saga genesis-in-isolation, but generally the disinclination to investigate, not only oral, but equally continental European written sources, and influences.

The second of Bredsdorff's schools, the *Norwegian School*, like the one-room schoolhouse in a soon to be resettled community, is characterised by its limited enrolment, and, in this case, the class-list counts only two names: Hans E. Kinck and Hallvard Lie.⁵¹ Hallvard Lie is often credited as the first scholar to use the term "Icelandic School" in print, and in their work, Kinck and Lie both seem to trust the saga narratives as historical accounts, and propose to uncover a psychological reality behind the works – one that even the author may not have been equipped to understand – based on objective evidence gathered from the texts.⁵² In the end, Lie's method, and similarly Kinck's, was to read the sagas with pragmatic historical intentions, to uncover the historical realities that underlie the texts, eliminating subjectivity, and historical distortion, as introduced by the authorial voice.⁵³ Their methods, though likely not still used in any meaningful way, are perhaps echoed in the anthropological approach to saga

Damsgaard, and Ole Widding, 1965, the same features can be detected in the scholars mentioned in relation to this school, among others.

⁵⁰ For a general overview concerning studies of this sort, see Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)," 251-53.

⁵¹ Bredsdorff, 138. It is important to note here that though Kinck's work ["Et par ting om ættesagaen. Skikkelser den ikke forstod" (*Sagaenes ånd og skikkelser*; Oslo: Aschehoug, 1951)] pre-dates most of the Icelandic School's work – as well as that of Hallvard Lie –, according to Bredsdorff, it still manages to stand in strong opposition to some of their primary tenants.

⁵² Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)," 241; Bredsdorff, 138-9.

⁵³ Bredsdorff, 139.

scholarship which I will return to in the next chapter.

The third of Bredsdorff's schools is what he calls the *Ethical-Aesthetic School*, which might be something like a state-less, international boarding school, and it is characterised by its ability to engage in issues like "ethics, morals, fate, dialogue, composition – issues that presuppose that the saga should be treated as a literary form rather than an historical document."⁵⁴ With such a wide field of interests it would be incredibly difficult to summarise this school in any concise manner, and it is thus more useful to introduce perhaps the most influential text to emerge from this group of scholars, that is Theodore Andersson's *The Icelandic Saga. An Analytic Reading* (1967). In his analytic reading Andersson "proposed a simple and ingenious six-point scheme for analyzing the typical feud story contained in most family sagas," something to which I will return next chapter.⁵⁵ Overall, this structuralist approach to sagas was quite helpful in that it provided scholars with "a practical and much-needed toolbox for analysing saga narrative," and the legacy of this school is the way in which it turned the attention "away from questions of authorship, which preoccupied the Icelandic School, and the question of influence, which preoccupied the European School."⁵⁶

If, as Bredsdorff has described, the Icelandic School had in fact won the polemical battle in which it had once found itself firmly entrenched, then, much like the elastic nature of honour as outlined by the paying-game played out in the sagas, victory was nothing like a permanent state. And thus, the schools and the scholarship that stood

⁵⁴ Bredsdorff, 140.

⁵⁵ Lars Lönnroth, "Structuralist Approaches to Saga Literature" (*Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, eds. Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills, Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2007) 65.

⁵⁶ Bredsdorff, 140.

in strong opposition to the intentions of the Icelandic School each continued to push for their own victories, and from the mix, it seems that, in many ways, the structuralist approach to saga studies, as evidenced in Andersson's work, emerged at the front of the pack.

CHAPTER II - RECENT SCHOLARLY TRENDS

A great shambling mutant, silent and serene. Whatever his antecedents, he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there any system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history through what unravelling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing. - Cormac McCarthy¹

... yet although silence explains much by the emphasis of leaving all unexplained, because it is a negative thing, one must name the silence, so that what it signifies may be understood. Failing that, silence will say nothing, for that is its proper function: to say nothing.

- Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz²

MATTER + FORM

Likely inspired by post-WWII European structural-theorists, Vladimir Propp, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and others, perhaps equally inspired by the oral-formulaic theory of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, and of course in response to the prevalent theories of the Icelandic School, it seems that a movement toward a structural approach to medieval narrative prose works began to gain ground toward the end of the 1960s.³ However, before this, it seems that the very first structuralist approach to the sagas was formulated in 1885 by Albert Ulrik Bååth, although rather than exploring the idea of a structured narrative construction, Bååth's work drew conclusions regarding the origin of the sagas, and their relationship to oral tradition. His “*páttir* theory,” posited the idea that the “longer sagas had developed from smaller narrative units, *þættir*, which had circulated in oral tradition as independent short stories but had later been incorporated as

¹ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West*, (New York: The Modern Library, 2001) 309-10.

² Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *The Answer / La Respuesta: Including a Selection of Poems*, eds. and trans. Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1994) 43.

³ Lönnroth, “Structuralist Approaches to Saga Literature,” 63.

episodes in long written sagas.”⁴ It seems that, at the time, Bååth's ideas had garnered little attention, other than strong criticism from Andreas Heusler, who himself saw many indications that longer sagas had existed in oral form without necessarily consisting of several independent shorter tales, or *þættir*.⁵ Whether due to the domineering power of Heusler's critical view, or rather from lack of interest, or due to competing scholarly concerns, it seems that the structuralist approach to the sagas was something of a barren field for the first half of the twentieth-century, for it was in 1967 – eighty-two years after Bååth's piece was first published – that Theodore M. Andersson first cultivated the grounds of a modern structuralist approach to the sagas, with his study, *The Icelandic Family Sagas: An Analytic Reading*.⁶

In the preface to his piece, Andersson remarks on the late-blooming of structuralist, or formalist, approaches to the sagas, commenting that,

Though it would seem late in the day to be undertaking such a fundamentalist task, it can hardly qualify as a work of supererogation. The question of formal definitions and formal categories has in fact seldom been raised, for the simple reason that the saga has never been entertained by literary scholarship ... A programmatic acceptance of the sagas as literature is still only a few decades old and has been accompanied by the critical dogma that a saga is best studied in isolation and that a comparative perspective blurs the image.⁷

In his piece, Andersson outlines a six-point structure, from which the typical feud story contained within most of the sagas can be analyzed: (1) Introduction, (2) Conflict, (3) Climax, (4) Revenge, (5) Reconciliation, and (6) Aftermath, and he proceeds to use this

⁴ Lönnroth, “Structuralist Approaches to Saga Literature,” 63. For a more detailed description of Bååth's structuralist method, namely his “*þáttir* theory,” see Lönnroth, “Structuralist Approaches to Saga Literature,” 63-4, and Albert Ulrik Bååth, *Studier öfver kompositionen i några isländska ättsagor* (Lund: Berling, 1885).

⁵ Lönnroth, “Structuralist Approaches to Saga Literature,” 64.

⁶ Lönnroth, “Structuralist Approaches to Saga Literature,” 64-5.

⁷ Theodore M. Andersson *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967) v.

structure to examine closely twenty-four sagas.⁸ Carol Clover – who under the influence of Andersson's work would later construct her own three-point description of scene design as a formal structural unit in the sagas⁹ – notes, quite viscerally, that Andersson believed “it is not only their common skeletal structure that associates the sagas with one another and distinguishes them as a genre but also the manner in which that skeleton is fleshed out.”¹⁰ Consequently, in addition to Clover, several young scholars began to nurture the seeds that Andersson had planted including Joseph Harris – one of Andersson's students – who developed a similar narrative structure for analyzing the *þættir*, and Richard F. Allen, who published a new study of *Njáls saga* in which he established a hierarchical scheme for analyzing narrative structural elements in the text.¹¹ In his work, Allen alludes to the method and terminology used to approach “the typical units of oral poetry” by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg in their *The Nature of Narrative*, and this, he proposes to extend and modify in relation to his study of *Njáls saga*.¹² In his examination of saga

⁸ Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga*, 4-5. For a complete description of Andersson's six-point structure see Anderson, *The Icelandic Family Saga*, 3-30, and note that Andersson suggests that “half of the twenty-four sagas dealt with in this study lend themselves readily to the same six-part analysis and all but one of the remaining sagas [*Vatnsdæla saga*] deviate only slightly from it.” [Anderson, *The Icelandic Family Saga*, 6]

⁹ Lönnroth, “Structuralist Approaches to Saga Literature,” 68. Also see Carol Clover, “Scene in Saga Composition” (*Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 89, 1974) 57-83, and Carol Clover, *The Medieval Saga*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982): “Scene is the smallest particle of story and may be defined in strictly formal terms as a tripartite “paragraph” consisting of a dramatic encounter preceded by a narrative preface and followed by a narrative conclusion.” [Clover, *The Medieval Saga*, 180.]

¹⁰ Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” 275. Note that the structural method, like the “free-prose” theory allows a scholar to analyze the sagas in a plural sense, as opposed to the individuated approach of the Icelandic School. (see n.33, Ch.I above)

¹¹ Lönnroth, “Structuralist Approaches to Saga Literature,” 66-8. See Joseph Harris, “Genre and Narrative Structure in Some *Íslendinga þættir*” (*Scandinavian Studies* 44, 1972) 1-27.; Richard F. Allen, *Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls saga* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971). Lönnroth also mentions his own structuralist approach to *Njáls saga* in his *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), wherein he “proposed a simplified and revisionist version of Allen's theory of narrative elements, greatly inspired by Clover's analysis of scenic composition and by [Albert] Lord's oral-formulaic theory.” [Lönnroth, “Structuralist Approaches to Saga Literature,” 69.]

¹² Allen, 69.

narratives, Allen builds something akin to a series of Russian dolls, from the small-scale minimal fact or figurative or gnomic statement, to the out-most layer, the archetypal level, in which events in the sagas “are seen to take their place in a universe inhabited by other literary worlds and peoples.”¹³ Allen, much like Andersson, whose analytical reading contends “that sagas are stories of blood and vengeance,” explains that the “the overall structure of events focuses on the dominant concern of this literature, which is the blood feud.”¹⁴

While structuralist approaches to the sagas had waxed quite rapidly, and noticeably, during the general rise of *New Criticism*, their departure, if they have in fact left the building, or perhaps they've simply found a quiet basement office, has been less than riotous.¹⁵ But, like much of the scholarship mentioned in the first chapter, much of the scholarship that followed upon the work of the structuralists, and formalists, grew from the grounds that they had in fact fertilized.

THE MEANNESS OF REALITY

An anthropological approach to saga studies, like most of the other approaches mentioned above, had existed as a voice in saga-scholarship for a long time before it more or less gained prominence. However, this is not to say that the more recent

¹³ See Allen, 71-4, for a full description of his eight level structure of saga narrative.

¹⁴ Bredsdorff, 141; Allen, 73.

¹⁵ For more on structuralist approaches to the sagas see the aforementioned: Allen, *Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls saga*, Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading*, Clover, “Scene in Saga Composition” and “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” Harris, “Genre and Narrative Structure in Some *Íslendinga þættir*,” Lönnroth, “Structuralist Approaches to Saga Literature,” as well as John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber, eds., *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), and A. Margaret Arent Madelung, *The Laxdæla saga: Its Structural Patterns*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1972), a work that purports to discuss five structural elements that promote the unity of the composition of *Laxdæla*: foreknowledge, repetition, comparison, tripartite and quadripartite groupings, and recurrence.

practitioners of such an approach picked up where their antecedents – perhaps only in a superficial manner – had left off. In fact, as mentioned above, for the greater part of four centuries, the sagas were largely considered factual historical accounts of how things were, and were read as chronicles of actual historic events, and thus could be studied as the extant cultural-historical documents of an earlier society. However, for better or for worse, the promotion of the sagas from historical documents to world literature in the early twentieth-century seems to have stunted the growth of any sort of anthropological aspect of saga-scholarship.

Perhaps one of the earliest scholars to view the sagas from a somewhat blended perspective, one both anthropological and literary, was W. P. Ker, who recognized the way in which they,

differ from all other “heroic” literatures in the large proportion that they give to the meanness of reality. Their historical character, and their attempts to preserve an accurate memory of the past, though often freely modified by imagination, yet oblige them to include a number of things gross, common, and barbarous, because they are part of the story.¹⁶

However, as Ker's piece, *Epic and Romance*, was first published in 1908, amidst a bipolar age of saga-scholarship, few scholars at the time were willing to follow his example, and to marry the disciplines of textual criticism and historical anthropology.¹⁷ And, apart from a few earlier studies, it seems that the modern movement toward a literary-anthropological approach to saga-scholarship resulted, in large part, as an extension of the structuralist, formalist method.¹⁸

¹⁶ W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1926) 200-1.

¹⁷ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, “Some methodological considerations in connection with the study of the sagas” (*From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson, Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992) 27.

¹⁸ “... despite their declared or undeclared distaste for *New Criticism* or aesthetic formalism, advocates of the “social” approach are, ironically, sometimes so indebted to this style of analysis that one is hard-pressed

In his *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, Jesse Byock concentrated a great deal on structure within the sagas, but rather than focusing on sequentially structured, or structural narratives, he was concerned with the structure of the feuds and legal conflicts described in the sagas, which, according to Byock, “stand at the core of the narrative,” and which “provided the formal model for saga narratives about Iceland.”¹⁹ Byock writes about feudemes, which are small units of action, or narrative elements, more specifically the three active elements of saga disputes and settlements: conflict, advocacy, and resolution.²⁰ In his telling, these feudemes “are not bound by linear progression; rather, they cluster together in a variety of ways, and the results often form what critics have described as scenes or episodes,” and according to Byock, these clusters “form chains of feud, which are the backbone of Icelandic prose narrative.”²¹ There is little question that Byock was well versed in the works of the earlier structuralists critics, however, in his work, he suggests that,

Theories of fixed sequential order do little more than bring attention to gross patterns in the sagas, and the determination to find such an order had remained for years a stumbling block in the study of the sagas' narrative forms.²²

Similarly, M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, the author of *The Saga Mind*, a work that Clover writes has had no appreciable effect on consequent saga-scholarship, although – perhaps contradictory – she also describes it as the most discussed book of its decade in the field

to see the difference.” [Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” 256.]

¹⁹ Lönnroth, “Structuralist Approaches to Saga Literature,” 69; Jesse Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1982) 1-2. See also William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and peacemaking : feud, law, and society in saga Iceland*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

²⁰ Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 57.

²¹ Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 57-8. Byock also suggests his neologism, “feudeme,” is by no means accidentally analogous to the linguistic term “morpheme,” and its role in language. Namely, “the feudeme forms a relatively stable indivisible unit of feud,” and that “each feudeme can be expanded by attaching a unit of travel as a prefix or suffix.”[Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 58-9] For a full introduction to Byock's concept of the “feudeme” in the sagas see, Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 47-62.

²² Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 57.

of saga-studies,²³ with respect to *Eyrbyggja saga* specifically, argues that, “attempts to squeeze such a saga into the Procrustean bed” of a structured schematic, “are interesting only as illustrations of how impotent a purely formal analysis is when applied to works representing syncretic truth.”²⁴ In many ways, it seems as though a structuralist approach to the sagas, and perhaps to any piece of literature, is like drawing a blueprint with an incomplete knowledge of the materials at hand, and thus, in its application, excess materials that do not fit the blueprint, regardless of their value, must be discarded, and those that are missing must be fashioned from ill-fitting, lesser materials, or yet out of thin air.

Clover delineates two acceptable strategies when approaching the sagas from this anthropological-literary perspective: (1) “measuring the sagas’ representations of events and customs against that of a set of texts thought to lie closer to history: the laws, the bishop’s sagas, *Sturlunga saga*, *Íslendingabók*, and *Landnámabók*,” and (2) “to ignore the issue of their historicity and to concentrate instead on their significance to the audience that produced them in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.”²⁵ It seems that more than anything else, the emergent anthropological-literary approach to saga-scholarship, by its very nature, looking beyond – but not necessarily past – questions of dating, and authorship, influences and sources, is characterized by its immense diversity, and wide application. A clear, by not necessarily all-encompassing, image of the more recent view

²³ Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” 260, 262. It is important to note that Clover original piece was published in 1985, and thus, whether Steblin-Kamenskij’s book has since spread its influence over saga-scholarship remains to be seen.

²⁴ Steblin-Kamenskij, 79. Steblin-Kamenskij’s notion of the sagas as works of “syncretic truth,” that is, “that which is thought of as simply truth, something given, not created. ... the lack of distinction between historical and and artistic truth, [which] inevitably implies the absence of consciousness of authorship...” is, at least in some part, the plane on which much of the literary-anthropological saga-scholarship is grounded.

²⁵ Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” 254-5.

of the sagas as neither purely fictional, nor purely historical, and a common position taken toward an anthropological-literary approach to saga-scholarship might be summed up in the words of Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, when he writes that,

the family sagas were written in accordance with the knowledge of the past that was available at the time and their authors moulded that knowledge into one comprehensive picture ... The saga presents meaningful images of the past ... but strictly speaking there are no genuine historical facts to be found in [them] ... they are just as concerned with reality as a socially and culturally determined space as with the people who lived and acted in it ... they are accounts of events that took place in a previous culture and as such are appropriate objects for historical and anthropological study, but they are also narrative presentations of that past and therefore suitable objects for literary analysis and interpretation.²⁶

However, it would be a mistake to imagine that saga-scholarship had returned to a lost golden age, that the scholars had relocated the forgotten keys to their own Edenic garden, or that they have moved forever forward, forever upwards, have finally seen the summit of a once thought insurmountable peak. If there was reason to celebrate, it was due to the wide breadth of subjects that this new movement had seemed to open up, and to re-open, to scholarly enquiry, one of the most important, and long undervalued, was the women of the sagas.

INDEPENDENT WOMEN

As previously noted, and, contrary to many other fields of modern scholarship, women's history in the context of Old Norse studies has enjoyed a relatively long tradition, wherein it was noted that the sagas, and other Old Norse-Icelandic literature

²⁶ Sørensen, "Some methodological considerations in connection with the study of the sagas," 28-33. As mentioned above, the diversity of more recent approaches to the sagas is unparalleled in the history of saga-scholarship, and so the reader is directed to Carol Clover's more complete overview in Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)," 253-71, and to offer only a few examples, see Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love: The Philosophy of the Icelandic Family Sagas*, Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* and *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*, Miller *Bloodtaking and peacemaking : feud, law, and society in saga Iceland*, and the collection of essays, Gísli Pálsson *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*.

provide myriad images of strong, proud, independent women who were once thought to reflect an historical, social reality that stood in sharp contrast to that of their contemporary continental sisters.²⁷ It seems that scholarship concerning the image of this type of Nordic, independent woman appeared first in the middle of the eighteenth century in the works of Paul-Henri Mallet, where, in large part, they were considered a purely historical image, a reflection of “the north as the fountainhead of political freedom.”²⁸ And, in fact, in 1796, the University of Copenhagen held a contest in search of the best essay concerning Nordic women during the pagan period, the prize taken by Laurits Engelstoft, whose work was published three years later.²⁹ In his work, Engelstoft focused on the Nordic pagan woman's biological life, avoiding the image of the inciting, or whetting woman, concluding that, although these women had few and limited rights, among the patriarchal world of his forefathers the conditions in which they lived were quite tolerable, and that they enjoyed much greater freedom than women living in other nations who had achieved a similar level of culture.³⁰ It seems that Engelstoft's work, outside of the contest that it had won, was soon forgotten, and that, during the Romantic period, the earlier image of the proud, independent, and heroic historic Nordic woman

²⁷ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 234.

²⁸ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 235-6. It is interesting to note here that, like in the discussion in the first chapter concerning the effect of nationalism with respect to the direction of saga-scholarship, Robert Molesworth, the English ambassador to the Danish Court from 1689 to 1692, upon his return to England, published his *An Account of Denmark as it was in the year 1692*, a work that was quite critical of the court in Copenhagen, and reflected back brightly on the earlier freedom of the north. It seems that Danish historians were dutifully embarrassed by Molesworth's piece, and thus enlisted Mallet to silence the critics, and, in 1763, he published a three volume history of Denmark, and while working on the larger piece, he published, in 1755, his *An Introduction to the History of Denmark*. It seems that the nature of the independent Nordic woman appears to have surfaced first in these works, and herein Mallet congratulated “the Danes for their luck and prais[ed] their kings for moderation, mildness, and wisdom.” [Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 234-6.] For more on Mallet, and the early continental interest in Medieval Scandinavian and Old Icelandic literature, see Margaret Clunies Ross, “Percy and Mallet: The Genesis of Northern Antiquities” (*Sagnþing helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni*, Reykjavík, 1994) 107-17.

²⁹ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 237.

³⁰ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 237.

had been reestablished as common currency.

It was again later, during the middle of the twentieth-century that those adherents of the “book-prose” theory, and students of the Icelandic school, as one would expect, reestablished this Nordic woman as, not a real person, but a “composite image of literary motifs, created by authors from contemporary society or inspired by knowledge of heroic literature.”³¹ Commenting on *Laxdæla saga*, and on circumstances surrounding a disruption at the marriage feast of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and Þorkell Eyjólfsson – Guðrún's fourth, and final marriage – the scholar L. L. Bjarnason characterized her as follows,

Few women in any literature possess such power as does Guðrún. She is not only a beautiful woman and extremely feminine at times, but she is also a woman of such stature that she does not hesitate to challenge the power of Þorkell, ... a powerful chieftain in his own right ... The saga-man realizes that precisely at this point he has the opportunity to portray Guðrún in all her power ... We have no way of knowing whether the author of *Laxdæla* was acquainted with Homer, but his art is homeric in its simplicity.³²

Similarly, Rolf Heller, in his *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Isländersagas* (1958), while arguing that the saga heroine had no real basis in society, posited her genesis as a composite image of literary motifs, although a few cultural features from the Sturlung age may have seeped into the mould, she was largely inspired from the knowledge of heroic literature, but beyond this, most critics failed to investigate the motivations, and reasons behind the development of such characters.³³ For all of the overt power and strength that scholars had bestowed upon these women, it is no wonder that they became a gallery of granite statues, and one would never think to take a chisel to

³¹ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 238.

³² L. L. Bjarnason, “Character Delineation of Women in the Old Icelandic Sagas,” (*Scandinavian Studies* 28, 1956) 153.

³³ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 238.

such a polished form, and thus had they become impenetrable.

If it seems that the early twentieth-century scholars failed to develop the relatively long history of saga women as scholarly subjects, in some ways the structuralists did not fare much better. Their emphasis on conflict, and male blood-feuding as a structural principle of saga narrative, argues Helga Kress, does particular violence to *Laxdæla saga*, and Patricia Conroy posits much the same with respect to *Eiríks saga rauða*.³⁴ In Andersson's exemplifying piece, of *Njáls saga*, he writes that the “rivalry between Hallgerðr and Bergþóra has ultimately no function in the plot, but is simply a bit of unattached prefatory matter that it is so elaborately worked out [that it] ultimately misleads the reader into seeking some function for it which it does not possess.”³⁵ Whether the function of describing at length this particular feud is to reinforce and to further elaborate upon characterizations that Andersson deems, in Hallgerður's case, “fully delineated elsewhere,” and, in Bergþóra's case, as “not play[ing] an important part in the saga,” or if it is, as Byock contends, to form “a contrast with succeeding feuds in the saga,” or whether it has been included for some other function yet unremarked upon, it is quite unreasonable to scold the saga-writer for his superfluous inclusion of this lengthy episode.³⁶

The anthropological-literary approach did not necessarily change things overnight, and Steblin-Kamenskij, who had earlier commented on the impotence of

³⁴ Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” 257. See also, Kress, “Mjök mun þér samstaft þykkja: Um sagnahefð og kvenlega reynslu í Laxdæla sögu,” 97-109; Patricia Conroy, “*Laxdæla saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*” (*ANF* 95) 116-25.

³⁵ Andersson, *The Icelandic Saga*, 46.

³⁶ Andersson, *The Icelandic Saga*, 46; Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 183. I would hate to generalize, and thus to offer a counter-example, wherein a structuralist text does offer an interesting perspective on the women of the sagas see Madelung, *The Laxdæla saga: Its Structural Patterns*. Also, some of the implications of this feud will be discussed in Chapter 5 below.

structuralist approaches, comments in his own work that, “Obviously the narrator [of *Laxdæla saga*] is not interested in Guðrún's feelings,” and that, “the story concerns Guðrún generally only to an extent that she plays a role in the feud.”³⁷ Steblin-Kamenskij was certainly not the first, nor likely the last to overlook the representation of emotions in the sagas, but in recent years some scholars have deeply examined the role of emotions, their sometimes lack, as well as their function in public and private performances in the sagas. Clover calls the encounter between Hildigunnr and Flosi in chapter 116 of *Njáls saga*, one of the most emotionally charged in all of saga literature, and argues that this scene represents not only an angry, disenfranchised woman's call for blood-vengeance, but in equal part the lamentation of a grieving widow for her dead husband.³⁸ Likewise, Vésteinn Ólason, and William Ian Miller have written on emotions, and the ways in which they are presented in the sagas,³⁹ and Daniel Sävborg presents a “meticulously detailed account of the way that brief but loaded formulas such as *sitja á tali* (*við*) and incidents of exchanges of clothing can add up to a powerful depiction of love, which in some cases becomes a formative element in the sagas.”⁴⁰ This is not to suggest that the women of the sagas are the only characters to express emotions, or to live emotional lives, but rather that the study of emotions in the sagas has helped to overcome

³⁷ Steblin-Kamenskij, 92.

³⁸ Carol Clover, “Hildigunnr's lament” (*Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, eds. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber, Odense: Odense University Press, 1986) 141-6. Note that, in her essay, Clover does in fact view this scene from a structuralist standpoint.

³⁹ See Vésteinn Ólason, “Emosjon og aksjon i *Njáls saga*,” (*Nordica Bergensia* 3, 1994) 157-72, and William Ian Miller, “Emotions and the Sagas,” (*From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson, Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992) 89-102.

⁴⁰ Robert Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr: A Failed Romance,” (*Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland: Essays in Honour of Marianna Kalinke*, eds. Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2008) 6. See Daniel Sävborg, “Sagan om kärleken. Erotik känslor och berättarkonst i norrön litteratur,” (*Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Historia Litteratum* 27, Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2007).

the earlier flat characterization of the saga-woman as an amalgam of motifs introduced in order to develop the drama of men's activities more quickly, only to be discarded once this goal had been achieved.⁴¹

In other instances, scholars have sought not only to describe how the women of the sagas are represented, but to discover what compelled the saga-authors to represent them in the way that they did. Kress examines a number of instances in *Laxdæla saga* where women challenge the limits of the narrowly defined female role, and she wonders whether an earlier form of the saga had existed wherein women's interests had not been so subordinated in favour of the male characters.⁴² Elsewhere Kress has highlighted the misogyny that underscores the treatment of the women of *Njáls saga*, none more so than Hallgerður, and, likewise, Sigrid Grønstøl's survey of *Gísla saga* finds that the women who best serve the interests of the patriarchal family, of their fathers, husbands, and brothers, find greater favour than those who act against them.⁴³ Returning to the women of *Njáls saga*, Marina Mundt emphasizes the legitimacy of their harsh reactions to violations of their perceived rights, and Ursula Dronke places special importance on the subtle manner in which the author depicts male-female relations, contrasting it with the stereotypical patterns of earlier sagas.⁴⁴ Robert Cook examines the central importance of

⁴¹ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 238.

⁴² Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)," 257; See Helga Kress, "You will find it all rather monotonous"; on literary tradition and the feminine experience in *Laxdæla saga*," trans. Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir (*The Nordic Mind: Current Trends in Scandinavian Literary Criticism*, eds. Frank Egholm and John Weinstock, Lanham: University Press of America, 1986) 181-95.

⁴³ Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)," 257; See Helga Kress, "Ekki hófu vér kvennaskap: Nokkrar lanstengdar athuganir um karlmennsku og kvenhatur í Njálu" (*Sérpr. úr Sjötíu ritgerðum helguðum Jakobi Benediktssyni*. Reykjavík, 1977) 293-313, and "Mandom og misogyni: Noen refleksjoner om kring kvinnesynet i Njáls saga" (*Garder* 10) 35-51; Sigrid Bø Grønstøl, "Kjærleik og ættekjense i Konflikt: Om Kvinnesyn og helteideal i Gisle-saga" (*Edda* 79, 1979) 189-95.

⁴⁴ Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)," 257; See Marina Mundt, "Kvinnens forhold til ekteskapet i Njáls saga" (*Úrtak úr Edda* 1/2, 1976) 17-25; Ursula Dronke, "The Role of Sexual Themes in *Njáls saga*" (*The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture*, London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1980).

women in *Laxdæla saga*, noting first the saga's, and perhaps the saga authors, sensitivity to workings of a woman's heart,⁴⁵ along with the relatively large number of intimate scenes involving women, and secondly the number of “deliberate actions of women that either constitute the primary events [of the plot] or prepare for them.”⁴⁶ Contrary to Kress' view of *Njáls saga* as a misogynist tract against over-active women, as well as Grønstøl's reading of *Gísla saga* as rewarding only to those women who are willing to function within a patriarchal-defined space, Cook sees *Laxdæla saga* as a “women-centred saga in a positive sense, exhibiting in rich abundance the ways that women can live and control their destinies.”⁴⁷

Some scholars in recent years, perhaps combining the study of emotions, and of male-female relations, have focused their attention on both love and sexuality in the sagas. As mentioned above, Daniel Sävborg, has written about some of the ways in which love can be expressed in the sagas, and – countering the dominant view of early scholarship – in his work has analyzed how the love between Kjartan and Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga* plays a fundamental role in the progression of the saga's plot.⁴⁸ In response to Sävborg's study, Cook examines the failed romance of Gunnarr and Hallgerður in *Njáls saga*, citing the author's antipathy toward Hallgerður from the beginning, commenting on the relationship's lack of emotional charge, and concluding that *Njáls saga* shows that a failed relationship – not in the sense of failing to produce a marriage,

⁴⁵ See n.10, Ch.1 above.

⁴⁶ Robert Cook, “Women and Men in *Laxdæla saga*” (*Skáldskaparmál: Tímarit um íslenskar bókmenntir fyrr alda* 2, Reykjavík: Stofaholt hf, 1992) 34-59. Cook lists twenty-six primary events from *Laxdæla saga* initiated by women, more than a third of which concern Guðrún directly – and several others indirectly – and notes that, “Without these female doings, there would be no saga. When men kill, they do so as the instruments of women.” [Cook, “Women and Men in *Laxdæla saga*,” 39]

⁴⁷ Cook, “Women and Men in *Laxdæla saga*,” 57.

⁴⁸ Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerður” 29.

but rather in lacking the type of love that Kjartan and Guðrún shared for each other – can be equally as effective in shaping a saga.⁴⁹ In a similar manner, but concentrating on sexuality rather than love, Bredsdorff, throughout his *Chaos and Love*, cites, in addition to power, sexual acts and erotic impulses as an important driving force in the sagas.

Ruth Mazo Karras has examined a topic which the saga texts fail to bring attention to, but which, according to her, was known to exist in Iceland as well as many other medieval societies, that is sexual exploitation across social class lines, namely between master, the land-holders, and their slave women. Karras provides several possible reasons for the sagas failure to emphasize such sexual relations: (1) that any such engagement was not an act of exploitation, and had nothing to do with power relations, but was rather based simply on sexual attraction, (2) that the saga-authors, composing their tales under the influence of Christianity, refused to tarnish the image of their ancestors by depicting such acts, and, what Karras describes as the most likely explanation, (3) that a master's sexual use of his own slaves was so common place that it was simply assumed.⁵⁰ In her article, Karras cites Clover's "The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia," highlighting the manner in which a high-sex ratio, where women are more scarce, and thus become more like status objects, can lead to institutionalized male violence – such as blood-feud – and how in such a society the sexual use of slave women could be an exertion of power over not only the slave-women, but also over other men who did not have wives or concubines.⁵¹ In addition to

⁴⁹ See Cook, "Gunnarr and Hallgerðr" 5-31.

⁵⁰ Ruth Mazo Karras, "Servitude and sexuality" (*From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson, Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992) 302-3.

⁵¹ Karras, "Servitude and sexuality," 299; Carol J. Clover, "The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia" (*Scandinavian Studies* 60:2, Spring 1988) 176-7.

the consequence that Karras speaks of, Clover's article examines several other possible outcomes of such a disproportionate sex-ratio, and places a great deal of emphasis on the discrepancy between structural and dyadic power, between a saga-woman's low theoretical status and her high informal status.⁵² She concludes by stating that, "Women in the Icelandic sources seem to have two statuses not because the sources got it wrong, in other words, but because they got it right; women in settlement Iceland had two statuses in fact and simultaneously."⁵³

Though by no means a comprehensive summary of the history of scholarship concerning women in the context of Old Norse literature, the account given above is intended to introduce the idea of past scholarly oversights in this direction, and to suggest that modern remedies are, if only slowly, now taking effect.⁵⁴ That being said, for all of its perceived oversights, saga scholarship is characterized, from near its early beginnings, by its uncanny ability to reject consensus opinions, which is reflected not only in the varied richness of the scholarship, but seems to be a necessary quality that stems from the great richness of the original texts. Having now established an historical, as well as a scholarly context in which to approach some of the questions mentioned near the beginning of this study, it is now time to introduce the three characters that will feature in the comparative analysis that will form the main body of this study.

⁵² Clover, "The Politics of Scarcity," 179-80.

⁵³ Clover, "The Politics of Scarcity," 182. Also see Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe" (*Speculum* 68:2, Apr. 1993, 363-87), for a discussion on the social binary presented in sagas, not between men and women, but rather between the strong and the weak, the powerful and the powerless.

⁵⁴ Much of the scholarship mentioned and discussed above, along with other scholarship yet to be introduced, will be expanded upon in the forthcoming chapters of this text. The reader is directed to the bibliography at the end of this text wherein a comprehensive reading list is provided, which includes not only specifically cited works, but also pieces that were consulted, but not cited, in the composition of this study.

CHAPTER III - CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

I never saw more in it than I had when I saw it first, because I saw everything then.
- Alice Munro¹

Every book is a quotation; and every house is a quotation out of all forests and mines and stone quarries; and every man is a quotation from all his ancestors.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson²

Character introductions in the sagas tend to follow a remarkably formal pattern, wherein the standard introduction of a character, regardless of gender, seems concerned primarily with the character's ancestors and kinfolk and the places where these people live, and only then, having established this ground, on any specific physical, or personality traits of the character in question.³ However, there are predictably several variations upon this familiar theme, three of which can be observed in the character introductions that follow below.

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

In *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, the eponymous hero's wife, Auðr Vésteinsdóttir, along with her brother Vésteinn, is first mentioned in the fourth chapter of the saga in the following passage,

Bjartmarr hét maðr, er bjó í Arnarfirði inni í botni, en kona hans hét Þuríðr ok var Hrafns dóttir af Ketilseyri ór Dýrafirði, en Hrafn var sonr Dýra, er fjórðinn nám. Þau áttu sér born; hét dóttir þeira Hildr, hon var ellst barna þeira; Helgi hét sonr þeira, Sigurðr ok Vestgeirr. Vésteinn hét Austmaðr einn, er út kom um landnám ok vistaðisk með Bjartmari. Hann gengr at eiga Hildi, dóttur hans. Ok er þau hqfðu eigi lengi ásamt verit, gátu þau tvau börn at eiga; Auðr hét dóttir þeira, en

¹ Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (London, New York, Toronto: The Penguin Group, 1997) 234-5.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Plato; or The Philosopher" (*Essays and Lectures*, New York: The Library of America, 1983) 634.

³ Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of Icelanders*, (trans. Andrew Wawn, Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998) 84. It is important to note that characters in the sagas, as in many other literatures, are not always introduced on a solely individual basis, but it remains that their often seems to exist a particular primary target, as is the case with Guðrún and Hallgerðr, or small group of targets, a pair or small group of siblings as is the case with Auðr and Vésteinn, upon which an introductory passage is focused.

Vésteinn sonr. (15-6)

[There was a man named Bjartmar who lived at the head of Arnarfjord. His wife, Thurid, was the daughter of Hrafn from Ketilseyri in Dyrafjord, and Hrafn was the son of Dyri who first settled the fjord. Bjartmar and Thurid had several children. The eldest was a girl named Hild, and their sons were named Helgi, Sigurd and Vestgeir.

There was a Norwegian named Vestein, who arrived at the time of the settlement. He lodged at Bjartmar's farm. Vestein took Bjartmar's daughter, Hild as his wife, and it was not long before they had two children, a daughter named Aud and a son named Vestein. (504)]⁴

Of those individuals mentioned in this passage, only Vésteinn Vésteinsson and his sister Auðr, play a significant role in what remains of the saga, which continues,

Vésteinn austmaðr var Végeirsson, bróðir Vébjarnar Sygnakappa. Bjartmar var sonr Áns rauðfelds, Gríms sonar loðinkinna, bróður Orvar-Odds, Ketils sonar hængs, sonar Hallbjarnar háltrolls. Móðir Áns rauðfelds var Helga, dóttir Áns bogsveigis. (16)

[Vestein the Norwegian was the son of Vegeir, the brother of Vebjorn the Champion of Sognefjord. Bjartmar was the son of An Red-Cloak, son of Grim Hairy-cheeks, brother of Arrow-Odd, son of Ketil Haeng, son of Hallbjorn Hall-troll. An Red-cloak's mother was Helga, the daughter of An Bow-bender. (504)]

It is sometimes noted that characters in the sagas are often described less by authorial intervention, than by their actions; that is, in a sense they actively describe themselves through their relationships with others.⁵ Along similar lines, formal character introductions in the sagas are known for their abundance of genealogical information, which can at once offer a certain degree of credibility to the narrative, but can likewise function as a descriptor of one's status within society, not to mention an indication of

⁴ Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, eds., “Gísla saga Súrssonar” (*Vestfirðinga Sögur*, Íslenzk fornrit 6, Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1943) 1-118. All references to *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, or simply *Gísla saga*, will be to this edition. Their English counterparts follow Martin S. Regal's translation [Örnólfur Thorsson, ed., “Gisli Sursson's saga: *Gísla saga Súrssonar*,” trans. Martin S. Regal (*The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*. New York: Penguin Books, 2001) 496-557.]

⁵ Bjarnason, 143; Steblin-Kamenskij, 64; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Njáls saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, ed. and trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1971) 94.

inherent familial character traits.⁶ This particular observation seems warranted with respect to the passage cited above, wherein, with respect to Auðr, an extensive inventory of her kinship relations seems to take precedence over even a limited individual characterization. In fact, early in the chapter that follows, in the next instance in which she is mentioned, she and Gísli have already married – a topic to which I will return in the next chapter.

If Auðr's introduction is thought typical in the weight it lends to the genealogical rather than the individual, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir's introduction in *Laxdæla saga*, which follows, begins in a remarkably similar fashion,

Ósvífr hét maðr ok var Helgason, Óttars sonar, Bjarnar sonar ins austræna, Ketils sonar flatnefs, Bjarnar sonar bunu. Móðir Ósvífrs hét Niðbjörg, hennar móðir Kaðlín, dóttir Gøngu-Hrólf's Qxna-Þórissonar; hann var hersir ágætr austr í Vík. Því var hann svá kallaðr, at hann átti eyjar þrjár ok átta tigu yxna í hverri; hann gaf eina eyna ok yxnina með Hákonu konungi, ok varð sú gjöf allfræg. Ósvífr var spekingr mikill; hann bjó at Laugum í Sælingsdal. Laugabær stendr fyrir sunnan Sælingsdalsá, gegnt Tungu. Kona hans hét Þórdís, dóttir Þjóðólfs lága. Óspakr hét sonr þeira, annar Helgi, þriðri Vandrádr, fjórði Torráðr, fimmti Þórólfr; allir váru þeir vígligir menn. (85-6)

[A man named Osvif was the son of Helgi, the son of Ottar, the son of Bjorn the Easterner, the son of Ketil Flat-nose, the son of Bjorn Buna. His mother was Nidbjorg, the daughter of Kadlin, the daughter of Hrolf the Walker, the son of Ox-Thorir, who was the hersir of good family in Vik [in Norway]. He was called Ox-

⁶ Vésteinn, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, 85-6. An example of this particular feature, concerning Hallgerðr's Høskuldsdóttir, will be discussed at length later in this chapter, however, to offer another example, consider the following passage from the opening chapter of *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, describing Skallgrím's family: „Þau Kveld-Úlfur áttu tvá sonu; hét inn ellri Þórólfr, en inn yngri Grímur; en er þeir óxu upp, þá váru þeir báðir miklir menn ok sterkir, svá sem faðir þeira var. Var Þórólfr manna vænstr ok gjörviligastr; hann var líkr móðurfrændum sínum, gleðimaðr mikill, qrr ok ákafamaðr mikill í qllu ok inn mesti kappsmaðr; var hann vinsæll af qllum mōnnum. Grímr var svartr maðr ok ljótr, líkr feðr sínum, bæði yfirlits ok at skaplyndi.“ [Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (Íslensk fornrit 2, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritfélag, 1933) 5] [Kveldulf and his wife had two sons. The elder one was named Thorolf and the younger one Grim, and they both grew up to be big, strong men like their father. Thorolf was an attractive and highly accomplished man. He took after his mother's side of the family, a cheerful generous man, energetic and very eager to prove his worth. He was popular with everyone, Grim was swarthy and ugly, resembling his father in both appearance and character. [Örnólfur Thorsson, ed., “Egil's Saga: *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*,” trans. Bernard Scudder (*The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, New York: Viking Penguin, 2001) 8]]

Thorir because he owned three islands with eighty oxen on each of them. He gained much renown by giving one of the islands, together with its oxen, to King Hakon.

Osvif was a very wise man. He lived at Laugar in Saelingsdal. The farm is located to the south of the Saelingsdala river, across from the Tunga farm. His wife was Thordis, the daughter of Thjodolf the Short. They had five sons, Ospak, Helgi, Vandrad, Torrad and Thorolf, all of them bold fighters. (327)]⁷

As in the first example, before Guðrún finds her way into the narrative, a lengthy genealogy is provided, and in this case an interlude concerning one of the ancestors, Qxna-Þórir, is mentioned, seemingly to embolden the honour of her lineage, along with a positive characterization of her father, and brothers, and the location of their farm. However, at the first mention of Guðrún, the boundaries of this purely genealogical model are stretched,

Guðrún hét dóttir þeira; hon var kvenna vænst, er upp óxu á Íslandi, bæði at ásjánu ok vitsmunun. Guðrún var kurteis kona, svá at í þann tíma þóttu allt barna vípur, þat er aðrar konur höfðu í skarti hjá henni. Allra kvenna var hon kænst ok bezt orði farin; hon var qrlynd kona. (86)

[They had a daughter named Gudrun. She was the most beautiful woman ever to have grown up in Iceland, and no less clever than she was good-looking. She took great care with her appearance, so much so that the adornments of other women were considered to be mere child's play in comparison. She was the shrewdest of women, highly articulate, and generous as well. (327)]

Although there is nothing like a definite physical description given here, this short passage provides a great deal of explicit information concerning Guðrún's character.⁸

Laxdæla saga is often considered unique among the sagas not only in the prominence that it allows the women of the story, but equally in the manner in which they are able to act

⁷ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., *Laxdæla saga*, (Íslensk fornrit 5, Reykjavík, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélagið, 1934). All references to *Laxdæla saga* will be to this edition. Their English counterparts follow Keneva Kunz's translation [Örnólfur Thorsson, ed., "The Saga of the People of Laxardal: *Laxdæla saga*," trans. Keneva Kunz (*The Sagas of Icelanders*, New York: Viking Penguin, 2001) 270-421.]

⁸ In fact, according to Ármann Jakobsson, "Laxdæla Dreaming: A saga heroine invents her own life" (*Leeds Studies in English* new ser. 39, 2008, detailed physical descriptions are reserved for the men of this saga, such as Kjartan, whose face, eyes, hair, and body are given special attention, in contrast to Guðrún, for whom there are no specific details given pertaining to her beauty. [Ármann, "Laxdæla Dreaming," 38]

potently, and sometimes positively, within their environment.⁹ Perhaps this particular feature of the saga is likewise betrayed in the way in which Guðrún is introduced, in that, though sure to mention her beauty, the narrator is more specific concerning the less superficial of her character traits,¹⁰ which are ultimately more useful in actively participating within society, than in filling the typical subservient female role, or acting as an object of status, as a currency to be exchanged between the men of the saga.¹¹

Though unique among the sagas in many ways,¹² *Laxdæla saga* is not unique in its occurrence of female characterizations that extend beyond the physical, and physiological. Consider this passage from the first chapter of *Njáls saga*, which functions as an introduction, among other things, to Hallgerðr Høskuldsdóttir,

Nú víkr sǫgunni vestr til Breiðafjarðardala. Maðr er nefndr Høskuldr; hann var Dala-Kollsson. Móðir hans hét Þorgerðr ok var dóttir Þorsteins ins rauða, Óláfs sonar ins hvíta, Ingjaldssonar, Helgasonar; móðir Ingjalds var Þóra, dóttir Sigurðar orms-í-auga, Ragnars sonar loðbrókar. Uðr in djúpúðga var móðir Þorsteins rauðs, dóttir Ketils flatnefs, Bjarnar sonar bunu. Høskuldr bjó á Høskuldsstöðum í Laxárdal. Hrútr hét bróðir hans; hann bjó á Hrútsstöðum. Hann var sammæður við Høskuld; faðir hans var Herjólfir. Hrútr var vænn maðr, mikill ok sterkr, vígr vel ok hógværr í skapi, mann vitrastr, harðráðr við óvini sína, en tillagagóðr inna stærri mála. (6)

⁹ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature*, trans. Peter Foote (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1988) 276; Loren Auerbach, "Female Experience and Authorial Intention in *Laxdæla saga*" (*Saga-Book* 25, 1998) 33-6.

¹⁰ Ármann, "Laxdæla Dreaming," 38.

¹¹ Auerbach, 30; According to Auerbach, "*Laxdæla saga* is not the story of two men, but of one woman. It could easily be called Guðrún's saga. The tragedy of *Laxdæla saga* is what happens to Guðrún: the strong, intelligent and potent woman who is forced into a submissive, 'female' role—an action which unleashes bitterness, anguish, evil and destruction." [Auerbach, 30] In a similar vein, Ármann Jakobsson writes that *Laxdæla saga*, "is a narrative about a precocious girl who is able to engage in intelligent conversation of the kind that would normally be restricted to men of some stature, in the fundamentally unequal society of mediaeval Iceland, albeit with an occasional superwoman included in the group of dominant men." [Ármann, "Laxdæla Dreaming," 39]

¹² Alison Finlay highlights the recurrent theme in *Laxdæla saga* of women wearing the trousers, and the way in which, "the prelude to the saga gives a feminine slant to the conventional saga opening," in that it is dominated not by a male ancestor but rather by the matriarchal figure, Unnr djúpúðga. [Alison Finlay, "Betrothal and Women's Autonomy in *Laxdæla Saga* and the Poets Sagas" (*Skáldskaparmál Tímarit um íslenskar bókmenntir fyrr alda* 4, Reykjavík: Stafaholt hf, 1997) 107-28.] Some other elements in which *Laxdæla saga* displays its uniqueness will be discussed in the remaining chapters of this study.

[Now the setting of this saga shifts west to the valleys of Breidafjörð. A man named Hoskuld lived there, the son of Dala-Koll. His mother was Thorgerd, the daughter of Thorstein the Red, who was the son of Olaf the White, whose father was Ingjald Helgason. Ingjald's mother was Thora, the daughter of Sigurd Snake-in-the-eye, who was the son of Ragnar Shaggy-breeches. Thorstein the Red's mother was Unn the Deep-minded; she was the daughter of Ketil Flat-nose, who was the son of Bjorn Buna. Hoskuld lived at Hoskuldsskadi in the valley of Laxardal.

Hrut was Hoskulds brother; he lived at Hrutsstadir. He had the same mother as Hoskuld, but his father was Herjolf. Hrut was a good-looking man, big and strong, a good fighter, and even-tempered. He was a very wise man, harsh towards his enemies but ready with good advice on important matters. (2)]¹³

As with Auðr and Guðrún, Hallgerðr appears only after a lengthy line of ancestors has been listed, along with several place-names that are important in her family. However, Hallgerðr's introduction is eventually individualized, and during a feast at Hoskuldsskadi the narrator explains,

Hoskuldr átti sér dóttur, er Hallgerðr hét. Hon lék sér á gólfinu við aðrar meyjar; hon var fríð sýnum ok mikil vesti ok hárit svá fagrt sem silki ok svá mikit, at þat tók ofan á belti. (6)

[Hoskuld had a daughter named Hallgerd; she was playing on the floor with some other girls. She was tall and beautiful, with hair as fine as silk and so abundant that it came down to her waist. (2)]

Furthermore, when repeatedly prompted by his brother to comment on his niece's beauty, Hrútr responds, „Ærit fagr er mæðr sjá, ok munu margir þess gjalda; en hitt veit ek eigi, hvaðan þjófsaugu eru komin í ættir várar.“ (7) [The girl is very beautiful, and many will pay for that. But what I don't know is how thief's eyes have come into our family(2)]

While seemingly largely concerned with her physical appearance, there is little concrete information offered about Hallgerðr in this instance apart from that provided concerning

¹³ All citations of *Njáls saga* are taken from the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition [Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga* (Íslenzk fornrit 12, Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954)] and their English counterparts follow Robert Cook's translation [Viðar Hreinsson, ed., “Njal's Saga,” trans. Robert Cook (*The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Leifur Eiríksson, 1997) Vol. III, 1-220.]

her hair, and her eyes.¹⁴ As in the case of Guðrún, the most interesting characteristic revealed in this passage is one of personality rather than physicality, and Høskuldr is openly offended by his brother's remark, which certainly seems to amount to a poor reflection upon his honour.¹⁵ Regardless of whether thief's eyes are a well known physiological descriptor or not, it remains that the personality trait that they point to would be more meaningful than any particular physical aspect they might suggest.¹⁶ This, the first chapter of *Njáls saga*, ends with the following brief summary of Hallgerðr's siblings: „Bræður Hallgerðar váru þeir Þorleikr, faðir Bolla, ok Ólafr, faðir Kjartans, ok

¹⁴ Although the present discussion is mainly concerned with the first impressions that the narrator provides of the three characters under discussion, it is interesting to note that Hallgerðr's physical beauty is remarked upon throughout the saga, most notably her long, silken hair: „Nú er þar til máls at taka, at Hallgerðr vex upp, dóttir Høskulds, ok er kvenna fríðust sýnum ok mikil vexti, ok því var hon langbrók kōlluð. Hon var fagrhar ok svá mikil hárit, at hon mátti hylja sik með“. (29) [Now the story turns to Hallgerðr, Høskuld's daughter; she grew up to be a most beautiful woman, very tall, and therefore called Long-legs. She had lovely hair, so long that she could wrap herself in it. (13)]; „... en hárit tók ofan á bringuna tveim megin, ok drap hon undir belti sér“. (44) [Her hair was hanging down on on both sides of her breast and she had tucked it under her belt. (19-20)]; „Hon var svá búin, at hon var í rauðum kyrtli, ok var á búningr mikill; hon hafði yfir sér skarlatsskikkju, ok var búin hlöðum í skaut niðr; hárit tók ofan á bringu henni ok var bæði mikil ok fagrt“. (85) [She was dressed like this: she had on a red gown, heavily ornamented, and over that a scarlet cloak trimmed with lace down to the hem. Her hair came down to her breasts and was both thick and fair. (37)]. However, in terms of her physical appearance, as in the last example, the narrator most often comments on her dress rather than her natural beauty. [Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 10] Furthermore, according to Cook, unlike Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga* or Helga Þorsteinsdóttir in *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*, the superlative is never used with Hallgerðr with respect to her natural beauty, and he suggest that, “If they are Miss Iceland, Hallgerðr is Miss Akureyri.” [Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 10] However, keeping this in mind, Ármann Jakobsson suggests that the interpretation of the description of Guðrún - „hon var kvenna vænst, er upp óxu á Íslandi“. - as a woman of supreme beauty follows the traditional overestimation of her beauty, and that the superlative adjective construction was more commonly used in medieval Icelandic literature to suggest the elevation of a particular feature rather than its ceiling. [Ármann, “Laxdæla Dreaming,” 50, n.11]

¹⁵ „Þá reiddisk Høskuldr, ok var fátt um með þeim bræðrum nokkura hríð“. (7) [Høskuld was angry at this, and for a while there was coolness between the brothers. (2)]

¹⁶ Perhaps a medieval audience could conjure an accurate image of what the term *þjófsaugu* is intended to represent in a physiological sense, however, if such a generalized interpretation did exist, it is now lost. Ursula Dronke notes that, “*Þjófsaugu* seems an uncommon term,” and suggests that, “*Þjófs-* might be prefixed to a reference to any part of the body – *þjófsnef*, *-tennr*, *-haka* – to indicate scorn and aversion.” [Dronke, 14, n.2] Even if it were possible to derive some physiological characteristic from the term, it would remain that the character trait associated with the physical feature is the more important message to take away from Hrútr's observation. The ill-omen implied by Hrútr observation is later fulfilled in the saga when Hallgerðr orders her slave Melkólfr to steal two horse loads of food from Otkells farm at Kirkjubær (Ch. 48).

Bárðr“. (7) [Hallgerd's brothers were Thorleik, the father of Bolli; Ólaf the father of Kjartan; and Bard. (2)]

BATTLE OF THE SEXES

From this select sample, it seems that character introductions in the sagas express certain familiar elements but are by no means restricted by a rigidly formulaic pattern. Each of the three passages cited above place great importance on ancestral information, which itself contains important information with respect to characterization and personality. With respect to Auðr's lineage, the narrator first focuses on her mother's side of the family, naming her maternal grandfather, and grandmother, and then, through her grandmother, then her great grandfather, links her to a man named Dýri who first settled, and gave his name to, the fjord in which Gísli and his family settle upon their arrival in Iceland, and which features prominently early in the saga.¹⁷ Following the introduction of her father, a brief account of her parents marriage, and the conception of their children, her father's lineage is traced back to Norway, with mention of his father and his uncle. The narrator then returns to her mother's family, listing one female and six male ancestors, tracing her maternal grandfather's line back an impressive four generations, introducing, along the way, several legendary figures.¹⁸

¹⁷ As noted in *Landnámabók*, from the Sturlubók edition, „Dýri hét maðr ágætr; hann fór af Sunnmæri til Íslands at ráði Rognvalds jarls, en fyrir ofriki Haralds konungs hárfagra. Dýri nám Dýrafjörð ok bjó hann at Hálsum.“ (180) [There was a famous man named Dýri, he went from the South of the Mœrri district (in Norway) to Iceland on the council of the earl Rognvaldr, to escape the tyranny of King Harald the fair-haired. Dýri settled Dýrafjörðr and he lived at Hálsum.] Similarly, from the Hauksbók edition, „Dýri hét maðr, er fór af Sunnmæri til Íslands at ráði Rognvalds jarls; Hann nám Dýrafjörð ok bjó at Hálsum.“ (181) [There was a man named Dýri, he went from the South of the Mœrri district (in Norway) to Iceland on the council of the earl Rognvaldr. He settled Dýrafjörðr and he lived at Hálsum.] The *Landnámabók* citations are taken from the Íslensk fornrit edition, Jakob Benediktsson, ed., „Landnámabók,” (Íslensk fornrit 1, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968) 29-397.

¹⁸ Many of Auðr's ancestors feature in what are known collectively as the *Hrafnistumannasögur* [The sagas of the People of Hrafnista], a series of legendary sagas surrounding her great great great grandfather, Ketill hæng and his descendants, including *Ketils saga hængs*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, *Qrvar-Odds saga*, and *Ans*

In Guðrún's case, her father Ósvífr first enters the saga, and then, in an impressive list of male ancestors – including Ketill flatnefr and Björn buna Grímsson – his lineage is traced back five generations.¹⁹ Following this, her paternal grandmother's – Niðbjörg's – family is traced back three generations through another female ancestor, and two further male ancestors, the last of whom, Qxna-Pórir, it is said was a *hersir* [a local chief or lord] of good family in Vik in Norway, and that he had gained great renown in an exchange with King Hákon. On her mother's side, only her maternal grandfather, Þjóðólfr lági, is mentioned.

Auðr and Guðrún's lineages point to honoured and respectful ancestors, who certainly serve to bolster the reputations and self-respect of their respective families, and help to support and to attest to their own honourable and noble qualities that, in Guðrún's case, are reinforced, and heightened, in her own individualized description.²⁰ Hallgerðr's introduction, on the other hand, is, accompanied by her uncle's observation, somewhat puzzling if not read in the greater context of the saga.

Like Guðrún, Hallgerðr can trace her ancestry directly through Ketill flatnefr, and Björn buna, along with a great deal of other impressive, some legendary, forebears, and in doing so draws an equally honourable and noble line.²¹ However, as her uncle Hrútr

saga bogsveigis. Note also that this famous bloodline opens *Egils saga*, in the introduction of Egill's paternal grandfather Úlfr (Kveldúlfr) Bjálfaðson, wherein it is remarked that Úlfr's grandmother was Hallbjörg hálftröll's sister, and thus Ketill höngs aunt. It is suggested in the saga that this is the source of the trollish nature of Úlfr, his son Skalla-Grímr, and the eponymous hero of the saga, Egill Skallgrímsson. [See Ármann Jakobsson's forthcoming article, "Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in the Sagas," (*Scandinavian Studies*, 2011)] This bloodline is also mentioned twice in *Njáls saga*, in chapters 105 and 119.

¹⁹ According to Vésteinn, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, 85-6, in many of the sagas ancestral lines are traced back to Björn buna – in this case, Guðrún's great great great great grandfather – a chieftain in Sognefjord in Norway.

²⁰ Vésteinn, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, 86.

²¹ See n.18, Ch.3 above. In fact, Hallgerðr's great great grandmother, Uðr in djúpúðga [Unnr/Auðr the deep-minded], and Guðrún's great great grandfather, Björn austrœni Ketilsson [Bjorn the Easterner, son of

ponders, it remains to be seen how this ill-fitting characteristic, how her thief's eyes, have come into their family. If her paternal lineage is marked by pride and honour, by a disciplined disposition and demeanour, on her mother's side, the story is quite different, and it is from this gene pool that Hallgerðr's odd ocular feature seems to have been plucked.²² Thus, in the sagas, it seems that as much as one's honour, and nobility is, in large part, a hereditary feature, those less desirable personal traits travel the branches of one's family tree along a parallel, or perhaps the same axis. Furthermore, though perhaps not always detectable, these personal traits, good or bad, are in many ways established from the beginning, and, though they may be elaborated upon as the narrative progresses, a character is seemingly bounded by their initial characterization.²³ In short, in the sagas, first impressions are everything.

Before departing from the discussion on character introductions, in comparing the passages cited above, it could be interesting to consider the role that gender might play in the genealogical accounting of the sagas.²⁴ That is, if a lengthy, well-stocked lineage

Ketill], were sister and brother. Furthermore, Hallgerðr's paternal bloodline can be traced back to continental royalty, as she remarks on the birth of her first child, „Hana skal kalla eptir fǫðurmóður minni ok skal heita Þorgerðr, því at hon var komin frá Sigurði Fáfnisbana í fǫðurætt sína at langfeðgatölu.“ (46) [She shall be named after my father's mother, Thorgerd, because she was descended on her father's side from Sigurd Fafnisbani. (21)]

²² Einar, *Njáls saga*, 127. Einar cites Hallgerðr's maternal uncle Svanr of Svanshóll, his son Brynjólfr rósta (the brawler), along with her foster-father Þjóstólfr as the source, and indulgence, of the shadiness, the discord, and the deceitfulness in her behaviour.

²³ Perhaps the only exception to this narrative trend is something of a conversion loophole. That is, a dramatic change in an individual's characterization brought upon by an individual's conversion to Christianity. For example, the peaceful settlement that brings the feud that dominates the latter half of *Njáls saga*, that is resolved only after Flosi has made his pilgrimage to Rome, and Kári likewise receives absolution in the south. (Chapters 158-9)

²⁴ Though it is beyond the scope of the present discussion, it is also interesting to compare the manner in which Auðr, Guðrún, and Hallgerðr's brothers find their way into the sagas. Vésteinn, Auðr's brother, is introduced simultaneously with his sister, and furthermore is even given his own individual descriptive passage (see n.29, Ch.3 below). On the other hand, Guðrún's brothers are listed as the five sons of Ósvifr and his wife Þórdís, and are described in concert as *vígligir menn* [bold fighters]. However, in a way giving her prominence, the saga continues with the previously cited passage that characterizes their lone sister at length. As for Hallgerðr's brothers, the three men are initially characterized as *bræðr Hallgerðar* [The

accords to greater spending power within the society of the sagas, then, within a given line, is the nobility of male and female ancestors exchanged at parity?

As mentioned above, in Auðr's introductory passage, focusing first on her mother's ancestors, the narrator traces her lineage through mothers and fathers – sons and daughters – arriving at a prominent settler of the area in which the saga takes place. Following this, the narrator traces her father's family back to a champion in Norway, but quickly returns to her mother's family focusing mainly on the male ancestors of her maternal grandfather's line. On the other hand, Guðrún's genealogical account concerns, in all but one instance, her father's family and, for the most part, his male ancestors on both the maternal and the paternal sides of the family. As for Hallgerðr, the genealogical summary that opens her introduction into the saga is entirely concerned with her father's ancestors, tracing an extremely impressive collection of mostly male ancestors through her paternal grandmother's father, Þorsteinn rauðr.

All three passages seem to lend more weight, at least in numbers, to the male ancestors of the families that they are introducing, and, further, the ultimate destination of any particular line is always a man. This certainly seems to support the idea that women in the sagas were largely excluded from the arenas of society, those public performance spaces, in which honour was earned, exchanged, and lost.²⁵ However, the women

brother's of Hallgerðr] and thus, as Hallgerðr might be called her mother's daughter, so are they – from the beginning – their sister's brothers.

²⁵ Zoe Borovsky, "Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature" (*The Journal of American Folklore* 112:443 Winter, 1999) 6-39; Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, 134-5; Vésteinn, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, 147. I will return to this idea in forthcoming chapters, citing the work of Carol Clover article, "The Politics of Scarcity," in which she distinguishes between the limited official power that women were give, and the wider unofficial power that they exercised in society. Elsewhere, Clover also suggests that the manner in which these different but complimentary types of power are wielded suggests, "a single standard of behavior, a system that obviously advantaged the male but at the same time a system in which, because the strong woman was not inhibited by a theoretical ceiling above which she could not rise and the weak man not protected by a theoretical floor below which he could not fall, the potential for

featured in these genealogies are by no means negligible, as witnessed in the extensive genealogical background provided with respect to Auðr, and her brother Vésteinn, wherein their maternal lineage is traced through six generations compared to only three paternal generations. Thus, by this mark, it seems that even if women were restricted to a spectatorial role in the honour trade, they were not entirely excluded from its hereditary aspect, and that, though certainly originating in masculine ancestry, those honourable familial traits could be derived as much from one's maternal forebears as from those of the father.²⁶ In short, the more illustrious line, whether derived from one's maternal, or paternal ancestry, always plays a prominent role in these genealogical tabulations.

In a similar fashion, in their respective introductory passages, the narrator provides several of Guðrún's, and all of Hallgerðr's, paternal ancestors through the forebears of their fathers' mothers, seemingly a source of great honour in their families. However, contrary to Auðr's case, in both Guðrún and Hallgerðr's case there is almost no mention of maternal ancestors, the only exception, Guðrún's maternal grandfather, Þjóðólfr lági, who fails to draw attention anywhere else in *Laxdæla saga*. As for Hallgerðr, the failure to even name her mother in her introduction is an action that speaks loudly in its effort to withhold information. Auðr's maternal line is drawn at length, and although Guðrún's maternal line consists of only two short segments which ultimately

gender overlap in the social hierarchy was always present.” [Carol Clover, Review of *Norrønt nid: Forestillingen om den umandige mand i de islandske sagaer* (*Journal of English and German Philology* 81:3, 1982) 400] See also Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og æra: Studier i islændingesagaerne* (Århus, Norway: Aarhus University Press, 1993) 246-8 and 333-40.

²⁶ In fact, to further support this point, in *Laxdæla saga*, when Óláfr pái, along with his father Høskuldr, approaches Egill Skallagrímsson to arrange a match between himself and Egill's daughter Þógerðr, and Egill presents his daughter with the idea, she quickly dismisses his eagerness, citing the fact that Óláfr's mother was brought to Iceland as a slave. Egill quickly corrects her mistake, explaining that Óláfr's mother is in fact the daughter of an Irish king, and further stating that, „Er hann miklu betr borinn í móðurkyn en föðurætt, ok væri oss þat þó fullboðit.“ (63-4) [He's of even better family on his mother's side than his father's, which by itself would be more than good enough for us. (313)]

reveal nothing beyond themselves, it remains that the information is dutifully divulged, and in contrast, Hallgerðr's maternal line is shrouded in silence, despite the fact that several characters from this line appear, and play important roles, later in the saga.²⁷ It seems that Hallgerðr's maternal ancestors are left out, not because they are insignificant in the formation of her character, but rather due to their troublesome nature, which, though not specifically recorded in this passage, is clearly suggested by her uncle Hrútr's remark regarding her eyes, as discussed above.²⁸ Thus, though it might first seem as if something is missing from Hallgerðr's introduction, upon closer examination, by leaving her maternal ancestors out of the equation, rather replacing them with a heavily weighted scene, a heated dialogue between two brothers, the narrator more fully reveals the implications of the much less than honourable half of her inheritance.

THE BURDEN OF EXPECTATIONS

In the three examples offered above, the character introductions differ not only in the way in which they explicate upon the women that they purport to describe, but equally in the specific characteristics that they ascribe to the three characters. Little is mentioned with respect to Auðr's individual character, but rather, together with her brother Vésteinn, she is primarily drawn as the product of her ancestry.²⁹ And, while it is

²⁷ See n.22, Ch.3 above.

²⁸ It seems that the inheritance of these troublesome traits does not end with Hallgerðr, as when describing she and Gunnar's two sons, Hogni and Grani, the saga narrator suggests that, „Þeir váru menn óskapglíkir; hafði Grani mikit af skapi móður sinnar, en Hogni var vel at sér.“ (182) [They were quite different from each other: Grani had much of his mother's character, but Hogni was a fine person. (86)] Also, see n.6, Ch.III above.

²⁹ Although nothing more is said of Auðr until her betrothal to Gísli in the next chapter, there is a short passage that follows the longer passage quoted above which expands upon the characterization of Vésteinn: „Vésteinn Vésteinsson gerðisk fardrengur góður; þó átti hann bú í Qnundarfirði undir Hesti, þá er hér var komit sögunni; kona hans hét Gunnhildr, Bergr hét sonur hans ok Helgi.“ (16) [Vesteinn Vesteinsson eventually became a skilled seafarer, though at this point in the story he lived on a farm in Onundarfjord below Hest mountain. He had a wife, Gunnhild, and two sons, Berg and Helgi. (504)]

difficult to understand exactly how a medieval audience would have received the lengthy genealogical information provided in these passages, it is important to remember that the society of the sagas is not unique – and not even remarkably distinct from our own – in its perception of inherited character traits, both physical and personal, nor in the manner in which honour, or perhaps its lack, is passed through the generations of a particular family.³⁰ In this regard, Auðr's is first introduced as a direct descendant of not only Dýri, an early settler in the west-fjords, but also a cast of troll and dragon slayers, and other legendary figures, which, in terms of honour and prestige, seem to speak for themselves.

As mentioned above, with respect to her ancestry, the narrator paints a similar, though perhaps more earthly, impression of Guðrún. However, the closing paragraph of the passage continues with the individuated impression of Guðrún's, which outlines her physical beauty, though only in broad strokes, and rather closely examines the less physiological aspect of her person, citing her intelligence and shrewdness, her ability to

³⁰ Sir Francis Galton first used the the terms “nature” and “nurture” – although for an instance of earlier usage, see n.32, Ch.III below – he which accord to the still extant modern usage relating to those innate personal qualities – which include those acquired through heredity – and those derived from personal experience, respectively. In his *Englishmen of Science: Their Nature and Nurture*, Galton writes, “The phrase “nature and nurture” is a convenient jingle of words, for it separates under two distinct heads the innumerable elements of which personality is composed. Nature is all that a man brings with himself into the world; nurture is every influence from without that affects him after his birth. ... Neither of the terms implies any theory; natural gifts may or may not be hereditary; nurture does not especially consist of food, clothing, education or tradition, but it includes all these and similar influences whether known or unknown.” [Sir Francis Galton, *Englishmen of Science: Their Nature and Nurture* (London: 1874) 12] However, M. G. Bulmer writes that, “nature includes any prenatal influence, whether hereditary or not; natural in this sense is synonymous with congenital.” [Michael G. Bulmer, *Francis Galton: Pioneer of Heredity and Biometry* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003) 61] More recent perspectives on this debate consider the binary division between nature and nurture a rather naive viewpoint; as Michael J. Meaney suggests, “Nature and nurture do not exist in a manner that can ever be considered independently quantifiable. There is, instead, simply a continuing process of development that emerges from the constant dialogue between gene and environment.” [Michael J. Meaney, “Nature, Nurture, and the Disunity of Knowledge” (*Annals of The New York Academy of Science*, 935:1 2006) 51] It might be a far stretch to view Hallgerðr, or any other saga character, in light of this synergetic approach to characterization, however it is nonetheless quite tantalizing to consider the interplay between the high nobility of her father's family, and the proud environment in which she is raised, and those more difficult maternal ancestors, from whence she has seemed to derive her own harsh personality, not to mention the influence that her less-than-reputable foster-father Þjóstólfr seems to have over her life.

engage in clear and fluent conversation, and her generosity. Although this more acute characterization is not necessarily an entirely positive one – one that would inevitably result in honourable behaviour – it is nonetheless extremely functional, and would prove of great utility along any route upon which she might discover herself travelling in what remains of the saga.

On Hallgerðr's behalf, the narrator of *Njáls saga* similarly offers a genealogical and an individualized character description, but this preliminary passage largely contrasts with the others both in the manner in which it seems to withhold certain genealogical information, as suggested above, as well as in the negative personality traits that it ascribes to its subject.³¹ Hallgerðr, like Guðrún, is noted for her beauty, and, specifically, for her long, silken hair, but then in one of the most memorable scenes in the early part of the saga her uncle Hrútr reveals, albeit through a physiological observation, a character trait, although not explicitly stated, that seems to largely define Hallgerðr for what remains of the saga. And, although it is difficult to understand the specific consequences of this particular trait at this early stage in the saga, her father's reaction asserts its unfavourable aspect, which contrasts remarkably with the initial impression that the narrator provides. It seems then that, although top-loaded with an impressive cast of paternal ancestors, Hallgerðr, against all of the Dalamenn's better intentions, despite the fact that her mother is never named in the saga, cannot escape her maternal inheritance.³²

³¹ In fact, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, suggests that, “if we look closely at this saga, we find that few works of this genre reveal a greater understanding of heredity ... than *Njáls saga* does in the characterization of Hallgerður.” [Einar, *Njáls saga*, 126]

³² At the risk of enlisting Hallgerðr among a legion of beasts, or worse a cabal of demons, perhaps Hǫskuldr and Hrútr would find some comfort in the island ruler Prospero's similar struggles to subvert the malevolent nature of his charge Caliban: “PROSPERO. A devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains, / Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost;” [William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (*The Complete Illustrated Shakespeare*, ed. Howard Staunton, New York: Park Lane, 1979) Vol. 3, 38]

Although the character introductions cited above all follow a familiar, similar pattern, they are however distinguishable not only in their particular content, but also in the manner in which they individually interpret the 'rules' described by the common pattern. Thus, from the initial impressions, the sagas offer quite distinct characterizations of these three women, differing largely in the style by which they are presented, as well as in the particular traits with which the characters are ascribed. However, the differences do not end here, and, in the next chapter, in examining the subsequent marriages of these women, the gulfs only seem to widen.

CHAPTER IV - MARRIAGE NEGOTIATIONS

HERMIA. *I would my father look'd but with my
eyes!*

THESEUS. *Rather, your eyes must with his
judgement look.*

- William Shakespeare¹

*The value and quality of any love is determined
solely by the lover himself.* - Carson McCullers²

The first substantial movement of many women in the sagas concerns the negotiations, usually under the encouragement and the guidance of their male kin, of their betrothals, and consequent marriages.³ As much interest as these women must have in securing a good marriage, it is perhaps equally as important for their male guardians to find a suitable husband that will strengthen their own political and legal position, and so,

¹ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*The Complete Illustrated Shakespeare*, ed. Howard Staunton, New York: Park Lane, 1979) Vol.1, 342.

² Carson McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Café and Other Stories* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2005) 26.

³ According to Helga Kress, "The wife motif is one of the most common women's motifs in the Icelandic sagas, and the writer who wishes to describe women's experiences cannot escape from this." [Helga Kress, "You will find it all rather monotonous"; on literary tradition and the feminine experience in *Laxdæla saga*," trans. Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir (*The Nordic Mind: Current Trends in Scandinavian Literary Criticism*, eds. Frank Egholm and John Weinstock, Lanham, New York, and London: , 1986) 192.] Although it will be shown later in this chapter, at least across the scope of this particular study, that men all but dominated the decision-making process when it comes to betrothals, the sagas provide two interesting, and contrasting exceptions: first, in *Laxdæla saga*, when Unnr had reached an advanced age she sends for her grandson Óláfr feilan, and offers him the following suggestion: „Þat hefir mér komit í hug, frændi, at þú munir staðfesta ráð þitt ok kvænask.“ (11) [It has occurred to me, my grandson, that you should think of settling down and marrying. (281)] and it is said that, „Óláfr tók því vel ok kvezk hennar forsjá hlíta mundu um þat mál.“ (11) [Olaf agreed and said he was ready to follow her advice on this matter. (281)]. The subsequent wedding feast is noted as very impressive, Unnr is depicted as a figure of remarkable dignity, and the marriage produces an impressive familial line; In stark contrast, near the beginning of *Finnboga saga*, it is said that, „Ásbjörn átti dóttur, er Þorný hét. Hennar bað austmaðr sá, er Skíði hét. Ásbjörn vildi eigi gipta hana. Þá er Ásbjörn var riðinn til þings um sumarit, hafði Skíði tekit í brott meyna með ráði Þorgerðar, móður hennar.“ (254)[Asbjorn had a daughter called Thorny. A Norwegian called Skidi asked for her hand, but Asbjorn would not give his consent. So when her father had ridden to the *Thing* one summer, Skidi took the young woman away with the approval of her mother Thorgerd. (221-2)] Although it is noted that, „Var hann mikilhæfr maðr ok átti frændr ágæta ok ina beztu kosti.“ (254) [He (Skidi) was a very good match, an eminent man from a noble family. (222)], it remains that Asbjörn is quite angry when he discovers what has happened, suggesting that he is less angry about the marriage itself, than the fact that it was agreed upon without his counsel and lacking his consent. The references to *Finnboga saga* follow the Íslenzk fornrit edition: Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., "Finnboga saga" (*Kjalnesinga saga*, Íslenzk fornrit 14, Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1959) 251-340, and their English counterparts follow John Kennedy's translation: Viðar Hreinsson, ed., "The Saga of Finnbogi the Mighty," trans. John Kennedy, (*The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Leifur Eiríksson, 1997) Vol. III, 221-70.

due to their own vested interests, it is no surprise that they take this business quite seriously.⁴ However, although one of the predominant roles of marriage in the sagas is to form desirable and strategic kinship bonds, and to strengthen the power and the wealth of the families involved, it is often considered an act of good judgement, and a portent for a healthy marriage, if a woman is consulted in these matters.⁵ And, it follows that a marriage that is agreed upon against the will of the betrothed woman often ends badly, and is thought an unwise decision. As in the case of the introductory passages examined in the previous chapter, examining the three characters that form the basis of this study with respect to their betrothals, and consequent marriages, offers a wide survey of the ways that such negotiations can proceed, as well as offering insight into the state of married life in the sagas.

UN COURT DIMANCHES DE FIANÇAILLES

As mentioned in the previous chapter, shortly after her brief introduction, the next mention of Auðr is in the following opening passage of the fifth chapter of *Gísla saga*:

Þorbjörn hét maðr ok var kallaðr selagnúpr; hann bjó í Tálknafirði at Kvígandafelli; Þórdís hét kona hans, en Ásgerðr dóttir. Þessarar konu biðr Þorkell Súrsson ok getr hana at eiga, en Gísli Súrsson bað systur Vésteins, Auðar Vésteinsdóttur, ok fekk hana; búa nú báðir saman í Haukadal. (17)

[There was a man named Thorbjorn, nicknamed Selagnup (Seal's Peak). He lived at Kvigandfell in Talknafjord. He was married to a woman called Thordis and had a daughter named Asgerd. Thorkell, the son of Thorbjorn Sur, asked for Asgerd's hand and she became his wife. Gisli asked for the hand of Aud, Vestein's sister, and married her. The two brothers lived together in Haukadal. (327)]

The narrator quickly moves on, discussing a series of scenes from various assemblies,

⁴ “Although women had certain rights in divorce and marriage, wives and daughters were often treated as possessions ...”[Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 72] See also Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 248-9.

⁵ Vésteinn, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, 147.

another quick gloss of the marriage of Þorgrímr and Gísli's sister Þórdís,⁶ culminating in the powerful scene wherein the famous proposed blood-brotherhood between the Súrssons, Vésteinn, and Þorgrímr is broken. (Ch.6)

In the case of Auðr and Gísli, as well as the two other marriages cited above, the narrator seems to have little interest in the negotiation process, and that, for a man to secure a wife, simply asking is enough. However, it is difficult to read what may have been implied in the text to a medieval audience, and then, keeping this in mind, it seems that asking is a necessary, but not necessarily a sufficient act for establishing the desired after marriage. That is, while there is no mention in the saga of consulting Auðr, Ásgerðr, or Þórdís with respect to their marriages, it is equally unsaid that they were not consulted, nor that these women were in any way compelled by their guardians to act against their respective wills.⁷ If *Gísla saga* offers little in the way of explication upon the nature of marriage negotiations, such omissions are amplified when drawn alongside *Laxdæla saga*, and the marriage history of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir.

THE DRIVER'S SEAT

When Guðrún is fifteen years old a man named Þorvaldr Halldórsson approaches her father Ósvífr at the Alþing asking for her hand in marriage. It is remarked in the saga that he was a wealthy man, but by no means a hero, and that, „Því máli var eigi fjarri tekit, en þó sagði Ósvífr, at þat myndi á kostum finna, at þau Guðrún váru eigi

⁶ „Þorgrími list systir þeirra bræðra væn og biður hennar og því næst er hún honum föstnuð“ (page number) [Thorgrim, the son of Thorstein, found Thordis, the sister of Gísli and Þorkel, very attractive and asked for her hand in marriage. She was betrothed to him and the wedding happened soon in the wake of the betrothal. (505)]

⁷ Along similar lines, after the slaying of her husband Þorgrímr, when Þórdís marries his brother Þorkr, the narrator simply states that, „Þorkr gengr þar í bú með Þórdísi ok fær hennar“. (57) [Þork moves in with Thordis and married her. (523)]

jafnmenni.“ (93) [His suit was not rejected but Osvif felt the difference in their means would be evident in the marriage conditions. (332)] It is then stated that,

Síðan var Guðrún fōstuð Þorvaldi, ok réð Ósvífr einn máldaga, ok svá var skilt, at Guðrún skyldi ein ráða fyrir fé þeira, þegar er þau koma í eina rekkju, ok eiga alls helming, hvárt er samfarar þeira væri lengri eða skemmri. (93)

[Gudrun was eventually betrothed to Thorvald according to conditions which Osvif himself decided upon. He declared that Gudrun should control their common finances once they were married and would acquire the right to half of the estate, whether the marriage was a brief or lengthy one. (332)]

In contrast to the examples cited above from *Gísla saga*, it is explicitly stated that the conditions of Guðrún's first marriage are entirely decided upon by her suitor and her legal male guardian, her father Ósvífr, at the Alþing no less,⁸ and, furthermore, that, „Ekki var Guðrún at þessu spurð, ok heldr gerði hon sér at þessu ógetit, ok var þó kyrrt.“ (93) [Gudrun was not asked for her opinion and, although, she was rather against the idea, nothing was done. (332)] It is interesting to note that Ósvífr, as a condition of the marriage, declares that Guðrún should control the purse-strings of the couples common wealth, offering her a great deal of power within the relationship, but it remains that she

⁸ Although there are rare cases in the sagas where women are present at the Alþing, they are largely confined to spectatorial role: “Women attended the Althing but did not have access to performance roles in the center of the social-legal space.” [Borovsky, “Never in Public,” 13], and so this was a space restricted, at least legally, to male performance. But, although the women of the sagas seemed to play “no substantial role in open political life and did not enjoy full legal equality with men,” they “did, however, frequently play an influential role in the extralegal workings of advocacy.” [Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2001) 196.] It is also interesting to note here a passage from *Eyrbyggja saga*, whereupon, after the death of Arnkell hofgoði, the narrator states, „Eptir víg Arnkels váru konur til erfðar ok aðildar, ok var fyrir því eigi svá mikill reki at gorr um vígit, sem ván myndi þykkja um svá gofgan mann;“ (103) [Arnkell's only heirs were women, and because of this the prosecution for his killing was not taken up with as much energy as might have been expected for such a great man. (179)] And the saga continues, „En með því at eptirmálit varð eigi svá sœmiligt, sem líkligt þótti um svá mikinn hofðingja, sem Arnkels var, þá færðu landsstjórnarmenn lög á því, at aldri síðan skyldi kona vera vígsakaraðili né yngri karlmaðr en sextán vetra, ok hefir þat haldizk jafnan síðan.“ (103-4) [Since the outcome of this case was not as honourable as was thought fitting for a great chieftan such as Arnkel, the leading men of the land made a law that a woman or a young man under the age of sixteen could never prosecute a manslaughter case, and this has been the law ever since. (179)] References to *Eyrbyggja saga* follow the *Íslensk fornrit* edition: Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds., *Eyrbyggja saga*, (Íslensk fornrit 4, Reykjavík, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélagið, 1935); and their English counterparts follow Judy Quinn's translation: Viðar Hreinsson, ed., “The Saga of the People of Eyri” trans. Judy Quinn (*The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Reykjavík: Bókautgáfan Leifur Eiríksson, 1997) Vol. V, 131-218.

held no influence over the decision, that it was enacted against her will, and, equally as important, she made it known as such.⁹ However, Ósvífr's acknowledgement of the difference of their means, his stipulation that Guðrún control the common finances of the couple, and his arrangement of a prenuptial estate agreement, independent of the duration of the marriage, all belie the fact that he somehow must have felt this marriage an unequal match, but for some reason – perhaps to avoid conflict – felt compelled to approve of it, and to inflict it upon his daughter.

This marriage proves an unhappy one, and after two years it is ended – a topic to which I will return in the next chapter. Guðrún's second marriage develops under very different circumstances when, upon divorcing his wife Auðr – with Guðrún's help –, Þórðr Ingunnarson rides to Ósvífr's farm at Laugur, and, „Síðan bað hann Guðrúnar; var honum þat mál auðsótt við Ósvífr, en Guðrún mælti ekki í móti. ... Samfyr þeira Þórðar ok Guðrúnar var góð.“ (96) [(Thord) proceeded to ask for Gudrun's hand in marriage. Osvif agreed readily and Gudrun raised no objection ... the marriage of Thord and Gudrun was a happy one. (334)] Contrary to the negotiation of her first marriage, Þórðr's proposal is offered at her father's farm – rather than at the Alþing – in a private space in which the balance of power along gender lines is in some ways neutralized, and where – again, contrasting the public space of the Alþing – a woman is not forbidden from

⁹ As suggested by her characterization in the previous chapter, there is little surprise that Guðrún is given such an important responsibility in this marriage, at age fifteen no less. In fact, the first major event concerning Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga*, contrary to the common pattern suggested at the beginning of this chapter, concerns her meeting with “the renowned sage Gestr Oddleifsson,” and their conversation regarding her dreams. As Ármann Jakobsson writes, “The wise man and the teenage girl might at first sight seem a strange couple and even more remarkable is the fact that the saga highlights their common eloquence and wisdom. Even at fourteen, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is very comfortable in making witty small-talk with one of the wisest men in Iceland. It is this that makes Guðrún special.” [Ármann, “Laxdæla Dreaming,” 38]

fulfilling an active performance role.¹⁰ It is unclear whether this particular aspect contributed to the success of the negotiation and of the consequent marriage, as it is quite clear that there has been a shared affection between the two for quite some time.¹¹ However, the narrator makes it a point to state that „en Guðrún mælti ekki í móti,“ [and Gudrun raised no objection (to the proposal)], and so it remains within the realm of possibility that her disapproval could have caused problems with the betrothal procedure, and, if nothing else, that the lack of objection seems intrinsically linked to the later success of the marriage.

It is extremely difficult to discuss Guðrún's third marriage in isolation, as it forms the centrepiece of the central feud that permeates what remains of the saga. Although twice married, and a widow, Guðrún is still a young woman by the time that Kjartan Ólafsson begins to visit her at Laugur, and notably, he is never without his foster brother Bolli Þorleiksson.¹² It is soon clear, despite his father's reservations,¹³ that Kjartan and Guðrún are well suited for each other.¹⁴ However, soon Kjartan finds an opportunity to

¹⁰ Borovsky, “Never in Public,” 12-16.

¹¹ While still married to her first husband Þorvaldr, it is said that, „Þórðr Ingunnarson gerði sér dætt við þau Þorvald ok Guðrúnu ok var þar löngum, ok fell þar mörq umræða á um kærleika þeira Þórðar ok Guðrúnar.“ (93) [Thord Ingunnarson made a point of befriending Thorvald and Gudrun and spent a great deal of time at their farm, until soon rumours of the growing affection between Thord and Gudrun spread. (332)] Also, I cannot fail to mention here the manner by which both Guðrún and Þórðr managed to escape their marriages, that is through insightful, mutual counsel, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹² „fór Kjartan hvergi þess, er eigi fylgði Bolli honum.“ (112) [Kjartan never went anywhere without Bolli by his side. (344)]

¹³ „Eitt sinn ræddi Óláfr við Kjartan: „Eigi veit ek,“ segir hann, „hví mér er jafnan svá hugstætt, er þú ferr til Lauga ok talar við Guðrúnu; en eigi er þat fyrir því, at eigi þœtti mér Guðrún fyrir öllum konum orðum, ok hon ein er svá kvenna, at mér þykki þér fullkosta. Nú er þat hugboð mitt, en eigi vil ek þess spá, at vér frændr ok Laugamenn berim eigi allsendis gæfu til um vár skipti.“ (112) [Olaf spoke to Kjartan one day, saying, “I don't know why your visits to the springs of Laugar to spend time with Gudrun make me uneasy. It isn't because I don't appreciate how much superior to other women Gudrun is, as she is the only woman I consider a worthy match for you. But somehow I have a feeling, although I won't make it a prediction, that our dealings with the Laugar family will not turn out well. (344-5)]

¹⁴ As discussed in the previous chapter, and noted as something that is often overlooked, Guðrún's principal asset is not her physical beauty, but rather her mind: „þótti Kjartani gott at tala við Guðrúnu, því at hon var bæði vitr ok málsnjöll.“ (112) [Kjartan enjoyed Gudrun's company, as she was both clever and good with

journey abroad, and, much to the disappointment of Guðrún, refuses to take her with him. They part in disagreement, and angry, perhaps heart-broken, Guðrún refuses to wait for him for the three years that he asks of her.¹⁵ While abroad, Kjartan and King Óláfr's sister develop a friendship, and upon his return to Iceland, preceding his foster brother Kjartan, Bolli informs Guðrún of the developing relationship, „ok kvað þat nær sinni ætlan, at konungr myndi heldr gipta honum Ingibjörgu en láta hann lausan, ef því væri skipta.“ (127) [and said in his opinion the king would rather marry Kjartan to his Ingibjorg than let him leave, if he had his way. (354)] It seems that there is little doubt that Bolli presents a largely truthful account of Kjartan's dealings in Norway, and that Bolli is not coloured a liar in this passage.¹⁶ However, it is interesting to note the final meeting between Bolli and Kjartan in Norway before the former heads back to Iceland, wherein Bolli tells him that he would stay through the winter if he thought that there was a chance that his foster-brother would be returning to Iceland in the following summer. He acknowledges the fact that the King would likely refuse to see Kjartan leave, but further suggests that, „en hofum þat fyrir satt, at þú munir fátt þat, er á Íslandi er til skemmtanar, þá er þú sitr á tali við Ingibjörgu konungssystur.“ (126) [I also take for granted that you remember little that might entertain you in Iceland when you're conversing with the king's sister Ingibjorg. (353)] Kjartan, perhaps taken aback by this

words. (344)] As Ármann Jakobsson suggests, “She may be a good-looking woman but it is her eloquence rather than her beauty which captivates him.” [Ármann, “Laxdæla Dreaming,” 39] See also Auerbach, 36-8, and n.9, Ch.IV above.

¹⁵ Loren Auerbach posits that this scene forms the focal point of the saga, wherein Kjartan's answer is “not only a flat refusal, but that she must stay behind to look after her father and brothers. In this instant he [Kjartan] rejects the fact that she [Guðrún] is equal to him in promise and ability, and pushes her back into a subservient 'female' role. It is from this moment that all the tragedy, all the death and destruction, in the saga unfolds.” [Auerbach, 30]

¹⁶ Bredsdorff, 44. Bredsdorff further comments that, “The saga does not deal with villains and heroes, but with basic impulses that struggle within the individual.” [Bredsdorff, 44]

sly comment, replies, „Haf ekki slíkt við, en bera skaltu frændum várum kveðju mína ok svá vinum.“ (126) [Don't go saying things like that, but do give my regards to our kinsmen and friends. (354)] Kjartan quick rejoinder, „Haf ekki slíkt við,“ seems to bear witness to the fact that he is aware of the slyness of Bolli's comment, and it also acts as an injunction against repeating any gossip pertaining to Kjartan's relationship with Ingibjörg upon his return to Iceland.¹⁷ And so, despite the fact that Bolli gives Guðrún a truthful account of Kjartan's experiences in Norway, it remains that his revelation is a transgression of sorts, if not to some wider moral code, at least a transgression of the degree of confidence, justly or unjustly, to which Kjartan holds their relationship.¹⁸

Bolli continues to visit Guðrún at Laugar, and one time he asks Guðrún how she would respond were he to ask her to marry him. She quickly replies, „Ekki þarftu slíkt at ræða, Bolli; engum manni mun ek giptask, meðan ek spyr Kjartan á lífi.“ (128) [There's no point in even discussing that, Bolli; I'll marry no man as long as I know Kjartan is still alive. (128)]¹⁹ Soon after this, Bolli, speaking to his uncle Óláfr, suggests that it is high time to find a wife, and speaks of his desire to ask for Guðrún's hand. Óláfr, echoing his earlier reservations with regard to his son Kjartan's visits to Laugar, wants to play no part in the matter, but tells Bolli that he will not oppose any such agreement if it is so reached, and then asks whether he has raised the question with Guðrún herself, suggesting, at the

¹⁷ Madelung, 37.

¹⁸ Perhaps Kjartan was unjust in the expectations that he placed upon his foster-brother Bolli, for, as Robert Cook suggests, “it is clear that their friendship is not, as true friendships must be, a relationship between equals. Bolli always plays the secondary role. Kjartan's way of speaking to Bolli (even before their alienation over Guðrún) is not pleasant.” [Cook, “Women and Men in *Laxdæla saga*,” 53.] And then, it was perhaps only a matter of time before something had to give.

¹⁹ Bolli stirs the pot once again in suggesting that, „myndi hann ok kost hafa átt at bjóða mér þar um nokkut ørendi, ef honum þótti þat allmiklu máli skipta.“ (128) [He could have asked me to give you a message, if he thought it important enough. (354)]

least, that her approval would help to hasten the arrangement. In response, Bolli cites his earlier conversation with Guðrún, but continues, „vænti ek þó, at Ósvífr muni mestu um ráða þetta mál.“ (129) [“but I expect that it will be first and foremost Ósvífr who will decide the question.” (355)] At first it seems as though Óláfr's enquiry is entirely germane with respect to social, if not the strictly legal, custom, when Ósvífr meets Bolli's request with the following response, „Svá er, sem þú veizt, Bolli, at Guðrún er ekkja, ok á hon sjálf svör fyrir sér; en fýsa mun ek þessa.“ (129) [As you know, Bolli, Gudrun is a widow and as such she can answer for herself, but I will give it my support. (355)] However, the subsequent conversation between Ósvífr his daughter Guðrún seems to belie the perceived custom.

He first broaches the issue by stating Bolli's request, and then adds that, were the decision left to him, he would not fail to accept it. Guðrún, citing the early instance when she had refused Bolli, then replies, „Skjótlitit gerir þú þetta mál, ok ræddi Bolli eitt sinn þetta mál fyrir mér, ok veik ek heldr af, ok þat sama er mér enn í hug.“ (129) [You've been quick to decide this. Bolli brought the question up once with me and I tried to discourage him, and I still feel the same way. (355)] Ósvífr once again gives the impression that the decision is Guðrún's alone, but her response seems to suggest that he has already made his own decision here, and that if it remains that she indeed does have final say in the matter, it is not to be thus spoken without duress or further implications. Responding to his daughter, expressing at least one of the implications of a refusal to arrange the proposed marriage, that is, providing unflattering grist for the rumour mill, Ósvífr then says, „Þá munu margir menn mæla, at þetta sé meir af ofsa mælt en mikilli

fyrirhyggju, ef þú neitar slíkum manni, sem Bolli er; en meðan ek em uppi, þá skal ek hafa forsjá fyrir ýðr börnum mínum um þá hluti, er ek kann gørr at sjá en þér.“ (129) [‘If you refuse a man like Bolli many people will say that your answer shows more recklessness than foresight. But as long as I’m still alive, I intend to direct my children’s actions in matters where I can see more clearly than they.’ (355-6)]²⁰ And it then follows that, „Ok er Ósvífr tók þetta mál svá þvert, þá fyrirtók Guðrún eigi fyrir sína hond ok var þó in tregasta í öllu. Synir Ósvífrs fýsa þessa mjök; þykkir sér mkil slægja til mægða við Bolla.“ (129) [Since Osvif opposed her so, Gudrun did not, for her part, refuse, although she was very reluctant in all respects. Osvif’s sons were also very eager for her to make the match and felt it was an honour for them to have Bolli as their brother-in-law. (355-6)] Thus, the final result of this negotiation seems to leave all parties satisfied, including Guðrún’s brothers, excepting for the bride herself, and, contrasting the narrator’s comment that her second marriage was a happy one – „Samfqr þeira Þórðar ok Guðrúnar var góð“ (96) [the marriage of Thord and Gudrun was a happy one. (334)] –, but drawing parallel with the first, of which it is stated that, „Lítt unni Guðrún Þorvaldi,“ (page number) [Gudrun cared little for Thorvald, (332)], it is said that, „Ekki var mart í samföllum þeira Bolla af Guðrúnar hendi.“ (130) [After they were married Gudrun showed little affection for Bolli. (356)]²¹

Guðrún’s fourth marriage, though it arrives after a great deal of personal and political manoeuvring under the council of Snorri goði,²² is settled in a very

²⁰ Although Keneva Kunz translates *ofsa* as recklessness, it can also be translated as excessive pride-fulness, or hubris.

²¹ A. Margaret Arent Madelung remarks on the significance of this comment, which appears as an iteration upon a formal element in her study on *Laxdæla saga*, in that it explicitly “marks the the lack of love as being “on Gudrún’s part.”” [Madelung, 129]

²² Some of the aspects of this particular process will be discussed in the next chapter. After the death of her

straightforward manner. Þorkell, together with Snorri, arrives at Helgafell, and on spending the night there, Snorri speaks privately with Guðrún, telling her that he has made this journey on behalf of Þorkell to ask for her hand. Guðrún replies,

„Synir mínir munu hér mestu af ráða, Þorleikur og Bolli, en þú ert svá inn þriði maður, Snorri, at ek mun mest þau ráð undir eiga, er mér þykkja allmiklu máli skipta, því at þú hefir mér lengi heilráður verit.“ (200)

[“My sons, Thorleik and Bolli, will have the deciding say in this matter, but you are the third man to whom I look most for council, Snorri, when I feel the outcome to be important, as for many years now you have proved a good adviser to me.” (403)]

Þorleikr and Bolli are summoned, the question of the proposed marriage raised to them, and Bolli, who later Guðrún suggests is dearest to her, „enda hefir hann öruggastr verit í því minna barna, at gera at mínum vilja,“ (206) [... because he has always been the one among my children most loyal in doing as I wished. (407)],²³ answers, „Móðir mín mun þetta glöggvast sjá kunna; vil ek hér um hennar vilja samþykkja.“ (201) [My mother will know what is best and I agree to her wishes. (403)] He further cites the fact that Snorri's counsel has always proven good advice to their family, and, agreeing with her son, Guðrún says that, „Mjök munu vér hlíta forsjá Snorra um þetta mál, því at oss hafa þín ráð heil verit.“ (201) [We should make every effort to follow Snorri's guidance in this matter, because your counsel has been good counsel to us. (403)] And so, the match was decided, and it is later said that, „Ástir takast miklar með þeim Þorkatli og Guðrúnu.“

(203) [Gudrun and Thorkel grew to love one another very deeply. (405)]

second husband Þórðr, it is stated that, „Í þenna tíma bjó Snorri goði at Helgafelli. Hann var frændi Ósvífrs ok vinr; áttu þau Guðrún þar mikit traust. Þangat fór Snorri goði at heimboði. Þá tjáði Guðrún þetta vandkvæði fyrir Snorra, en hann kvazk mundu veita þeim at málum, þá er honum sýndisk.“ (100) [At this time Snorri the Godi lived at Helgafell. He was Ósvif's kinsman and friend and a source of great support to both him and Gudrun. When he visited them Gudrun told him of her dilemma [regarding the the sorcery of Kotkel, which led to her second husband's death] and he promised to help her in the way he thought best. (336-7)] Snorri continues to provide Guðrún with helpful council throughout the saga.

²³ It is earlier stated that, „Guðrún unni Bolla mest allra barna sinna.“ (204) [Of all her children, it was Bolli whom Gudrun loved the most. (405)]

If compelled to classify Guðrún's marriages in the hope of drawing some conclusions with respect to the negotiation and betrothal process, perhaps dividing those that prove successful in love, her second and her fourth marriage, from those that prove unsuccessful, her first and her third, will provide as much illumination as that offered by any other discrete categorization. In the negotiation of her first and third marriages, Guðrún openly expresses her disapproval, however, despite her objections, settlements are reached in both cases. Guðrún raises no objections in the negotiation of her second marriage, and, furthermore, it is suggested that she had entered upon an affair with the man who would become her second husband, Þórðr, while still married to her first husband. In her fourth and final marriage, Guðrún goes even further, deceiving another man, Þorgils Hølluson,²⁴ into seeking blood-vengeance for her slain husband Bolli, under the misleading auspice of a marriage agreement. Once the deed has been accomplished, and he comes seeking his reward, Guðrún reveals her act of cunning deception, and says that, „þykkjumk ek enda við þik 9ll ákveðin orð, þó at ek giptumk Þorkatli Eyjólfssyni, því at hann er nú eigi hér á landi.“ (195) [I keep every word of my promise to you though I marry Thorkel Eyolfsson, for he is at present not in this country. (399)]²⁵ This happens before the formal marriage negotiation scene cited above, and so it is quite clear that Guðrún here gets the man that she wants, and quickly disposes of the man whom she had

²⁴ It is interesting to note in the present context, and in relation of the preceding discussion of maternal and paternal bloodlines, that Þorgils' mother was called Halla, and that the saga introduces him thusly: „Maðr hét Þorgils ok var Hølluson; en því var hann kenndr við móður sína, at hon lifði lengr en faðir hans.“ (170) [There was a man named Thorgils who was identified with his mother and known as Halla's son (Hølluson), because she had outlived his father. (383)]

²⁵ Responding to Guðrún's “reveal,” and reflecting upon the counsel that Snorri had provided in accepting the original agreement, Þorgils says, „hafa mér þaðan jafnan k9ld ráð komit; veit ek, at þetta eru ráð Snorra goða.“ (195) [they have generally been cold, the counsels that Snorri the Godi has sent my way. (399)] This statement echoes the famous words of Flosi from *Njáls saga*, when he expresses horror upon his kinswoman Hildigúnnr's mournful and visceral act of incitement, opining that, „eru k9ld kvenna ráð.“ (292) [cold are the counsels of women. (137)]

earlier convinced to do her bidding.

However, it remains that from the perspective of Guðrún's legal male guardians, each negotiation arrives at the desired outcome, and they were never given the opportunity, in this respect, to refuse her wishes in a negative manner.²⁶ Even as her influence seems to grow with experience, that is, in the negotiation of her first marriage she is quite openly ignored, while in the second, though inconclusive as to the degree of influence that she might have held, it is stated forthrightly that she raised no objections, and it remains that she had developed an affinity for her suitor before the process had begun, she never subverts the wishes of her male guardians.²⁷ With respect to her third marriage, her own father seems to suggest that, as a widow, the decision rests upon Guðrún's approval, while in reality she seems no less than bullied by him into accepting, against her will, Bolli's proposal. In her fourth and final marriage, much like her second, Guðrún gets what she wants, but the saga remains ambiguous as to who had the final say over the matter. Guðrún suggests that her sons will decide on this matter, and that Snorri would be consulted next, but it remains that her son Bolli – perhaps the more impressive of her sons, although Þorleikr is surely no slouch – is favoured by his mother in proportion to the degree to which he remains loyal to her wishes, and he does not fail to accord to her will in this instance. Guðrún's intention is doubtlessly accomplished, but it remains unclear whether her sons approval was granted ceremonially, that is, as a sign of honour accorded to both Guðrún and her sons, or whether it stood as a legal obligation.

²⁶ That is, to refuse a marriage that she sought actively, rather than forcing her to follow through with a marriage to which she held strong objections.

²⁷ This idea accords well to Loren Auerbach's idea that, "The tragedy of *Laxdæla saga* is what happens to Guðrún: the strong, intelligent and potent woman who is forced into a submissive, 'female' role – an action which unleashes bitterness, anguish, evil and destruction." [Auerbach, 30]

Much of the ambiguity regarding Guðrún's influence over the events that frame her life – at least those events discussed thus far – lies in the fact that, whether her wishes are granted or ignored, the decision is always made through the agency of a male guardianship or counsel. Perhaps an examination of the way that her marriages end will shed some light on this ambiguity, and, though unlikely to resolve, it will at least add to the understanding of its nature. However, before approaching this subject, it remains to explore the negotiation process that precedes the marriages of Hallgerðr Hǫskuldsdóttir, which in large part parallels the experience of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir

A GIRL OF SUFFICIENT MEANS

In the previous chapter, Hallgerðr's honourable paternal lineage was discussed at length, and, likewise highlighted, was the ominous absence of any mention of her maternal genealogy, despite the fact that several of these ancestors appear later in the saga. It seems that, in equal measure, those personality traits that Hallgerðr inherits from both her mother's and her father's families come into play in the events leading up to her first marriage to Þorvaldr Ósvífrsson, a man who shares not only a name with Guðrún's first husband, but also the proclivity to draw forth disdain from a young wife who thinks her father has given her a rotten deal. However, in this case it is quite difficult to determine – perhaps left intentionally ambiguous – the source of her strong-willed opposition to the marriage, whether her reaction upon hearing of the man to whom her father has betrothed his young daughter, is driven by the pride that she has inherited from her father's noble line, or from the disruptive nature passed down from her mother's ancestors.²⁸

²⁸ Though I will restrict myself here to only the three marriages of Hallgerðr in *Njáls saga*, it is interesting

Þorvaldr is twice warned, once by his own father, and once by his future father-in-law Hǫskuldr, that a marriage with Hallgerðr would not be an easy one, but he nonetheless pursues it with vigour.²⁹ It seems that Þorvaldr's alacrity to secure Hallgerðr as his wife is matched only by Hǫskuldr's eagerness to find a husband for his daughter, as the narrator explains, „spurði Hǫskuldr dóttur sína ekki eptir, því at honum var hugr á at gipta hana.“ (31) [Hoskuld did not consult his daughter, because he had made up his mind to marry her off. (13)] Hallgerðr is predictably upset when she learns what her father had done, and expresses her disdain to the point where, „ok fannsk þat á qllu, at hon þóttisk vargefin.“ [It was perfectly plain that she considered herself ill-matched. (14)]³⁰ Though compelled to comply with the arrangement that Hǫskuldr has made, Hallgerðr, upon receiving a sharp reprimand from her father, offers him the following rejoinder: „Mikill er metnaðr yðvarr frænda, ... ok er þat eigi undarligt, at ek hafa nökkurn.“ (31) [You kinsmen have plenty of pride ... and it's not surprising if I've inherited some of it. (14)]

While Hǫskuldr, in discussing the proposed nuptials with Þorvaldr and Ósvífr, cites his daughter's difficult character as a potential stumbling block, a remark that, along

to note that, according to Thomas Bredsdorff, this saga “has more misguided marriages, forced marriages, hasty marriages, and broken marriages than any of the others.” [Bredsdorff, 74]

²⁹ Þorvaldr's father Ósvífr, on hearing that his son is intent on pursuing Hallgerðr, tells him that, „þat mun ykkur ekki mjók hent, ... hon er kona skapstór, en þú harðlyndr ok óvægin.“ (30) [Things are not likely to be easy between you two ... She is a strong minded woman and you are stubborn and unyielding. (13)] And when Þorvaldr persists, Ósvífr tells his son that, „Þú átt ok mest í hættu.“ (30) [You're the one taking the risk. (13)] For his part, when approached by father and son at his farm, Hǫskuldr disclaims the negotiation, stating that, „Kunnigt er mér um hag ykkar, en ek vil enga vél at ykkur draga, at dóttir mín er hǫrð í skapi. En um yfirlit hennar ok kurteisi meguð þit sjálfir sjá.“ (31) [I'm aware of your standing, and I don't want to deceive you about the fact that my daughter has a difficult character. As for her looks and manners, you can see for yourselves. (13)]

³⁰ Ursula Dronke summarizes the issue as follows: “She had been genuinely hurt when her father ... married her off to the first suitor who came, without consulting her, in order to get her out of the house because her temper was proving too sharp.” [Dronke, 15]

with the seeming desperation to rid himself of the obligation of his daughter, could be read in conjunction with his brother's earlier comment regarding his niece's *þjófsaugu* [thief's eyes], allowing that he attributes Hallgerðr's difficult character to her mother's family. Hallgerðr sees things quite differently, and suggests that the arrogance and pride that she has inherited from her father, and his kinsmen, is what really keeps her from acquiescing happily to their wishes. However, the saga remains ambiguous on this front, but in the end, there is perhaps little surprise that, like Guðrún's first marriage, Hallgerðr's proves unsuccessful, and, again like Guðrún – as I will discuss below –, Hallgerðr successfully navigates her way out of the marriage, with the help of her foster-father Þjóstólfr.³¹

Hallgerðr's second husband Glúmr enters in marked contrast to his less honourable predecessor. He is introduced along with his two brothers, and their father, suggesting a strong kingroup, and it is said that they, „váru virðingamenn miklir ok vel auðgir at fé.“ (40) [were men of high esteem and great wealth. (18)] Contrasting Þorvaldr, who was wealthy, but not a hero, Glúmr, „hafði verit lengi í fõrum; hann var mikill maðr ok sterkr ok fríðr sýnum.“ (41) [had been a long time on trading voyages. He was big and strong and handsome. (18)] Glúmr, as Þorvaldr had before him, was obliged to dodge several warnings from his brother Þórarinn, as well as a disclaimer from

³¹ Hallgerðr's uncle Hrótr, much as he had earlier predicted her troublesome nature, shies away from, but, out of respect for his brother, dares not disrupt, the marriage suit. But he does not fail to offer the following prediction, which ultimately proves true: „Betr þætti mér, at ek kæma hvergi í nánd, ... því at hvárigu mun í þessu kaupi gipta, honum né henni.“ (32) [I much prefer not having anything at all to do with this, ... because there will be no luck for either partner in this marriage, neither for him nor for her. (14)] Similarly, Hallgerðr's foster-father Þjóstólfr offers her his absolute loyalty with the following promise: „þú munt vera gefin í annat sinn, ok muntú þá eptir spurð; því at alls staðar mun ek gera at þínu skapi, nema þar er faðir þinn er eða Hrótr.“ (32) [You will be married a second time, and then you will be consulted, for I'll carry out your every wish – unless it touches your father or Hrut. (14)] Þjóstólfr later fulfils his promise, the circumstances of which will be in the next chapter.

Höskuldr, reminding the men of the failure of Hallgerð's first marriage. Thus, the negotiation process here follows along a similar path as that of the first marriage, however, one important difference is the presence of Hrútr, who is known to be „tillagagóðr inna stærri mála.“ (6) [ready with good advice on important matters. (2)]³² Hrútr wisely offers a stipulation with regard to Þjóstólfr – in order to keep him in check – and then he says,

„Skal nú ok eigi svá fara sem fyrr, at Hallgerð sé leynd; skal hon nú vita allan þenna kaupmála ok sjá Glúm ok ráða sjálf, hvárt hon vill eiga hann eða eigi, ok megir hon eigi qðrum kenna, þó at eigi verði vel; skal þetta allt vélalaust vera.“ (43)

[Also, this will not be done as before, with Hallgerd in the dark. She is to know all the terms of the contract now and meet Glum and decide for herself whether or not she wishes to marry him. Then she will not be able to blame others if things do not turn out well. Everything must be free of deceit. (19)]³³

When Hallgerð is sent for, she arrives with two women accompanying her, her dress is described in a very detailed and fine manner, and she takes a prominent seat between her uncle and her father.³⁴ This process stands in stark contrast to the negotiation surrounding

³² In fact, in light of the terms set in the second marriage, it seems clear that it would have proven wise to have consulted his brother in the negotiation of Hallgerð's first marriage when, shortly after that marriage has been arranged, it is clearly stated that Hrútr was absent throughout the process, when Höskuldr tells his brother, „ok vilda ek, frændi, at þér þætti eigi verr, þótt ek gerða þér eigi orð, þá er kaupit rézk.“ (32) [and I hope that you don't take it amiss that I didn't send you word when the contract was being discussed. (14)]

³³ To further stress the importance of Hrútr's wise counsel in the negotiation process, before Glúmr and his brother formally bring their case to Höskuldr, Hallgerð's father consults his brother in the hope of unravelling the purpose of the men's visit. Hrútr responds: „Við þik munu þó vera ørendin, ... þeir munu biðja Hallgerðar, dóttur þinnar, eða hversu munt þú svara?“ „Hvat þykki þér ráð?“ sagði Höskuldr. „Vel skalt þú svara ok segja þó kost ok löst á konunni,“ segir Hrútr.“ (42) [“But they must have some purpose in coming to you, ... They will ask for the hand of your daughter Hallgerd. How will you answer them?” “What would seem best to you?” asked Höskuld. “Answer them nicely, and tell them the good and the bad sides of the woman,” said Hrútr.” (19)] Also, after having set the provision regarding Þjóstólfr, and having set the condition that Hallgerd will decide for herself whether or not she wishes to marry Glúmr, Þórarinn says that, „Nú er sem jafnan, at þat mun best gegna, at þín ráð sé höfð.“ (43) [Now, as always, it's best that your advice be followed. (19)]

³⁴ Hallgerð's arrival is described as follows: „Þá var sent eptir Hallgerði, ok kom hon þangat ok tvær konur með henni; hon hafði yfir sér vefjarmottul blán ok var undir í rauðum skarlatskyrtli ok silfrbelti um sik, en hárit ofan á bringuna tveim megin, ok drap hon undir belti sér. Hon settisk niðr í milli þeira Hrúts ok fjoðursins;“ [Then Hallgerd was sent for, and she came there with two other women. She was wearing a woven *black* cloak and beneath it a scarlet tunic, with a silver belt around her waist. Her hair was hanging down on both sides of her breast and she had tucked it under her belt. She sat down between Hrútr and her

her first marriage wherein Hallgerðr learns of the marriage settlement only after it has been sealed. Also, after the terms of her first marriage have been settled, the narrator provides no setting, or ceremony upon which the news is relayed to Hallgerðr, merely stating that, „Hoskuldr sagði Hallgerði kaupit.“ (31) [Hoskuld told Hallgerd about the marriage contract. (13)] Before her second marriage has been settled, the narrator makes sure to establish an elaborate scene in which Hallgerðr, accompanied by two other women, and her dress described in detail, takes a prominent seat at the table with all of the others – all men – who have set to the task of securing this marriage.³⁵ In other words, the narrator, just as Glúmr, Hoskuldr, and Þórarinn follow Hrútr's wisdom, is precise in fulfilling his intention to show Hallgerðr is an equal partner in this negotiation, and, in her speech and her actions, she is equally aware of the consideration and the honour that she has been afforded.³⁶

After Hallgerðr enters the meeting, Glúmr explains his intentions, closing his statement with the following stipulation: „en ef þér er engi hugr á kaupum við oss, þá viljum vér ekki um tala.“ (44) [If you have no heart for a marriage contract with us, we will say no more about it. (20)] Hallgerðr then replies,

father.” (19-20)] See n.14, Ch.III above.

³⁵ Ursula Dronke writes that, Hallgerðr “takes delight in the grand manner. To show her approval about the fact that she is being consulted about her second marriage, she comes as a lady of rank, with two women in attendance, in brilliant clothing, her fabulous long hair – so long that she could hide herself in it – caught demurely in her silver belt. She performs the opening move in the game of manners perfectly, placing herself between father and uncle, greeting everyone with courteous words...” [Dronke, 15-16]

³⁶ It is said that upon taking her seat, „hon [Hallgerðr] kvaddi þá alla góðum orðum ok mælti vel ok skórliga ok spurði tíðenda.“ (44) [(She) greeted everyone with kind words. She spoke well and boldly and asked for the news. (20)] Magnús Sigurðsson believed that this episode in *Njáls saga*, dealing with Hallgerðr and Glúmr's marriage, was so different and distinct in its characterization of an otherwise harsh-tempered and bellicose woman, that it must have had a different source from the other parts of the story dealing with Hallgerðr. [Magnús Sigurðsson, “Hallgerðr í Njálu” (*Tímarit Þjóðræknisfélags Íslendinga* 13, 1931) 75-88.] On the other hand, Robert Cook suggests that the fact that Hallgerðr seems to be another person in her second marriage is exactly the point - that “she is capable of change, depending on the way she is treated.” [Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 18]

„Veit ek, at þit eruð mikils háttar menn, bræðr, ok veit ek, at ek mun nú miklu betr gefin en fyrr; en vita vel ek, hvat þér hafið um talat eða hvé mjök þér hafið fram mælt málinu. En svá lízk mér á þik, at ek mun þér vel unnandi verða, ef vit komum skapi saman.“ (44)

[I know that you brothers are men of great standing, and I know that I will now be much better married than before, but I want to know what you have already discussed and how far you have come in deciding things. I like you well enough that I could come to love you, as long as our tempers match. (20)]

This statement echoes back to Hrútr's earlier stipulation that Hallgerðr should be aware of all of the terms of the contract, and should not be kept in the dark. After having heard the terms, and having them confirmed by her father, Hallgerðr tells her father and her uncle,

„Svá vel sem þér hefir farit til mín, faðir, um þetta mál, ok þér, Hrútrm at ek vil þetta at yrrku ráði gera, ok skal þessi kaupmáli vera sem þit hafð stofnat.“ (44)

[You've treated me so well in this matter, father, and you, Hrut, that I'm willing to agree to your plan. The marriage terms shall be as you have determined. (20)]³⁷

Hrútr's counsel proves exceptionally prudent here, Hallgerðr and Glúmr are engaged without reservations, and it is later stated that, „Þau kómu vel ásamt, Glúmr ok Hallgerðr,“ (46) [Glum and Hallgerðr got along well together, (21)] and when asked by her foster-father Þjóstólfr how things are going between them, Hallgerðr herself replies, „Vel er um ástir okkrar.“ (47) [Yes, our love goes well. (21)]

Much like Guðrún's second marriage – to Þórðr – the success of Hallgerðr's second marriage seems intrinsically linked to her approval of the match. Furthermore, Hallgerðr, unlike Guðrún, is explicitly consulted in the negotiation process, while it is only stated that Guðrún raised no objections to her second marriage, although it is likely that she would have consented openly if given the opportunity. This proves to be the

³⁷ Thomas Bredsdorff notes that Hǫskuldr, in this instance, has “by the third time become wiser,” having twice gotten into trouble arranging the affairs of others: his brother Hrútr's marriage to Unnr, and his daughter Hallgerðr's first marriage, which both stand as “purely economic arrangement[s] between suitor and family.” [Bredsdorff, 77] Note again Hrútr prescience when, upon first seeing Unnr, the woman that Hǫskuldr has picked out for his brother, he says that he likes her well enough, „en eigi veit ek, hvárt vit eigum heill saman.“ (8) [but I don't know whether we will be happy together. (3)]

happiest of Hallgerðr's three marriages, although it does not fail to end in a similar fashion to the first. Hallgerðr's third, and perhaps final marriage, her marriage to Gunnarr Hámundarson is doubtlessly the most famous of the three.³⁸

Upon returning to Iceland from his travels abroad, the heroic Gunnarr, despite some reluctance due to the foreboding words of his wise friend Njáll, rides to the Alþing in company.³⁹ He is greeted warmly by many men, and tells them stories about his time abroad, and then one day, while walking from *logberg* [the Law Rock] Gunnarr passes by a group of well-dressed women, among whom walks Hallgerðr, the leading woman, and the best dressed. She introduces herself, and the saga continues,

Hon mælti til hann djarfliga ok bað hann segja sér frá ferðum sínum, en hann kvazk ekki mundu varna henni máls; settusk þau þá niðr ok tóluðu. Hon var svá búin, at hon var í rauðum kyrtli, ok var búningr mikill; hon hafði yfir sér skarlatsskikkju, ok var búin hlöðum í skaut niðr; hárit tók ofan á bringu henni ok var bæði mikit ok fagrt. Gunnarr var í tignarklæðum þeim, er Haraldr konungr Gormsson gaf honum; hann hafði ok hringinn á hendi, Hákonarnaut. Þau tóluðu lengi hátt. Þar kom, er hann spurði, hvárt hon væri ógefin.(85)

[She spoke boldly to him and asked him to tell her about his travels. He said he would not refuse her, and they sat down and talked.

She was dressed like this: she had on a red gown, heavily ornamented, and over that a scarlet cloak trimmed with lace down to the hem. Her hair came down to her breasts and was both thick and fair. Gunnar was wearing the stately garments given him by King Harald Gormsson, and on his arm he had a bracelet from Earl Hakon.

They talked aloud for a long time, and at last he asked if she were unmarried(37)]

³⁸ Ármann Jakobsson notes that it is hard to ascertain whether Hallgerðr's marriage to Gunnarr is her last as she "simply vanishes from the saga, last seen at Grjóta repeating her somewhat tired old 'Old Beardless' joke." [Ármann Jakobsson, "Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*" (Viator 38:1, 2007) 209 n.79]

³⁹ „Njáll spurði Gunnar, hvárt hann mundi til þings ríða. Gunnarr segir, at hann mundi ríða, ok spyrr, hvárt Njáll mundi ríða, en hann kvezk eigi ríða mundu - „ok svá vilda ek, at þú gerðir.“ (84) [Njal asked Gunnar whether he would ride to the Thing. Gunnar said that he would and asked whether Njal was riding. He said he was not - "and I would wish you do the same." (36)]

⁴⁰ Although the emphasis of the character descriptions in this scene is on clothing, and on Hallgerðr's hair, it is interesting to note, with respect to the earlier observation regarding the physical descriptions of Hallgerðr throughout the saga, and their emphasis on her dress (see n.14, Ch.3 above), that Gunnarr, on his entrance into the saga is described as, „vænn at yfirliti ok ljóslitaðr, réttnefjaðr ok hafit upp í framanvert, bláeygr ok snareygr ok roði í kinnunum; harit mikit, gult, ok för vel.“ (53) [... handsome and fair of skin and had a

As in the case of her second marriage, contrary to that of her first, the narrator does not fail to elaborate upon the scene surrounding the marriage negotiation. Although, as mentioned above, the Alþing is one of the established performance spaces for men in the sagas, where women are generally unable to exercise much power, here Hallgerðr is not only present at the Alþing, but manages to secure a private meeting with Gunnarr. When they first meet, Hallgerðr approaches the, apparently, lone Gunnarr as the head of a troop of well-dressed women, establishing her high standing position. Furthermore, the fine and ornamental dress of both characters is described in detail, showing their equal worth as partners, but perhaps also revealing the predominant superficiality of their attraction.⁴¹ And finally, after speaking together for a long time, Gunnarr asks whether she is unmarried, and,

Hon segir, at svá væri, - „ok er þat ekki margra at hætta á þat,“ segir hon. „Þykki þér hvergi fullkosta?“ segir hann. „Eigi er þat,“ segir hon, „en mannvond mun ek vera.“ „Hversu munt þú því svara, ef ek bið þín?“ segir Gunnarr. „Þat mun þér ekki í hug,“ segir hon. „Eigi er þat,“ segir hann. „Ef þér er nokkurr hugr á,“ segir hon. „þá finn þú fõður minn.“ Síðan skilðu þau talit. (86)

[She said that she was – “and marrying me is not a risk that many would take.”

“Is there no one good enough for you?” he said.

“It's not that,” she said, “but I'm very demanding when it comes to men.”

“How would you answer if I were to ask you?” said Gunnar.

“That can't be on your mind,” she said.

“But it is,” he said.

“if you are thinking of that,” she said, “then you must go and see my father.”

With this they ended their talk. (37)]⁴²

straight nose, turned up at its tip. He was blue-eyed and keen-eyed and ruddy-cheeked. His hair was thick, blond, and well-combed. (24)]

⁴¹ “...at this point the author delays presenting the dialogue in order to describe their clothing. It is as though he wishes to freeze for a moment a tableau of the two handsome young people getting acquainted at their leisure. ... By thus freezing the moment for us, giving us a static portrait of their external appearance, the author raises a suspicion that their attraction is superficial.” [Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 12]

⁴² Ursula Dronke, with respect to this conversation, that Gunnarr and Hallgerðr “are quickly at ease with each other, absorbed in conversation ... and attracted, as we can guess from the oblique touches of flirtation in their first exchange of words on the subject of marriage.” [Dronke, 19] Interestingly enough, this, their

This passage between Gunnarr and Hallgerðr is striking for many reasons, the least of which is in examining Hallgerðr's possible motives for conversing in such an elusive manner.

The dialogue begins in a very straightforward manner, when Gunnar poses what is blatantly a yes or no question, but things quickly diverge when Hallgerðr ominously adds, „ok er þat ekki margra at hætta á þat,“ (86) [and marrying me is not a risk that many would take. (37)] – it is also at this point that the dialogue moves into direct discourse.⁴³ On first glance this might seem a warning to Gunnarr, a blow-off, a suggestion that he is barking up the wrong tree, but his response suggests that, whether a warning or not, he is enticed by her mysterious answer, and responds to it as if it were something of a challenge.⁴⁴ Likewise, his answer reveals his ignorance to her background, which is suggested earlier when the two first meet where it is said that, „En er þau fundusk, kvaddi hon þegar Gunnar. Hann tók vel kveðju hennar ok spurði, hvat kvenna hon væri.“ (85) [When they met, she greeted Gunnar at once. He took the greeting well and asked who she was. (37)] In this instance it seems that Hallgerðr already knows who Gunnarr is, but he is ignorant of her identity, which is even more glaring when considering the extensive dealings that he has had with her father and her uncle.⁴⁵ Hallgerðr quickly dismisses Gunnarr's implication of unjustified pride-fulness,

each other, absorbed in conversation ... and attracted, as we can guess from the oblique touches of flirtation in their first exchange of words on the subject of marriage.” [Dronke, 19] Interestingly enough, this, their very first interaction, “is the only extended dialogue between Gunnarr and Hallgerðr presented in the saga.” [Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 12]

⁴³ Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 12.

⁴⁴ Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 12; Dronke, 19.

⁴⁵ Chapters 21-4 describe Gunnarr's successful quest to reclaim his kinswoman's dowry from her ex-husband Hrútr, which he accomplished under the counsel of Njáll.

[demanding or exacting] when it comes to men. Ursula Dronke suggests that Hallgerðr's applies a double-meaning in using the word *mannvond* in this instance, suggesting both that she will be very particular in her choice of husband, and, at the same time, that she will prove to be a severe test for any man that becomes her husband.⁴⁶ If in fact this is true, Gunnarr seems unaware of the danger involved in her answer, and is rather enchanted by the uncommon nature of this woman, and by the challenge that she seems to present to him. As for Hallgerðr, she seems quite keen to offer herself up to Gunnarr's scrutiny, in a sense leading Gunnarr to seek explanation as to why she poses a risk in marriage, what makes her demanding and difficult, and perhaps even dissuading him from pursuing her. However, in speaking in such a coy and witty manner, she does not fail to entice Gunnarr, while at the same time freeing herself from any later claims of misrepresenting herself, and thus it is possible that her suggestive language, her act of revealing and retreating, are designed to stimulate Gunnarr to accept the challenge of marrying this difficult and enigmatic woman.⁴⁷

This reading is supported by the negotiation that follows between Gunnarr and Hallgerðr's father, Hǫskuldr, and her uncle Hrótr. At the end of their conversation, Hallgerðr directs Gunnarr's proposal to her father,⁴⁸ and after seeking him out, Hrótr, who is present at the meeting, tells his brother, „Ekki þykki mér þetta jafnræði,“ (86) [This doesn't seem to me to be an even match, (38)] further qualifying his assessment: „Því mun ek svara þér um þetta, er satt er: Þú ert maðr vaskr ok vel at þér, en hon er blandin

⁴⁶ Dronke, 20.

⁴⁷ Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 13.

⁴⁸ Although, as is the case with Guðrún after the death of her second husband, Hallgerðr, by this point in the saga is a twice widowed woman. (see note 161 above) However, there is no mention that, as a widow, Hallgerðr is able to answer for herself in this matter, but rather, she informs Gunnarr that if he is thinking of asking her to him, then, as cited in their conversation at the Alþing, he must seek out her father.

mun ek svara þér um þetta, er satt er: Þú ert maðr vaskr ok vel at þér, en hon er blandin mjök, ok vil ek þik í engu svíkja.“ (86) [I'll answer this with the truth: you are a valiant and worthy man, but she has a mixed character, and I don't want to deceive you in any way. (38)] Hallgerðr's male guardians again realize the importance of full disclosure in the negotiation process, and make sure that nothing remains hidden, neither from Gunnarr, nor from Hallgerðr, and their admission of her mixed nature seems to suggest their awareness of her variable behaviour, as witnessed in her earlier marriages, and that it is based largely upon the manner in which she is treated.⁴⁹ Robert Cook suggests that the arrangement with Hallgerðr's family “is more by concession than by whole-hearted approval,” and so Hrútr and Hǫskuldr's forthrightness regarding Hallgerðr's past could be read as an attempt to dissuade Gunnarr from pursuing the negotiation further.⁵⁰ Gunnarr is first angry at Hrútr's response, suggesting that his reluctance is based on their earlier enmity,⁵¹ but Hrútr quickly replies, „Eigi er þat, ... meir er hitt, at ek sé, at þú mátt nú ekki við gera.“ (86) [It's not that, ... but rather that I see you cannot help yourself. (38)]⁵² Gunnarr continues to push for a settlement, and Hrútr replies, „Veit ek, at svá

⁴⁹ Zoe Borovsky offers a more subtle reading, and compares the usage of the adjective *blandinn* (f. *blandin*) in this case with other occurrences throughout medieval Icelandic literature – including the Eddic poem *Lokasenna*, the skaldic poem *Ynglingatal* from the ninth-century, written by Þjóðólfr ór Hvín, from Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*, and in Sturla Þórðarson's version of *Landnámabók* [*Sturlubók*]. She suggests that, “the saga-writer used the word *blandinn* because of its archaic, poetic connotations, and because it was associated with Loki, “giantness,” and paganism.” She concludes that, “Hallgerðr is *blandin* in the same sense as being “tainted” be her adherence to values of the past. She demands that her husbands live up to the old “group” system and perform as “whole-hearted” Eddic heroes even though times have changed. In addition, the *blandin* accusation takes on overtones of influence from Loki, ... [and] Hallgerðr comes to stand for a “giant” past that disrupts, “mixes,” taints, or poisons the new, more peaceful order.” [Zoe Borovsky, ““En hon er blandin mjök”: Women and Insults in Old Norse Literature” (*Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, eds. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson, London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 1-14.]

⁵⁰ Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 13.

⁵¹ See n.45, Ch.IV above.

⁵² Here Cook writes, “Hǫskuldr, always short of good counsel, wisely refers the matter to Hrútr, who recognizes that Gunnarr has no control over himself and that this is a match based on desire which cannot be prevented.” [Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 13-14]

that the two of you yearn for this match, and it is you two who take the greatest risk as to how it works out. (38)] However, Hrútr does not stop here, and perhaps as a last ditch effort,

Hrútr segir Gunnari allt um skaplyndi Hallgerðar ófregit, ok þótti Gunnari þat fyrst ærit mart, er áfátt var, en þar kom um síðir, at saman fell kaupmáli þeira. Var þá sent eftir Hallgerði, ok var þá um talat svá, at hon var við. Létu þeir nú enn sem fyrr, at hon festi sik sjálf. Skyldi þetta boð vera at Hlíðarenda ok skyldi fara fyrst leyniliga, en þó kom þar, er allir vissu. (87)

[Hrut told Gunnar, without being asked, everything about Hallgerd's character, and though it seemed to Gunnar at first that there were many faults, it finally came about that they made a marriage contract. Then Hallgerd was sent for, and it was talked about in her presence. As before, they let her betroth herself. The wedding feast was to take place at Hlidarendi. This was to be secret at first, but soon everybody knew about it. (38)]

Hrútr does not stop in merely suggesting his nieces dubious past, here it is stated that he tells Gunnarr, without solicitation, everything about Hallgerðr's character. Although Gunnarr seemed to approach Hallgerðr's earlier, esoteric comments regarding her troubled history almost as though it were a challenge to overcome, it seems that upon discovering the concrete details of her past, through Hrútr's comprehensive explication, he is rapidly dismayed.⁵³ But, as he has been so aggressively and proudly insistent on securing an engagement with Hallgerðr, withdrawing at this point would surely make him appear quite foolish, and provide much ammunition for public ridicule.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, they eventually come to an agreement, Hallgerðr is summoned, and as in her second marriage, where full disclosure was of equal import, she betroths herself to Gunnarr. Then, the narrator states that the wedding feast will be held at Gunnarr's farm at Hlíðarendi, but that, strangely, it was to be kept secret at first, but eventually the story got

⁵³ Dronke, 20.

⁵⁴ Dronke, 20. Cook and Dronke's readings diverge at this point, as Cook suggests that Gunnarr regards Hrútr's explication of his niece's "explicit flaws as a challenge rather than a matter for serious consideration." [Cook, "Gunnarr and Hallgerðr," 14]

Hlíðarendi, but that, strangely, it was to be kept secret at first, but eventually the story got out. Together, his late reluctance to follow through, and his realization that his pursuit of Hallgerðr was coloured more by the florid, but unsealed pastels of exotic infatuation, rather than the duller, yet weather-tested temperas of love, the whole affair has become an embarrassment for Gunnarr.⁵⁵ Immediately afterwards, Gunnarr rides to Bergþórshváll to tell Njáll about the marriage contract, upon which his friend portends trouble, although he seems secure in the fact that, although it will come close, she will never ruin their friendship. And so, from the start, their relationship follows the path of deterioration and destruction, beginning with the negotiation itself, wherein Gunnarr first approaches the task with high spirit and vigour, only to darken when he learns the truth about Hallgerðr, and to the point where he intends to keep their wedding feast hidden from the public. Not long afterwards, fulfilling Njáll's prophecy, Gunnarr and Hallgerðr's marriage is filled with trouble and misfortune, and like her two earlier marriages, though in closer parallel with her first, this union ends with the death of her husband.

Although tightly focused in scope, this examination of marriage negotiations and betrothals has shown several of the myriad ways that a marriage can begin in the sagas, as well as the difficulties in, and benefits of securing a successful arrangement; although, in this case, it remains that what is good for the goose is not always good for the gander. It has also shown the extents, as well as the limits, of the influence that women were able to exercise over the negotiation process, and the difficulty they faced in attempting to subvert the intentions of the patriarchy. Then, if it is true, as it seems, that a woman's

⁵⁵ Dronke, 20. Again, contrary to Dronke, Cook states only that, "For some obscure reason, the saga says that the wedding feast is meant to be a secret, but of course this is an impossibility." [Cook, "Gunnarr and Hallgerðr," 14]

fit, then it remains to consider who was steering the boat after the wedding feast, and, more important in the present context, if unhappy with the direction of her journey what options remained to an dissatisfied married woman? Was she to sit quietly and tough out the ride, to man the tiller herself, or to take drastic measures, to scuttle the ship, that is, to find a way to otherwise end the marriage?

CHAPTER V - MARRIAGE ENDINGS

*You may wonder what's the reason for this
great big smile;
Say, I haven't been so happy, in the longest
while!
Got a big load off my mind, here's the
papers, sealed and signed;
- Ethel Waters ¹*

*Now the scaffold was high,
and eternity neared.
She stood in the crowd,
and shed not a tear.
- The Band ²*

While this study has focused on only three women from the sagas, between them they count no less than eight marriages, and thus logic, along with the monogamic nature of the society of the sagas,³ seems to dictate that several of these marriages were likely to have ended prematurely, and, as probability would also allow, at least a few under less than congenial circumstances. Of the three women, Auðr counts the least number of husbands, having married only Gísli, although that is not to say that their marriage does not encounter difficulties.

I'M STICKING WITH YOU

In an early, and a pivotal scene, in *Gísla saga*, wherein Auðr and Þorkell's wife, Ásgerðr, sit sewing in the *dyngja* [women's room *or* bower] and Þorkell, upon waking

¹ Channing Pollack and Jack Yellen, "No Man's Mamma" (Rec. 1925-6, *Ethel Waters 1925-1926*, Ethel Waters, 1997) CD.

² Danny Dill and Marijohn Wilkin, "Long Black Veil" (Rec. 1968, *Music from Big Pink*, The Band, prod. John Simon, 1968) CD.

³ According to Jenny Jochens, in historical Old Norse society, "marriage was not necessarily monogamous, and in fact kings and powerful men were allowed several wives." [Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995) 20] However, the sagas offer only rare glimpses of extramarital affairs, and, although there are distinct instances of something along the lines of formal concubinage, such is this case with Melkorka in *Laxdæla saga*, who is purchased as a slave and brought back to Iceland by Hǫskuldr (Chapter 13), marriage in the sagas is mostly monogamous. [Jenny Jochens, "The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?" (*Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Tucker, New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989) 102; Jenny Jochens, "The Illicit Love Visit: An Archaeology of Old Norse Sexuality" (*Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1:3, Jan. 1991) 361] For more on concubinage and polygyny in Old Norse society, see Clover, "The Politics of Scarcity;" and also, Karras, "Servitude and sexuality."

hears voices coming from the room, and listens in, laying close by,⁴ it soon comes to light that Ásgerðr is engaged in some sort of illicit affair with Auðr's brother Vésteinn. Although this scene acts as something of a starter pistol for the feud that pervades what remains of the saga, it is no less important in revealing some very notable events from the past, more specifically, from Auðr's past.

After hearing Auðr's remarks concerning the affair with Vésteinn, Ásgerðr is quick to respond, „Þat þykki mér eigi brigzl, ... þótt mér þykki Vésteinn góðr. Hitt var mér sagt, at þit Þorgrímr hittizk mjök opt, áðr en þú værir Gísla gefin.“ (30-1) [I cannot see anything wrong with my liking Vestein, ... What's more, I've heard tell that you and Thorgrim saw a lot of each other before you married Gisli. (509)] Then Auðr, defending herself against the suggested, nefarious implication, retorts, „Því fylgðu engir mannlestir, ... því at ek tók engan mann undir Gísla, at því fylgði neinn mannlostr.“ (31) [There was no shame in that, ... I was never unfaithful to Gisli and have therefore brought no disgrace upon him. (509-10)] Although only briefly mentioned – here, and no where else in the saga – the earlier “affair” between Auðr and Þorgrímr, two incredibly important characters in the saga, demands further attention.

⁴ Helga Kress notes that “a *dyngja* is a place with definite boundaries, which a real man does not enter.” And, as in the case of Þorkell, “the man belongs to the scene by being outside and listening with curiosity from the other side of the wall.” [Helga Kress, “Gender and Gossip in the Sagas” (*Sett och hört – en vänskrift tillägnad Kerstin Nordenstam på 65-årsdagen*, ed. Anna Grönberg et al, Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 2000) 195] Also of note, is a similar scene in *Njáls saga*, where it is said that, „Hallgerðr átti dyngju, ok sat hon þar optliga í; þar var þá Þorgerðr, dóttir hennar, ok Þráinn; þar var ok Sigmundur ok fjöldi kvenna. Gunnar var eigi þar né Kolskeggr.“ (112) [Hallgerd had a room in which she often sat, and her daughter Thorgerd and Thrain were there, as well as Sigmund and a number of women. Gunnar was not there, nor Kolskegg. (51)] Once again, this *dyngja*, “is a woman's place. The male heroes are absent, and the only men inside are completely in Hallgerd's power.” [Helga, “Gender and Gossip in the Sagas” 196] It is also related later in the scene, after Hallgerðr has Sigmundur compose several malicious verses concerning Gunnar's close friend Njáll and his sons, that, like Þorkell, „hann [Gunnar] hafði staðit fyrir framan dyngjuna ok heyrð öll orðtækin,“ [He had been standing outside the room and had heard all the words that had passed.] and when he enters Hallgerðr's *dyngja*, „Öllum brá við mjök, er hann sá inn ganga; þögnuðu þá allir, en áðr hafði þar verið hlátr mikill.“ (113) [They were all shocked when they saw him come in and they fell silent, but before there had been loud laughter. (52)]

As noted earlier, in the third chapter, whilst discussing character introductions in the sagas, the content of Auðr's entrance into the saga was heavily weighted toward her genealogical background rather than personal history or individual characterization, and it was followed quickly in mentioning her marriage to Gísli. However, the gossip-scene above offers a brief glimpse of Auðr's life before Gísli, wherein, as she confirms in her response to Ásgerðr claim, she and Þorgrímr had engaged in some sort of romantic relationship, or at least flirtation. As *Gísli saga* is, in large part, concerned primarily with the conflicts between personal and familial relationships, and the struggle between the attached, sometimes conflicting obligations,⁵ it seems entirely pertinent to wonder why, and how this relationship ended, and whether or not there were any detectable, resounding effects from this short-lived courtship. In the previous chapter, on the discussion of marriage negotiations, it seems that, no matter what the perceived legal, or social custom suggested with regard to a proposed marriage, a woman's male guardian had the ultimate say in the matter. And so in this case, supported by her comment that, „Því fylgðu engir mannlestir,“ [There was no shame in that (that being her relationship with Þorgrímr)], it seems entirely plausible that Auðr and Þorgrímr were, at one time, poised to be married, and, following common precedent, that her male guardians must have put a stop to things.⁶

⁵ According to Peter Foote, in *Gísli saga*, “we find interplay and open conflict between personal and family honour and personal and family love – the relationships could hardly be more complex, between brother and brother, brother and sister, man and wife, as well as between friends and blood-brothers ... The result is a sustained dramatic sequence of highly charged emotional relationships between central characters, expressed in much less restrained terms than usual in other sagas.” [Peter Foote, “An Essay on the Saga of Gísli and its Icelandic Background” (*The Saga of Gísli*, trans. George Johnston, London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1963) 106-7.]

⁶ Riti Kroesen, “The Enmity Between Þorgrímr and Vésteinn in the *Gísli saga Súrssonar*” (*Neophilologus* 66, 1982) 387. Kroesen suggests that the enmity caused by this, unseen but inferred, sequence of events allows the circumstances without which, “a strong-minded man [Þorgrímr] could not have been the will-less pawn of his friend [Þorkell].” (Kroesen, “The Enmity ...” 389) That is, this allowed Þorkell to enlist

It seems odd that any marriage proposal put forth by Þorgrímr would be rejected as becomes quite clear upon his marriage to Þórdís, the sister of Gísli and Þorkell, not to mention his status as a goði. Earlier in the saga, when Gísli and his family are still in Norway, the narrator explains just how protective, and selective Gísli is with regard to his sister Þórdís' suitors, when he kills several of them to protect her honour – as he, along with the girl's father Þorbjörn, sees it of course, as there is no mention of Þórdís approval or disapproval of her brother's actions.⁷ And so, it seems that were Þorgrímr an unsuitable match, Gísli would have at least refused the marriage, and perhaps would have taken to arms once again to preserve his notion of his sister's honour.⁸ But this does not happen, and it is related in the saga only that,

Þorgrími lízk systir þeira bræðra væn ok biðr hennar, ok því næst er hon honum fóstnuð, ok er þá þegar gort brúðkaupit, ok fylgir henni heiman Sæból, ok rézk þorgrímr vestr þangat ... (18-19)

Thorgrim, the son of Thorstein, found Thordis, the sister of Gisli and Thorkel, very attractive and asked for her hand in marriage. She was betrothed to him and the wedding followed soon in the wake of the betrothal. Thordis had the farm at Saebol as her dowry, and Thorgrim moved west to live there with her. (505)

Þorgrímr to kill Vésteinn on his behalf. However, it must be said that the *Gísla saga* – that is, the more popular shorter redaction – remains silent on the true identity of Vésteinn's killer, and Anne Holtsmark offers a compelling argument that Þorkell was in fact the real slayer. [Anne Holtsmark, “Studies in the Gísla Saga” (*Studia Novergica Ethnologica et Folkloristica* Vol. II, Oslo, 1956) 1-55.]

⁷ However, the first of his sister's suitors that Gísli kills is Bárðr, of whom, early in the saga, it is said, „Þat tóluðu sumir menn, at Bárðr fíflði Þórdísi Þorbjarnardóttir.“ (7) [There was a rumour abroad that Bard had seduced Thordis, Thorbjorn's daughter. (501)] Before things come to a head, it is also stated that, „Með þeim [Bárðr] Þorkatli var vingott, ok var hann í bragði með honum, en Gísla var óþakkt um tal þeira sem fœður hans.“ (7) [Thorkel was a close friend of Bard's and party to this liason. Gísli, however, was as deeply offended as his father by the way people were talking. (501)] And so, there is little surprise that, after Gísli has killed Bárðr, it is said that, „Aldri varð síðan jafnblítt með þeim bræðrum.“ (8) [There was never the same warmth between the two brothers after this. (502)] Thus, early in the saga, even if little is known of how Þórdís feels about her brother's actions, it is clear that Þorkell is far from steadfast in unanimous support of his family, and much of the early action foreshadows what is to come later in the saga.

⁸ In fact, later in the saga, after Þórdís implicates Gísli in the slaying of her husband Þorkell, he laments his sister's decision, stating, „Ok þóttumk ek eigi þess verðr frá henni, því at ek þykkjumk þat lýst hafa nokkurum sinnum, at mér hefir eigi hennar óvirðing betri þótt en sjáfls mín.“ (62) [I don't think I deserved this from her ... I though I made it clear several times that her honour meant no less to me than my own. (526)]

With Þorbjörn súrr – Gísli, Þorkell and Þórdís' father – having passed on, the guardianship of his daughter would thus be left to her brothers, and it seems quite clear that they held no objections to her marrying Þórgrímr, and, moreover, they even gifted the married couple the farm at Sæból that Gísli had built on their arrival in Haukadalsr. If this interpretation holds water, it seems that Þórgrímr would certainly hold a degree of animosity toward the men of Auðr's family, more specifically Vésteinn, for putting a stop to he and Auðr earlier relationship, but regardless of this, it is quite clear that Guðrún and Hallgerðr are not the only women with storied pasts.

As mentioned above, Gísli is Auðr's only husband throughout the saga, and though their marriage does end prematurely, that is, with the slaying of Gísli, an event by which she is greatly aggrieved,⁹ she nevertheless provides an interesting study in the way that she refuses to abandon a marriage that has become considerably impractical. After Gísli has been outlawed, and his pursuers, led by Eyjólf Þórðarson, have several times come up short in their search for him, they develop a new tactic, and it is said that,

... settisk Eyjólf enn á tal við Auði. Hann tekr svá til orðs: „Ek vil eiga kaup við þik, Auðr, ... at þú seg mér til Gísla, en ek mun gefa þér þrjú hundruð silfrs, þau sem ek hefi tekit til hæfuðs honum. Þú skalt ok eigi við vera, er vér tókum hann af lífi. Þat skal ok fylgja, at ek mun fá þér ráðahag þann, at öllu sé betri en sjá hefir verit. Máttu ok at þat líta, ... hversu óhallkvæmt þér verðr at liggja í eyðifirði þessum ok hljóta þat af óhöppum Gísla ok sjá aldri frændr ok nauðleytamenn.“ (99)

[... Eyjolf sat down to talk to Aud, and these were his words - “I want to make a deal with you, Aud, ... You tell me where Gísli is and I will give you three hundred pieces of silver, which I have received as the price on his head, and you will not be present when I take his life. In addition, I will arrange a marriage for you that will be superior in every way to this one. And you must consider, ...

⁹ At the end of the saga, it is stated that, „Þær Auðr ok Gunnhildr fara til Danmerkr í Heiðabæ, tóku þær við trú ok gengu suðr ok kómu eigi apr.“ (118) [Aud and Gunnhild went to Hedeby in Denmark, took the Christian faith and then went on a pilgrimage to Rome. They never returned. (557)] which can certainly be read to suggest strong feelings of mourning.

how impractical it would be for you to linger in this deserted fjord and suffer from Gísli's ill fortune, never seeing your family and kinfolk again. (547)]

Auðr is quick to respond to Eyjólfr, telling him, „Þar þykki mér óvænst um, ... at vér verðim um þat sátt, at þú fáir mér þat gjaforð, at mér þykki jafnt við þetta.“ (99) [I don't expect, ... that we'll reach agreement on your ability to find me as good a match as this one. (547)] But then, surprisingly, she continues, „En þó er þat satt, sem mælt er, at fé er bezt eptir feigan, ok lát mik sjá, hvárt fé þetta er svá mikit ok frítt sem þú segir.“ (99) [Yet it's true what they say, “death's best consolation is wealth”, so let me see whether this silver is as plentiful or as fine as you say. (547)] whereupon she proceeds to count out the silver. Guðríðr, her foster-daughter is distraught at the scene, and quickly rushes to alert Gísli, telling him, „Fóstra mín er nú vitlaus orðin ok vill svíkja þik.“ (99) [My foster-mother has lost her senses and means to betray you. (547)] But Gísli, knowing his wife better than anyone else, reassures Guðríðr: „Ger þú þér gott í hug, því at eigi mun mér þat at fjörlesti verða, at Auðr blekki mik.“ (99) [Think only good thoughts, for my death will never be the result of Aud's treachery. (547)], and proceeds to speak a verse suggesting the same.¹⁰

Gísli faith in Auðr proves justified when, upon Guðríðr's return to the farmhouse, it is said that,

Eyjólfr hefir þá talit silfrit, en Auðr mælti: „Í engan stað er féit minna eða verra en þú hefir sagt. Ok mun þér nú þykkja ek heimilt eiga at gera af slíkt, er mér sýnisk.“ Eyjólfr tekur því glaðliga ok bað hana at vísu gera af slíkt, er hon vill. Auðr tekur nú féit ok lætr koma í einn stóran sjóð, stendr hon síðan upp ok rekr sjóðinn með silfrinu á nasar Eyjólf, svá at þegar stökkr blóð um hann allan, ok mælti: „Haf nú þetta fyrir auðtryggi þína ok hvert ógagn með. Engi ván var þér

¹⁰ „Segja menn, at manni / mjöð-Hlin hafi sínum, / fjarðar elgs, of folgit / fleyvangs hugi ranga. / En grjótoluns grátna / golffit vitum sitja; / hykkat hœlibrekku / hrannlogs at því sanna.“ (100) [The fjord-riders claim / the mead-goddess has sold / her man, with a mind / deep and treacherous as the sea. / But I know the land / of gold sits and weeps. / I do not think this true / of the proud sea-flame's wearer. (548)]

þess, at ek mynda selja bónda minn í hendr illmenni þínu. Haf nú þetta ok með bæði skómm ok klæki. Skaltu þat muna, vesall maðr, meðan þú lifir, at kona hefir barit þik. En þú munt ekki at heldr fá þat, er þú vildir.“ (100-1)

[By the that time Eyjolf had counted all the silver.

Aud spoke: “By no means is this silver any less or worse than you have said. And now you must agree that I may do with it whatever I choose.”

Eyjolf gladly agreed, and told her that, of course, she might do as she wished with it. Aud took the silver and put it in a large purse, then she stood up and struck Eyjolf on the nose, and blood spurted all over him.

“Take that for your gullibility,” she said, “and all the harm that ensues from it. There was never any hope that I would render my husband into your hands, you evil man. Take this now for your cowardice and your shame, and remember, you wretch, for as long as you live, that a woman has struck you. And you will not get what you desire either.” (548)]¹¹

At this, Eyjólf commands his men to seize and kill Auðr, famously dispensing the order, „Hafið hendr á hundinum ok drepi, þó at blauðr sé.“ (101) [Seize the cur and kill it, though it be a bitch. (548)]¹² However, Hávarðr, who „var vinsæll maðr, ok váru margir búnir at veita honum lið til þessa,“ (101) [was a popular man, and many of the party were ready to show him their support, (548)] puts a stop to this, and Eyjólf and his men leave the farm. Before Hávarðr leaves the farm, Auðr gives him a gold ring for his help, and

¹¹ This is, in fact, not the first time that Eyjólf has offered Auðr a reward for revealing her husband's whereabouts, for earlier in the saga, after having failed to locate Gísli near the farm in Geirþjófsfjörðr, it is said, „koma aptr til bæjar Auðar, ok býðr Eyjólf henni mikit fé til at segja til Gísla. Et þat ferr fjarri, at hon vili þat. Þá heitask þeir at meiða hana at nokkuru, ok tjár þat alls ekki, ok verðr við þat heim at fara.“ (74) [They returned to the farm and Eyjolf offered Aud a large sum of money to disclose Gísli's whereabouts. But that was the last thing she wanted to do. Then they threatened to hurt her, but that produced no result, and they were forced to return home. (533)] Also of note, is a similar incidence in *Laxdæla saga*, when, Ingjaldr Sauðeyjargoði, upon seeking the return of a bounty that he feels obliged to recant, it is said that, „Vigdís hefr upp fésjóðinn ok rekr á nasar honum, svá at þegar fell blóð á jörð; þar með velr hon honum mǫrg hæðilig orð ok þat með, at hann skal þetta fé aldregi fá síðan; biðr hann á brott fara.“ (36) [Vigdís swung the purse up into his face, striking him on the nose which bled so that drops of blood fell to the ground. While doing so she heaped abuse on him, adding that he would never again see this money, and told him to be off. (295)]

¹² Although in Regal's translation of *Gísli saga* the term *blauðr* is translated as “bitch,” Carol Clover discusses, at length, the problem this adjective poses with respect to translation, noting that, “in both poetry and prose, *blauðr* occurs most conspicuously in verbal taunts toward or about men, and in such cases it is typically rendered in English as “coward.” She continues, “when *blauðr* is used in reference to women or female animals, however ... it is rendered “woman” or “female”; clearly “coward” will not do in the *Gísli saga* passage.” Clover thus begins her study of an aspect of early Scandinavian, and perhaps Germanic culture in general: “a sex-gender system rather different from our own, and indeed rather different from that of the Christian Middle Ages.” [Carol J. Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 364.] It is also interesting to note that the Old Norse cognate, *bleyða*, means “female cat” in modern Icelandic.

subsequently parts company with Eyjólfir. It is then stated that, „Eyjólfir ferr heim í Otradal ok unir illa sinni ferð, enda þótti mönnum þessi ferð in hæðiligsta.“ (101) [Eyjólfir went back home to Otradal, and was thoroughly displeased with the outcome of his journey, especially since most people regarded it as disgraceful. (548-9)] At least one element of the disgrace of this journey seems to be Auðr's attack upon Eyjólfir, as she herself suggests, „Skaltu þat muna, vesall maðr, meðan þú lifir, at kona hefir barit þik.“ (101) [Take this now for your cowardice and your shame, and remember, you wretch, for as long as you live, that a woman has struck you. (548)]¹³ However, in the present context, it is interesting to note what this scene reveals, or perhaps rather reinforces, about Auðr and Gísli's marriage.

Earlier in the saga, after spending the winter with Gestr Oddleifsson's mother Þorgerðr in Vaðill, it is said that, „Þegar er vórar, ferr Gísli aptr í Geirþjófsfjörðr ok má þá eigi lengr vera í brott frá Auði, konu sinni; svá unnask þau mikit.“ (75) [When spring came round again, Gísli went to Geirþjófsfjord because he could no longer be away from his wife, Aud – for they loved each other greatly. (534)] Although several of those cited in the previous chapter have been deemed likewise loving marriages, it is difficult

¹³ Although, as discussed earlier, women in the sagas were all but excluded from the feuding aspect of society, the lines are blurred in such cases as this, as well as later in the saga when Þórdís mounts an attack on her brother's slayer Eyjólfir. (See n.11, Ch.V below) Similarly, in *Laxdæla saga*, after Þórðr divorces his wife Auðr and becomes Guðrún's second husband she formulates a plan, and, riding to his farm, it is said that, „Hon gekk í lokrekkjuna, en Þórðr svaf ok horfði í lopt upp. Þá vakði Auðr Þórð, en hann snerisk á hliðina, er hann sá, at maðr var kominn. Hon brá þá saxi ok lagði at Þórði ok veitti honum áverka mikla, ok kom á hǫndina hægri; varð hann sárr á báðum geirvortum; svá lagði hon til fast, at saxit nam í beðinum staðar.“ (98) [She entered the bed closet, where Thord lay sleeping. The door was closed but not latched. She woke Thord, but he only turned over on his side when he saw some man had come in. She drew her short-sword and struck him a great wound on his right arm which cut across both breasts. She struck with such force that the sword lodged in the wood of the bed. (335)] Like the attacks mounted by Auðr Vésteinsdóttir and by Þórdís, though unmistakably damaging, the injuries sustained here are non-fatal, however, it is later said that, „Þórðr lá lengi í sárum, ok greru vel bringusárum, en sú hǫndum varð honum hvergi betri til taks en áðr.“ (98) [Thord was a long time recuperating from the wounds; the ones on his chest healed well but he never regained much use of his right arm. (335)] See also Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 363-287.

to find among the sagas a marriage that matches Auðr and Gísli's in terms of unfailing spousal support;¹⁴ along these lines, Auðr's rejection, and aggressive response to Eyjólf's offer, which is seemingly compelling from an entirely practical perspective, stands in stark contrast to several examples – some of which will be discussed below – of men and women in the sagas who seem to jump at the opportunity to escape a marriage that has provided them with a perceptibly poor lot.¹⁵

STANDING IN THE WAY OF CONTROL

Moving now to the most matrimonially prolific among the trinity of women that form the focus of this study: Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, who, as mentioned earlier, is engaged and married four times through the narrative of *Laxdæla saga*. The pairing suggested in the previous chapter, that is between her first and third marriages, and her second and fourth marriages – the unhappy, unloving marriages, during the negotiations of which Guðrún's counsel was not sought after or was over-ruled, and her reluctance was

¹⁴ On Gísli's behalf, although Auðr's early relationship with Þorgrímr was not a deceptive one, it remains that it was Auðr who had initiated the conversation that Þorkell had overheard, and that started much of the trouble in the saga. When she informs her husband Gísli of this, asking him not to be angry with her and to develop a plan, he absolves her of all guilt, saying, „Eigi sé ek hér ráð til, ... þat sem duga mun. En þó mun ek ekki kunna þik um þetta, því at mæla verðr einhverr skapanna málum, ok þat mun fram koma, sem auðit verðr.“ (34) [I see no plan that will work, ... but I will not be angry with you for this. Fate must find someone to speak through. Whatever is meant to happen will happen. (511)]

¹⁵ Remaining with *Gísli saga*, Ásgerðr and Þórdís provide two such examples: upon discovering the his wife Ásgerðr has engaged in an adulterous affair with Vésteinn, Þorkell refuses her entry into their bed, and to this she replies, „Þú munt ráða verða hugleiðing þinni um þetta, en ekki mun ek lengi þæfask til hvílnnar við þik, ok um tvá kosti áttu at velja. Sá er annarr, at þú tak við mér ok lát sem ekki sé í orðit. Ella mun ek nefna mér vátta nú þegar ok segja skilit við þik, ok mun ek láta fður minn heimta mund minn ok heimanfylgju, ok mun sá kostur, at þú hafir aldri hvíluþröng af mér síðan.“ (33) [You think what you will ... but I am not going to argue with you about whether I may sleep in this bed or not. You have a choice – either you take me in and act as if nothing has happened or I will call witnesses this minute, divorce you and have my father reclaim my bride-price and my dowry. Then you wouldn't have to worry about my taking up room in your bed ever again. (511)]; late in the saga, after the death of her brother Gísli, Þórdís strikes an unsuccessful attack upon Eyjólf, although leaving him sorely wounded. When her husband Þorkr offers compensation for the injury, it is said that, „Þórdís nefnir sér þá vátta ok segir skilit við Þork ok kvezk eigi skyldu koma síðan í sǫmu sæng hjá honum, ok þat endi hon.“ (116-7) [Then Thordis named witnesses and declared herself divorced from Þork, saying that she would never again share his bed – and she stood by her word. (556)]

completely ignored, and the happy, loving marriages, to which Guðrún raised absolutely no objections – is as apt a division, and offers as illuminating insights, in the present context as it was in the previous chapter. Directed by such an approach, it might be said that, for Guðrún, paralleling Tolstoy's famous maxim, all happy marriages end alike; each unhappy marriage ends in its own way.¹⁶

Soon after their marriage, Guðrún's second husband, Þórðr, in seeking to protect his mother Ingunn, brings legal action against a sorcerer by the name of Kotkell. Þórðr, along with his nine riding companions, takes to the sea to return home, while, in the mean time, it is said that, „Síðan lét Kotkell gera seiðhjall mikinn; þau færðusk þar á upp ǫll; þau kváðu þar harðsnúin fræði; þat vǫru galdrar. Því næst laust á hríð mikilli.“ (99) [Kotkel then prepared a high platform for witchcraft which they all mounted. Then they chanted powerful incantations, which were sorcery. A great blizzard came up. (336)] Soon after, it is said that Þórðr and all of his companions were drowned, and that, „Mikit þótti Guðrúnu at um líflát Þórðar.“ (100) [(Guðrun) was stricken with grief at Thord's death. (336)] In a strikingly similar fashion, Guðrún's fourth, and final marriage, comes to an end when her husband Þorkell, in a party of ten, is sailing home across Breiðafjörðr:

ok vǫru tíu á skipi; veðrit tók at hvesa mjök, ok gerði inn mesta storm, áðr létti ... Þeir Þorkell sigla, þar til er þeir kómu at Bjarnarey; ... en er þeir vǫru þar komnir, þá laust hviðu í seglit, ok kvelfði skipinu. Þorkell drukknaði þar ok allir þeir menn, er með honum vǫru. (222)

[As the party of ten men sailed ... the wind began to rise and turned into a great storm before it subsided again. They sailed onwards until they reached Bjarnarey ... but when they had reached the island, a gust of wind filled the sail and

¹⁶ “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” [Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Penguin Books: London and New York, 2000) 1.]

capsized the boat. Thorkel was drowned there along with all the men who were with him. (417)]¹⁷

It is later said that, „Guðrúnu þótti mikit fráfall Þorkels, en bar þó sköruliga af sér.“ (223) [Gudrun was greatly stricken by Thorkel's death, but bore her grief with dignity. (418)] And thus, both happy marriages end prematurely with the deaths, by drowning, of Guðrún's husbands, and her grief is likewise expressed in parallel phrasings: „Mikit þótti Guðrúnu at um líflát Þórðar,“ and „Guðrúnu þótti mikit fráfall Þorkels.“¹⁸ Contrary to this, Guðrún's unhappy marriages, her first and her third, offer quite contrasting circumstances by which a marriage can end in the sagas.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Guðrún had no say in the negotiation of her first marriage, and, moreover, it was agreed upon by her father Ósvífr and her first husband Þorvaldr against her will. Soon after the terms are settled, it is said that, „Lítt unni Guðrún Þorvaldi ok var erfið í grípakaupum;“ (93) [Gudrun cared little for Thorvald and was avid in demanding purchases of precious objects. (332)] and later that,

Þórðr Ingunnarson gerði sér dátt við þau Þorvald ok Guðrúnu ok var þar löngum, ok fell þar mǫrg umræða á um kærleika þeira Þórðar ok Guðrúnar. Þat var eitt sinn, at Guðrún beiddi Þorvald gripakaups. Þorvaldr kvað hana ekki hóf at kunna ok sló hana kinnhest. (93)

¹⁷ It must be noted here that the death's of both Þórðr and Þorkell, along with the death of Bolli, and the divorce of Guðrún's first marriage are all foretold in an elaborate scene – also mentioned in n.9, Ch.IV above – describing a meeting between Guðrún and Gestr Oddleifsson, wherein she asks him to interpret a dream that she had had which turns out to provide a detailed schematic of her four marriages, the relative worth of each, and the manner by which they end. For more on this scene, see, Ármann, “Laxdæla Dreaming.” Also, it is interesting to note that several other premonitory events foretell the death by drowning of Þorkell, Guðrún's fourth husband, (see Þorkell's dream, and King Óláfr's prophecy in chapter 74) including an incredibly dramatic scene wherein it is said that Þorsteinn Kuggason, after failing to delay his kinsman Þorkell's journey home, „gengr til stofu ok biðr leggja undir höfuð sér, ok svá var gort; griðkonan sá, at tárin runnu ufan á hægendit ór augum honum. En litlu síðar kom vindsgnýr mikill á stofuna; þá mælti Þorsteinn: „Þar megu vér nú heyra gnýja bana Þorkels frænda.“ (222) [went into the main room and asked for something to rest his head upon, and the servant woman saw the tears streaming from his eyes on to the cushion. A short while later the roar of a great wind could be heard in the room, and Þorsteinn spoke: “There you can hear the roaring of my kinsman Thorkel's killer.” (417)]

¹⁸ For a brief structural analysis on the drowning episodes in *Laxdæla saga*, including the two episodes mentioned above, as well as the drowning of Þorsteinn surtr, see Madelung, 110-13.

[Thord Ingunnarson made a point of befriending Thorvald and Gudrun and spent a great deal of time at their farm, until soon rumours of the growing affection between Thord and Gudrun spread. When Gudrun subsequently asked Thorvald to buy her a new treasure, he retorted that there was no limit to her demands and slapped her in the face. (332)]

Guðrún, responding to the slap says, „Nú gaftu mér þat, er oss konum þykkir miklu skipta, at vér eigim vel at gørt, en þat er litarapt gott, ok af hefir þú mik ráðit brekvísi við þik.“ (94) [Fine rosy colour in her cheeks is just what every woman needs, if she is to look her best, and you have certainly given me this to teach me not to displease you. (332)]

Later, during the same evening, Guðrún and Þórðr discuss the incident, after she asks him how she can repay Þorvaldr, Þórðr offers the following suggestion: „Hér kann ek gott ráð til. Gerðu honum skyrtu ok brautgangs hofuðsmátt ok seg skilit við hann fyrir þessar sakar.“ (94) [I know just the thing. Make him a shirt with the neck so low-cut that it will give you grounds for divorcing him. (332)] She seems to comply with his counsel, and in the same spring, „segir Guðrún skilt við Þorvald ok fór heim til Lauga.“ (94) [Gudrun announced she was divorcing Thorvald and went home to Laugar. (333)]

Guðrún's divorce from her first husband is paralleled, in quick succession, with that of Þórðr and his wife Auðr. One day, as Guðrún and Þórðr are riding together she asks him, „Hvárt er þat satt, Þórðr, at Auðr, kona þín, er jafnan í brókum, ok setgeiri í, en vafit spjorrum mjök í skúa níðr?“ (95) [whether the rumour is true, that you wife Aud is often dressed in breeches, with a cod-piece and long leggings? (333)]¹⁹ When he replies

¹⁹ Alison Finlay notes the lack of sympathy with which the saga treats Auðr on her introduction – „ekki var hon væn kona né górvilig. Þórðr unni henni lítit; hafði hann mjök slægzk til fjár, því at þar stóð auðr mikill saman“ (87) [a woman (Auðr) who was neither good-looking nor exceptional in any other ways, and Thord had little affection for her. He had married primarily for wealth, which Aud had brought him in quantity. (328)] suggesting rather that “sympathy is with the ruthless but attractive couple, Guðrún and Þórðr.” [Finlay, 108] However, Finlay also suggests that, ‘both the saga and Þórðr himself are alive to the injustice of her treatment, and sympathetic when she takes the law into her own hands (see Note 210 above),’ and,

that he had not noticed this, Guðrún further suggests to Þórðr that, „Lítit bragð mun þá at, ... ef þú finnr eigi, ok fyrir hvat skal hon þá heita Bróka-Auðr?“ (95) [You can't pay her much attention, in that case, ... if you haven't noticed such a thing, or what other reason is there for her being called Breeches-Aud? (333)]²⁰ Just as Þórðr had offered a divorce-schematic for Guðrún, she offers him the same, and, after they have arrived at the Alþing and spoken about the details of her plan, „Þá spratt Þórðr þegar upp ok gekk til Lögbergs ok nefndi sér váttu, at hann segir skilit við Auði, ok fann þat til saka, at hon skarsk í setgeirabrækr sem karlkonur.“ (96) [Thord then jumped to his feet and made his way to the Law Rock. He named witnesses and announced he was divorcing Aud on the grounds that she had taken to wearing breeches with a codpiece like a masculine woman. (334)]

As suggested in the saga, and mentioned in the previous chapter, it appears that a shared affection had developed between Guðrún and Þórðr while they were both still married, and the narrator also seems to suggest that, at least in part, this lead to the slap delivered by Þorvaldr to his demanding wife.²¹ Moreover, although Guðrún was unhappy with this arrangement from the beginning, her budding relationship with Þórðr only

“despite the law's express proscription ... against transgressing the traditional boundaries of gender, Auðr's need to do so is explicitly sanctioned by the saga.” [Finlay, 108]

²⁰ At this, Þórðr replies, „Vér ætlum hana litla hrið svá hafa verit kallaða,“ (95) [She can't have been called that for long, (333)] suggesting that Guðrún may have coined the nickname herself, perhaps further emphasized by her dismissive statement, „Hitt skiptir hana enn meira, at hon eigi þetta nafn lengi síðan.“ (95) [What is more important is how long the name will follow her. (333)] For furthering reading on the power of gossip in the sagas see Helga Kress, “Gender and Gossip in the Sagas.”

²¹ Although it might seem as though Guðrún's demand on Þorvaldr to own the finest things that money can buy “leads her to divorce him when he refuses to pander to her insatiable wants,” [Madelung, 42] based on the terms of the marriage settlement – „Hann skyldi ok kaupa gripi til handa henni, svá at engi jafnfjáð kona ætti betri gripi, en þó mætti hann halda búi sínu fyrir þær sakar.“ (93) [Thorvald was also obliged to purchase whatever finery Gudrun required in order that no other woman of equal wealth should own better, although not to the point of ruining the farm. (332)] – and the fact that there is no mention of her insatiable appetite for material goods as bringing anything like ruin to the farm, it seems well within reason that Þorvaldr was as aware as anyone else of the rumours of his wife and Þórðr's growing affection, and that his slap was delivered as much in response to their relationship, as to her financial demands.

seems to expedite the dissolution of the marriage. Then, proving their equal partnership – which doubtlessly contributes to the later success of their marriage – Guðrún offers her own wise counsel, likewise displaying her legal knowledge, when Þórðr wishes to divorce his wife Auðr: „Slíkt víti á konum at skapa fyrir þat á sitt hóf sem karlmanni, ef hann hefir hofuðsmátt svá mikla, at sjái geirvortur hans berar, brautgangssök hvárttveggja.“ (96) [If women go about dressed as men, they invite the same treatment as do men who wear shirts cut so low that the nipples of their breasts can be seen – both are grounds for divorce. (334)]²²

Before moving on, it is also interesting to note, in light of the stipulation appended to her first marriage settlement, „at Guðrún skyldi ein ráða fyrir fé þeira,“ (93) [that Gudrun should control their common finances, (332)] that after Guðrún's divorce from Þorvaldr, „Síðan var gort féskipti þeira Þorvalds ok Guðrúnar, ok hafði hon helming fjár alls, ok var nú meira en áðr.“ (94) [When their estate was divided Gudrun received half of all the property, which was larger than before. (333)] Again, if Guðrún's excessive demands had in fact been such a burden upon her husband's Þorvaldr's finances, it seems unlikely that their estate would have grown in value, and so this evidence seems to gain support the fact that his slap was provoked less by her limitless material desires, than by the affair that was being carried out right under his nose. In addition to this, the growth of their common-wealth accords well to the exceptional nature of Guðrún's character, for she is now not only a preternaturally gifted young

²² Alison Finlay suggests that these two instances may reflect some sort of historical prohibition against cross-dressing, however, she writes that, “it's existence in the saga is less a reflection of historical reality than a witty reversal of the conventional literary motif of a woman sewing a shirt for her husband ... here it is used instead [in Guðrún's case] to secure the heroine's freedom from the married state.” As for Þórðr, his manoeuvre, under Guðrún's guidance serves as a counterpart, and is built on “the apparently fabricated grounds that [Auðr] wears masculine dress.” [Finlay, 108]

woman, conversing at an even-keel with one of the wisest men in Iceland – Gestr Oddleifsson – at the tender age of fourteen, precociously knowledgeable in law, offering Þórðr – who himself, „var vænn maðr ok vaskligr, górr at sér ok sakamaðr mikill“ (87) [was a fine, strapping figure of a man, highly capable, and often involved in lawsuits (328)] – incredibly useful advice that allows him to dissolve a no longer desirable marriage, but, furthermore, she is also now, despite her own brand of material opulence, – at the still blossoming age of seventeen – seemingly no less fiscally prudent.

Much like the negotiation proceedings of her third marriage, its dissolution can not be discussed in the absence of Kjartan Ólafsson, her third husband Bolli Þorleiksson's foster-brother. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this marriage was established on incredibly shaky premises, from the passive-aggressive behaviour of her father, who warns Bolli that Guðrún will have final say in the matter, only to bully her into following his will in violation of her own, to Bolli's suggestive account of Kjartan's time in Norway, and so the tragic wheels of another set of star-cross'd lovers are set in motion.

Not long after his return to Iceland from Norway, Kjartan learns of Guðrún and Bolli's marriage, but, surprisingly, it is said that he, „brá sér ekki við þat; en mörgum var á því kvíðustaðr áðr.“ (132) [showed no sign of response, although many people had been dreading his reaction. (358)] On Guðrún's behalf, it is only a short time before she realizes exactly how Bolli had mislead her in his account of Kjartan's dealings abroad:

Guðrún mælti nú við Bolla, at henni þótti hann eigi hafa sér allt satt til sagt um útkvámu Kjartans. Bolli kvazk þat sagt hafa, sem hann vissi þar af sannast. Guðrún talaði fátt til þessa efnis, en þat var auðfynt, at henni líkaði illa, því at þat ætluðu flestir menn, at henni væri enn mikil eftirsjá at um Kjartan, þó at hon hlyði yfir. (134)

[Gudrun now told Bolli that she felt not everything he had told her about

Kjartan's return was true, but Bolli maintained he had told her what he knew as truth. Although Gudrun hardly spoke of the matter, it was obvious that she was anything but happy, and most people assumed that she regretted having lost Kjartan, though she tried to conceal it. (359)]²³

From this point, a gradual deterioration process begins,²⁴ beginning with Kjartan's rejection, against the insistence of his father Óláfr, of Bolli's gift of a horse along with three mares,²⁵ followed closely by the theft of both Kjartan's sword (*konungsnautr*) and Hrefna, his wife's, headdress.²⁶ This erosive pattern continues with the humiliation of

Bolli and Guðrún's household and Kjartan's purchase of land otherwise promised to them,

²³ Several later scenes attest to Guðrún's not so well-concealed emotions when it comes to Kjartan, notably during the feast at Óláfr's farm, in Chapter 46, when her face changes colour at Kjartan's rough words. And later, after Kjartan famously prevents the inhabitants at Laugar from accessing their privies, it is said that, „Guðrún talaði hér fæst um, en þó fundu menn þat á orðum hennar, at eigi væri víst, hvárt qðrum lægi í meira rúmi en henni.“ (145-6) [Gudrun said little, but the few words she did let fall showed that it was not necessarily of less concern to her than to others. (366)] For more on somatic changes as signals of heightened emotional situations see, Miller, “Emotions and the sagas,” 97-105, and for more on the idea of Northern emotional restraint, in contrast to Mediterranean fury, wherein the hero grows more silent as his passion rises, see Grímur Thomsen, “On the Character of the Old Northern Poetry,” eds. Edward J. Cowan and Hermann Pálsson (*Studia Islandica* 31, ed. Steingrímur J. Þorsteinsson, Reykjavík: University of Iceland – Faculty of Liberal Arts and the Icelandic Cultural Fund, 1972).

²⁴ Theodore Andersson writes *Laxdæla saga* represents a diachronic view of history, “a succession of periods with differing characteristics, a golden age and an iron age. In the earlier age there is peace and plenty, ... The break comes between Olaf's generation and the following generation of his son Kjartan and his foster son Bolli.” [Theodore Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006) 136.]

²⁵ „Þessi hross vildi Bolli gefa Kjartani, en Kjartan kvazk engi vera hrossamaðr ok vildi eigi þiggja. Óláfr bað hann við taka hrossunum, - „ok eru þetta inar virðuligstu gjafar.“ Kjartan setti þvert nei fyrir.“ (135) [Bolli said he wished to give the horse, along with three mares which were the same colour, to Kjartan, but Kjartan said he was no man for horses and refused to accept them. Olaf asked him to accept the horses, saying “They're a fine gift”, but Kjartan absolutely refused. (360)] Compare this scene with a similar incident in *Gísli saga*, wherein Þorkell refused to accept the gifts offered to him by Vésteinn. (Chapter 12)

²⁶ For Guðrún, who is later implicated as the thief, her act is less theft, than taking back a gift that was intended for her in the first place, as she tells Kjartan, „Þann seyði raufar þú þar, Kjartan, at betr væri, at eigi ryki. Nú þó at svá sé, sem þú segir, at þeir menn sé hér nokkurir, er ráð hafi til þess sett, at motrinn skyldi hverfa, þá virði ek svá, at þeir hefi at sínu gengit.“ (144) [You're stirring up embers that would be better left to die out. And even if it were true someone here was involved in the disappearance of the head-dress, in my opinion they've done nothing but take what rightfully belonged to them. (365)] In this case, as in most others, she does have a point, as the gift given by the king's sister was explicitly intended for her. (see Chapter 43)

²⁷ The humiliation in this case is that Kjartan stations men around Bolli and Guðrún's farmhouse, preventing the household's access to the privies, and thus forcing them to relieve themselves in their living space. (Chapter 47) Then, in a further display of bullying tactics, Kjartan exploits a legal loophole to buy a piece of land out from under Bolli and Guðrún, as they had failed to gather witnesses, and thus their tentative agreement was legally voided. However, it is important to note that Þorarrinn, who sold the land was reluctant to renege on the deal he had made with Bolli, and it was only after Kjartan offered him an unfavourable ultimatum that he agreed to the new sale. (Chapter 47)

finally culminating in the death of Kjartan at the hands of his foster-brother Bolli.²⁸

Guðrún shows no small degree of cunning in putting her own stamp upon much of this action, again using her strongest weapon, her sharp tongue. In fact, after her brother's have made preparations to ambush Kjartan, Guðrún approaches Bolli and asks him to go along with them, but, „Bolli kvað sér eigi sama fyrir frændsemis sakar við Kjartan ok tjáði, hversu ástsamliga Óláfr hafði hann fæddan.“ (150) [he replied that it was not right for him to attack his kinsman and reminded her of how lovingly Olaf had raised him. (369)] To this, Guðrún provides Bolli with an ultimatum, „Satt segir þú þat, en eigi muntu bera giptu til at gera svá, at öllum þykki vel, ok mun lokit okkrum samförum, ef þú skersk undan förinni.“ (150) [What you say is true enough, but you're not fortunate enough to be in a position where you can please everyone, and if you refuse to go along it will be the end of our life together. (369)]²⁹ It is then said that, at his wife's urging, Bolli's anger grows and he is quick to join her brother's and other kinsmen, and they ride off to wait for Kjartan. It is difficult to determine whether Guðrún's threat of divorce is in any way legitimate, or whether it rather suggests an attack on her husband Bolli's manhood, much like the earlier comment she makes to her brothers, under the duress of which they form the initial attack-party: „Gott skaplyndi hefði þér fengit, ef þér værið dötr enshvers bónda ok láta hvárki at yðr verða gegn né mein.“ (150) [With your

²⁸ Robert Cook and Helga Kress suggest that the feud the dominates this section of *Laxdæla saga* is unique in that, rather than a feud between two men who love the same woman, it is a feud between the lovers, Guðrún and Kjartan, themselves. [Cook, *Women and Men in Laxdæla saga*, 41; Helga, “Mjök mun þér samstaft þykkja,” 102] Cook notes that, “for her part, Guðrún takes action of a shameful sort against Kjartan, but an action open to women: theft. ... Kjartan, in retaliation, takes actions of the non-violent sort that can be directed against women (against whom violence may not be committed) ... In this way the feud escalates to the point where Guðrún must retaliate by bringing about the death of Kjartan.” [Cook, *Women and Men in Laxdæla saga*, 41-2]

²⁹ Guðrún's threat here bears striking resemblance to the threat of divorce offered by Ásgerðr to her husband Þorkell in *Gísla saga*, as discussed in n.15, Ch.V above.

temperament, you'd have made some farmer a good group of daughters, fit to do no one any good or any harm. (369)]³⁰

Then, shortly after the slaying of Kjartan, in a very powerful and revealing scene, Guðrún, speaking of Kjartan's death, tells her husband,

„Ekki tel ek slíkt með óhöppum; þótti mér, sem þú hefðir meiri metorð þann vetr, er Kjartan var í Nóregi, en nú, er hann trað yðr undir fótum, þegar hann kom til Íslands; en ek tel þat þó síðast, er mér þykkir mest vert, at Hrefna mun eigi ganga hlæjandi at sænginni í kveld.“ Þá segir Bolli ok var mjök reiðr: „Ósýnt þykki mér, at hon fólmi meir við þessi tíðendi en þú, ok þat grunar mik, at þú brygðir þér minnr við, þó at vér lægim eptir á vígvellinum, en Kjartan segði frá tíðendum.“ Guðrún fann þá, at Bolli reiddisk, ok mælti: „Haf ekki slíkt við, því at ek kann þér mikla þökk fyrir verkit; þykki mér núþat vitat, at þú vill ekki gera í móti skapi mínu.“ (154-5)

[“I wouldn't consider it misfortune. I think you were held in much greater esteem the winter Kjartan was still in Norway than now, after he returned to Iceland and had walked all over you. And last but not most important, to my mind, is the thought that Hrefna won't go to bed with a smile on her face this evening.

At this Bolli was furious and replied, “I wonder whether she'll pale at the news any more than you, and I suspect that you would be much less upset if it were me lying there slain and Kjartan who lived to tell the tale.”

Guðrún then realized how angry Bolli was and said, “Don't say things like that. I'm very grateful for what you've done. Now I know that you won't go against my will.” (372)

Once again, Guðrún seems most comfortable when she has assumed a position of power, and this scene, in conjunction with the earlier whetting scenes, seems to suggest that Bolli was all but forced by Guðrún to take Kjartan's life.³¹

Of little surprise, Bolli soon becomes the target of Kjartan's kinsmen, although

³⁰ As the whetting/goading/inciting woman is an incredibly common motif in medieval Icelandic literature, there are far too many similar scenes to list here, however, the keen reader should begin by consulting the chapter “The Nordic Whetter” in Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, as well as, Clover, “Hildigunnr's lament,” and Jennifer Gentry, *Wives and Whettors: The Dichotomous Nature of Women in Medieval Iceland* (Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 2008).

³¹ Bredsdorff, 45. This reading is supported by Bolli's reaction after killing his foster-brother: „en þó veitti hann honum banasár. Bolli settisk þegar undir herðar honum, ok andaðisk Kjartan í knjám Bolla; iðraðisk Bolli þegar verksins ok lýsti vígi á hendr sér.“ (154) [(Bolli) dealt him a death blow, then took up his body and held him in his arms when he died. Bolli regretted the deed immediately and declared himself the slayer. (372)]

Kjartan's father Óláfr – Bolli's foster-father –, before his death, had done his best to spare Bolli from retribution, when Kjartan's mother Þorgerðr goads her sons into action.³² Furthermore, against their protests, Þorgerðr joins the Ólafssons as they set out from the farm, implying that it is likely that they would need still more urging to accomplish the task at hand. As they arrive at Bolli and Guðrún's farm, realizing that an attack is imminent, Bolli implores Guðrún to leave, and despite her protests, „Hon gekk ofan fyrir brekkuna til lækjar þess, er þar fell, ok tók at þvá lérept sín.“ (166) [She walked down the slope to a small stream and began to wash some linen. (380)]³³ After the deed is accomplished, that is, after Bolli's death, Guðrún approaches the attack-party with incredible calm and dignity, which is amplified by the narrator's lengthy description of her dress, and when one of the attackers – Helgi Harðbeinsson – uses the end of Guðrún's shawl to clean her husband's blood from his spear, it is stated that, „Guðrún leit til hans ok brosti við.“ (168) [Guðrún looked at him and merely smiled. (381)] However, Guðrún's emotional state here is anything but opaque, as, „Guðrún gekk á veg með þeim ok talaði við þá um hrið. Síðan hvarf hon aprtr.“ (168) [Guðrún followed them a short

³² In this instance, Kjartan's mother, Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir, in admonishing their laxity in seeking vengeance for their brother, suggests that, „eigi myndi svá gera Egill, móðurfaðir yðvarr, ok er illt at eiga dáðlausa sonu; ok víst ætla ek yðr til þess betr fellda, at þér værið dætr fǫður yðvars ok værið giptr.“ (162) [Never would your grandfather Egil have acted like this, and it grieves me to have such spineless sons. You would have made your father better daughters, to be married off, than sons. (377)] Compare this with the insult that Guðrún had offered her brother's when they showed little initiative in defending themselves against Kjartan. Also, see n.30, Ch.V above.

³³ Although she often subverts the limited scope of what is thought to be womanly, and it is possible that the culture represented by the sagas is one in which “sex” is irrelevant and “gender” is everything, [Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 370] it is interesting to note that during the deaths of both Bolli and Kjartan, Guðrún occupies herself with typical woman's work, that is, washing linen and spinning wool. Furthermore, as Kjartan's death can be drawn as the result of many of Guðrún's actions – although, according to Robert Cook, he is surely no saint [Cook, “Women and Men in *Laxdæla saga*,” 52-5] – it is also interesting to note the parallel images of the Norns of Norse mythology, who are sometimes depicted as spinning or weaving the fates of men. [See “Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar” in Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Eddukvæði (Sæmundar-edda)* I (Akureyri: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954) 217-35, and also of interest, Thomas Gray's, “The Fatal Sisters – An Ode” from Thomas Gray, *Gray's Poems*, ed. John Bradshaw (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1912) 25-8]

way and talked to them as they untied their horses and rode off, then turned back. (381)]

Throughout the saga there is no clear sign that Guðrún, following her disapproval of the original marriage arrangement, harbours any strong emotional feelings towards Bolli, and after he had killed Kjartan, in a sense declaring her victory in the feud, she merely offers him a degree of appreciation as far as he continues to abide by her will. And so, her accompaniment of the men who had only moments earlier killed her husband, and the smile she offers Helgi after he wipes Bolli's blood onto her shawl, might suggest happiness or a sense of relief at her husband's death, but, clearly characteristic of the woman by this point, Guðrún never stops thinking, and in this instance her cunning is set to full awareness.

Upon leaving the scene of the slaying, some of the men comment on the fact that Guðrún seemed to care little that her husband had been killed, but Halldór Ólafsson rather suggests that,

Ekki er þat mín ætlan, at Guðrúnu þykki lítit lát Bolla; hygg ek, at henni gengi þat meir til leiðiorðs við oss, at hon vildi vita sem gørst, hverir menn hefði verit í þessi ferð; er þat ok ekki ofmæli, at Guðrún er mjök fyrir öðrum konum um allan skörungsskap. Þat er ok eptir vánum, at Guðrúnu þykki mikit lát Bolla, því at þat er satt segja, at eptir slíka menn er mester skaði, sem Bolli var, (168)

[I suspect that it was not because Bolli's killing meant little to her that she saw us off, but rather that she was intent on finding out exactly who had taken part in the attack. It's no exaggeration when people say that Gudrun is a woman of exceptionally strong character. Besides, it's only natural that she should greatly regret losing Bolli, because there's no denying that a man of Bolli's stature is a severe loss, (382)]³⁴

And so Halldór confirms that, like many others in the saga world, Guðrún's smile and

³⁴ This scene reveals, William Ian Miller writes, "that the modern reader is not the only one who can be taken in by the ways certain saga characters have of expressing emotions. ... They expected signs of grief, tears and wailing, not signs of casual cordiality, smiles and conversation." [Miller, "Emotions and the sagas," 91.]

intentioned geniality are not markers of amiability, but rather of hostility.³⁵ In stark contrast to the deaths of her second and fourth husbands, whereupon Guðrún is stricken with grief, in this case Guðrún's behaviour reads cold and calculating, each verbal and visual cue tightly measured for maximum effectiveness.³⁶ Interestingly enough, Guðrún's apparent emotional detachment is perhaps indirectly proportional to the alacrity with which she seeks revenge for her husband's death, but it seems that she feels more slighted by the death, not of her husband, but rather of Bolli, as the powerful instrument of her will.

Although all four of Guðrún's marriages end prematurely, she can hardly be blamed for the brevity of her second and fourth marriages, to Þórðr and Þorkell respectively, and is very clearly aggrieved by her husband's early deaths. In the case of her first marriage, the saga, noting the apparent discrepancy in their means, the absolute ignorance toward her objections, and the slap that Þorvaldr delivers to his young wife, renders her reasonably well-justified in seeking the eventual divorce. However, in her third marriage and in the death of her third husband, she is not so easily absolved of guilt, as Bolli's death seems to be nothing more than collateral damage, or fallout from the feud between Guðrún and Kjartan.³⁷ But, as in her first marriage, her objections to marrying

³⁵ Miller, "Emotions and the sagas," 91-2.

³⁶ In fact, Guðrún waits more than twelve years before finally ensuring retribution for the slaying of Bolli, in the meantime, under the counsel of her close friend Snorri goði, organizing an elaborate plan to enlist Þorgils Hølluson to lead the campaign against Bolli's killers. And, later still she gathers her sons together in her leek garden, and upon arrival, „sjá þeir, at þar vǫru breidd niðr linklæði, skyrti ok línbrœkr; þau vǫru blóðug mjök. Þá mælti Guðrún: „Þessi sǫmu klæði, er þit sjáið hér, frýja ykkar fǫðurhefnda; nú mun ek ekki hafa hér um mǫrg orð, því at ekki er vǫn, at þit skipizk af framhvǫt orða, ef þit íhugið ekki við slíkar bendingar ok áminningar.“ (179) [they saw spread out garments of linen, a shirt and breeches much stained with blood. Gudrun then spoke: "These very clothes which you see here reproach you for not avenging your father. I have few words to add, for it is hardly likely that you would let the urging of words direct you if unmoved by such displays and reminders." (388)]

³⁷ See n.28, Ch.V above.

Bolli were largely ignored, and she was bullied into accepting the agreement by her father though he had earlier suggested that the decision would rest with her; not to mention Bolli's, perhaps not untruthful, but, as far as Guðrún was concerned, misleading account of Kjartan, her unrequited love's, time in Norway. Although Auðr's marriage history is considerably less storied, Guðrún does not lack competition in this department, and, in fact, the marriage history of Hallgerðr Ósvífrdóttir offers several interesting parallels, as well as some equally interesting divergences.

BENEATH THE UNDERDOG

As discussed in the previous chapter, Hallgerðr and Guðrún's first marriages bear myriad parallels, resulting, in both cases, in a young woman who feels that she has been mislead and mistreated by her male guardians.³⁸ On Hallgerðr's behalf, she even goes so far as telling her father, with respect to his failure in consulting her, that, „Nú em ek at raun komin um þat, er mik hefir lengi grunat, at þú mundir eigi unna mér svá mikit sem þú sagðir jafnan.“ (31) [Now I have proof of what I have long suspected, that you do not love me as much as you have always said. (13)] As discussed earlier with respect to Guðrún, this combination of enthusiastic male guardians, and an unenthusiastic bride often proves troublesome, and, in this case, has fatal consequences.³⁹

In fact, even at the wedding feast it seems as though Hallgerðr, with the assistance of her dubious maternal relations, is eager to begin pulling the threads of this marriage apart. It is said that her foster-foster Þjóstólfr, who had already guaranteed her a second

³⁸ Anna Cornelia Kersbergen, arguing that *Njáls saga* was influenced by *Laxdæla saga*, has also discussed the parallels between the first and the second of each of Guðrún and Hallgerðr's marriages. [See Anna Cornelia Kersbergen, *Litteraire motieven in de Njála* (Rotterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 1927) 90-93.]

³⁹ Bredsdorff, 77.

wedding, along with his personal allegiance, brought along Hallgerðr's maternal uncle Svanr to the wedding,⁴⁰ and that, during the feast, „gekk Þjóstólfr jafnan til tals við hana, en stundum talar hann við Svan, ok fannsk monnum mikit um tal þeira.“ (32) [Thjostolf often went over to talk to her, and he also spoke with Svan now and then, and people found this talking quite strange. (14)] Although the text does not disclose what these three spoke of, the fact that people found it strange suggests a certain duplicity in their conversation, which is doubtlessly bolstered by the reputations of the two men involved.

⁴¹ The ever prescient Hrútr seems to offer a hint as to the direction that things are moving in his response to Hǫskuldr, the bride's father's question as to whether he should offer some gifts on top of the dowry: „Kostr mun þér af tómi at eyða fé þínu fyrir Hallgerði, ok lát hér staðar nema.“ (33) [You'll have chance enough to throw away your money for Hallgerd's sake; call it a halt for now. (14)]

The chatter does not end here, and it is said that Þorvaldr, Hallgerðr and Þjóstólfr ride home together from the feast, and that, „hann [Þjóstólfr] fylgði hesti hennar, ok tǫluðu þau jafnan.“ (33) [Thjostolf rode close to Hallgerd's horse and they spoke constantly. (14)] During which time Ósvífr, Þorvaldr's father, asks his son how he feels about the match, to which Þorvaldr replies, „Vel, ... alla blíðu lét hon uppi við mik; ok máttu sjá mót á, er hon hlær við hvert orð.“ (33) [Fine, ... She shows me nothing but sweetness. You can tell by the way she laughs at everything I say. (14)] Bearing a strong

⁴⁰ In introducing Svanr into this scene, the narrator notes that he „var fjölkunnigr mjök,“ (32) [was skilled in magic, (14)] and it is said that, „hann var ódæll ok illr viðreignar.“ (32) [he was overbearing and vicious to deal with. (14)] For more on the troublesome nature of Hallgerðr's maternal lineage, and the effect that her mother's relatives have on her character refer to the lengthy discussion on this topic in Chapter III above.

⁴¹ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, perhaps taking some small liberty, writes that, “During the wedding feast, at which Þjóstólfr and Svanur swagger about, Hallgerður displays great gaiety.” [Einar, *Njáls saga*, 128-9]

resemblance to the scene cited above, wherein Halldór corrects his men's misinterpretation of Guðrún's reaction to Bolli's death, Ósvífr ominously rejoins, „Eigi ætla ek hlátr hennar jafngóðan sem þú, ... en þat mun þó síðar reynask.“ (33) [Her laughter doesn't seem as good to me as it does to you, ... but time will tell. (15)]

Ósvífr's reading, like Halldór's above, proves accurate, and, again drawing a parallel with Guðrún, Hallgerðr is increasingly demanding of her first husband, by which she raises his ire until one day, „Þá reiddisk Þorvaldr ok laust hana í andlitit, svá at blæddi.“ (33) [Thorvald got angry and struck her in the face, so hard that she bled. (15)]⁴² Soon after this, Þjóstólfr sees her injury and Hallgerðr, perhaps distraught at her suffering, but also echoing the earlier comment she had directed at her father, suggesting that his lack of love led to her ill-fortune, seizes the opportunity to cash in on Þjóstólfr's loyalty, and laments, „stóttu mér þá fjarri, ef þér þœtti nokkut undr um mik.“ (34) [you would not have been so far away if you cared for me. (15)] And, forthwith, Þjóstólfr rows to Bjarneyjar, and there he finds Þorvaldr and he kills him. Drawing similarity with Guðrún once again, after Þorvaldr's death, after the marriage has ended, it is said that, „Fé Hallgerðar gekk fram ok gerðisk mikit.“ (40) [Hallgerd's property grew in value and became quite large. (18)]

As discussed in the previous chapter, the negotiation of Hallgerðr's second marriage was entirely and purposefully above the table. Her suitor, Glúmr, like Þorvaldr, was offered warnings by both his own kinsmen, as well as her own father, of Hallgerðr's

⁴² It should be noted though, in Guðrún's case, as suggested above, despite her husband Þorvaldr's suggestion that his anger was a result of her excessive demands, that her injury was more likely the result of her hidden relationship with Þórðr. On the other hand, in Hallgerðr's case, the narrator explains that, „enda kallaði hon til alls þess, er aðrir áttu í nánd ok hafði allt í sukki; en er váraði, var búskarpt, ok skorti bæði mjöl ok skreið.“ (33) [and (she) demanded to have whatever the neighbours had, and squandered everything; when spring came there was a shortage of both flour and dried fish. (15)]

harsh-temperament, and then, following the sage advice of Hrútr, who was notably absent during the negotiation of the first marriage, it is agreed that Hallgerðr herself should decide whether or not the suit is accepted.⁴³ And then later, after the marriage has been agreed upon, and the two have been married for a time, Hallgerðr herself tells her foster-father that, „Vel er um ástir okkrar.“ (47) [Yes, our love goes well. (21)]

However, despite the fact that this, like Guðrún's second marriage, is a happy one, there are signs of trouble from the very beginning when, during the wedding feast, it is said that, „Hallgerðar sat á palli ok samði sér vel. Þjóstólfr gekk með øxi reidda ok lét it dólgligsta, ok lét þat engi sem vissi.“ (45) [Hallgerd sat on the cross-bench and made a good impression. Thjostolf walked around with his axe at the ready and behaved atrociously, but no one took notice of him. (20)] In contrast to her first wedding feast, here Hallgerðr is free from the influence of her foster-father's secret whispers, and although Þjóstólfr is likewise depicted as an ludicrously unsettled figure, constantly moving about – plodding, even plotting – rather than sitting, in this instance people take no notice of him.⁴⁴ However, the fact that he is present at all here signals the fact that, although it has been previously, adventurously remarked that the episode concerning Hallgerðr's marriage has been thought to reveal the multi-sourced nature of the saga,⁴⁵

⁴³ Interestingly enough, Hrútr adds that, due to this stipulation, „megi hon eigi qgrum kenna, þó at eigi verði vel.“ (43) [Then she will not be able to blame others if things do not turn out well. (19)] Combining this with Hóskuldr's comment upon discovering the death of Þorvaldr at the hands of Þjóstólfr: „en ekki mun týja at saka sik um orðinn hlut.“ (36) [But there's no use blaming myself for what has already happened] and his brother Hrútr's suggestion that they compensate Ósvífr for the slaying of his son despite Hóskuldr's comment that, „Eigi drap ek son þinn, ok eigi réð ek honum banaráð,“ (39) [I didn't kill your son, and I didn't plan his death, (17)] suggests a certain burden of guilt, whether for Þorvaldr's death, or for the way he treated his daughter, weighing upon his conscience. But, it must also be noted that Hrútr, in suggesting that they offer compensation to Ósvífr, also tells his brother that it will restore Hallgerðr's standing, and so it is an act not entirely free of self-interest.

⁴⁴ Dronke, 18.

⁴⁵ Magnús, “Hallgerðr í Njálu;” See n.36, Ch.IV above.

this marriage is by no means exempt from the problems that hampered the first.⁴⁶

As it comes to pass, Hallgerðr again suffers the reproach of her husband, but in this case not for her lavish lifestyle,⁴⁷ but rather Glúmr strikes her when she speaks on Þjóstólfr's behalf after the two men have had a disagreement. Following this, it is said that Hallgerðr, „unni honum [Glúmr] mikit ok mátti eigi stilla sik ok grét hástøfum,“ (48) [loved him [Glum] greatly and was not able to calm herself, and wept loudly, (22)] and so the natural consequence, despite her voiced objections, is that Þjóstólfr, realizing what has transpired, kills Glúmr in retribution. However, despite Hallgerðr clear instructions to Þjóstólfr,⁴⁸ and the fact that it is clearly stated that she loved Glúmr greatly, her reaction upon meeting, and then hearing the news from Þjóstólfr that Glúmr is dead is incredibly surprising.

⁴⁶ Several scholars have commented upon the pairing of Hallgerðr and her foster-father Þjóstólfr. Theodore Andersson draws a link between their oddly close relationship – among several other close relationships that Hallgerðr shares with men to whom she is not married, including Sigmundur Lambason and Víga-Hrapp – and her thievish nature, which is often “associated with cowardice, sorcery, and sexual perversion in men and with nymphomania in women.” [Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, 184] Ursula Dronke comments on the sexual nature of the mockery with which Þjóstólfr attacks each of Hallgerðr's husbands before killing them, and suggests that such statements are “intended to imply that Þjóstólfr himself would be a more effective sexual partner for Hallgerðr,” and that, “in these moments, ... Þjóstólfr's own emotional fantasies are betrayed.” [Dronke, 18] Thomas Bredsdorff, in his discussion on erotic desire in the sagas, notes that Glúmr's “death takes place against the background of an explicit reference to sexuality,” and that “The evil forces that Hallgerd allies herself with during her first, forced marriage intervene destructively in her secondfreely-chosen and sexually fulfilling marriage.” [Bredsdorff, 77] Einar Ólafur Sveinsson writes that, “in time [Hallgerðr] discovers that his fidelity as a foster father is tinged with jealousy. He begrudges anyone else the enjoyment of her love, and, “this dark power which she exerts over Þjóstólfr flatters her ego and his jealousy tickles her fancy.” [Einar, *Njáls Saga*, 127-8]

⁴⁷ In addition to the problems that accompany Þjóstólfr from the first marriage, Anne Heinrichs [Anne Heinrichs, “Hallgerðs Saga in der Njála: Der doppelte Blick,” (*Studien zum altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1994) 347-8] notes that the term *fengsöm* [acquisitive, grasping or lavish], that characteristic to which most of the trouble in the first marriage was attributed, is used again, not only in her second marriage, but in her third marriage, to Gunnarr, as well: with Þorvaldr she is „fengsöm ok stórlynd“ (33) [acquisitive and high-spirited (15)]; with Glúmr she is „örlynd ok fengsöm“ (46) [lavish and acquisitive (20)]; and with Gunnarr she is „fengsöm ok atkvæðamikil“ (90) [grasping and domineering] However, Robert Cook suggests that, of the three instances, only that description relating to her marriage with Glúmr has a decidedly positive connotation. [Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 19, n.54]

⁴⁸ „Ekki skalt þú þessa hefna,” segir hon, „ok engan hlut í eiga, hversu sem með okkr ferr.“ (48) [“You are not to take vengeance for this,” she said, “or have anything to do with what goes on between us.” (22)]

Hallgerðr var úti ok sá, at blóðug var øxin. Hann kastaði til hennar gullhringinum. Hon mælti: „Hvat segir þú tíðenda? eða hví er øx þín blóðug?“ Hann svaraði: „Eigi veit ek, hversu þér mun þykkja: ek segi þér víg Glúms.“ „Þú munt því valda,“ segir hon. „Svá er,“ segir hann. Hon hló at ok mælti: „Eigi ert þú engi í leikinum.“ „Hvert ráð sér þú fyrir mér nú?“ sagði hann. „Far þú til Hrúts, fððurbróður míns,“ segir hon, „ok sjái hann fyrir þér.“ „Eigi veit ek,“ sagði Þjóstólfr, „hvárt þetta er heilræði, en þó skal ek þínum ráðum fram fara um þetta mál.“(50)

[Hallgerd was outside and saw that his axe was bloody. He threw the gold bracelet to her.

“What news do you bring?” she asked. “Why is your axe bloody?”

“I don't know how you'll take this, but I must tell you of the slaying of Glum,” he answered.

“You must have done it,” she said.

“That's true,” he said.

She laughed and said, “You didn't sit this game out.”

“What advice do you have for me now?” he said.

“Go to my father's brother Hrut,” she said, “and let him take care of you.”

“I don't know whether this is sound advice,” said Thjostolf, “but I'll follow it anyway.” (22-3)]

Just as she had appeared of bright spirit following her first wedding, with which, according to all other signs, she was quite clearly unsatisfied, in this instance Hallgerðr's laughter again seems remarkably discordant. Although this, and other similar instances, are sometimes cited as prime examples of the emotional coldness or insensibility of the sagas and the saga characters, based purely on the earlier scene wherein Hallgerðr struggled to hold back her tears out of fear that they would bring forth the death of the man that she loved,⁴⁹ it would be wildly inaccurate to label her an emotionally cold woman, and, in any respect, her laughter is quite clearly a marker of some sort of emotional response.⁵⁰ Furthermore, based on the apparently dubious counsel that she offers Þjóstólfr, which soon results in his death at the hands of her uncle Hrútr,

⁴⁹ Robert Cook comments that, “Her reaction is that of a woman in love, not that of an abused wife grimly set on vengeance. There are no negative signs in her relationship with Glúmr, and surely the point of the episode is to show the important and positive side of her character.” [Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 19]

⁵⁰ Miller, “Emotions and the sagas,” 91.

Hallgerðr's laughter seems to be at once a gesture of both emotion and measured reason. In this case, her nervous-laughter rises forth from shock in hearing of the death of her husband, but then she quickly recovers her composure, strategically employing the representational ambiguities of laughter to send Þjóstólfr to his death.⁵¹

Hallgerðr's third, and final, marriage⁵² is something of a macrocosm paired with the microcosm of the negotiation process that precedes it. That is, like its negotiation, the marriage itself begins in high style, as documented in the elaborate guest list of the well-populated wedding feast at Hlíðarendi, but soon follows a spiralling path of deterioration and destruction.⁵³ In fact, much like Gunnarr's hasty disillusionment upon hearing Hrútr explicate more fully on the concrete details of Hallgerðr's troubled past, immediately following the wedding feast, in the very next chapter during a feast at Njáll and his wife Bergþóra's farm at Bergþórshváll, a quarrel erupts between the two women over the seating arrangement, and the weak foundation of the marriage is first revealed. Hallgerðr, upon receiving a punishing insult from Bergþóra,⁵⁴ turns to her husband and

⁵¹ Einar, *Njáls saga*, 131; Miller, "Emotions and the sagas," 91. Furthering the ambiguity of this scene, Þjóstólfr detects that something is amiss, unsure whether Hallgerðr's advice is friendly or not, but because of who she is he nevertheless accepts it. Hrútr, on the other hand, immediately understands what Hallgerðr had in mind when she sent Þjóstólfr to see him: „Hann gekk norðr um vegginn ok sá þar mann mikinn ok kenndi, at þar var Þjóstólfr. Hrútr spurði tíðenda. „Ek segi þér vig Glúms,“ segir Þjóstólfr. „Hverr veldr því?“ segir Hrútr. „Ek vá hann,“ segir Þjóstólfr. „Hví reitt þú hingat?“ segir Hrútr. „Hallgerðr sendi mik til þín,“ segir Þjóstólfr. „Eigi veldr hon þessu þá,“ segir Hrútr ok brá sverðinu.“ (50-1) [He went around to the north side of the house and saw a big man and recognised him as Thjostolf. Hrútr said him what news he brought. "I must tell you of the slaying of Glum," Thjostolf said. "Who did it?" said Hrútr. "I killed him," said Thjostolf. "Why did you ride here?" said Hrútr. "Hallgerd sent me to you," said Thjostolf. "Then she was not the cause of it," said Hrútr, and drew his sword. (23)] Hrútr's line of questioning reveals the discrepancy in the circumstances surrounding the death of Glúmr – Hallgerðr's beloved husband – and that of Þorvaldr – her first husband – whose death she actively brought about.

⁵² See n.38, Ch.IV above.

⁵³ In fact, as Ármann Jakobsson suggests, the ultimate fate of the marriage is foreboded from the beginning, as even during their wedding feast (Chapter 34) a divorce, between Þráinn Sigfusson and his wife Þórhildr skáldkona, takes place. [Ármann, "Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*," 209]

⁵⁴ After Hallgerðr comments on the fact that Njáll cannot grow a beard, Bergþóra retorts, „en eigi var skegglaus Þorvaldr, bóndi þinn, ok rétt þú honum þó bana.“ (91) [But your husband Thorvald was not beardless, and yet you had him killed. (40)]

says, „Fyrir lítit kemr mér, ... at eiga þann mann, er vaskastr er á Íslandi, ef þú hefnir eigi þessa, Gunnarr.“ (91) [There's little use in me being married to the bravest man in Iceland ... if you don't avenge this, Gunnar. (40)]⁵⁵ But rather than revenge, Gunnarr only offers his wife reproach, and, unlike Guðrún's third husband Bolli, he flatly refuses to be manipulated into what he perceives as unjust action.⁵⁶

This early scene is only a prelude,⁵⁷ and the ensuing feud between the two women, wherein, between the two houses, a series of men are slain in a retaliatory and escalating fashion,⁵⁸ however, Gunnarr and Njáll remain loyal to their friendship, and each killing is settled amicably with monetary compensation. As expected, Hallgerðr is extremely disappointed at her husband's willingness to counteract the killings in a peaceful manner, as the narrator explains after the slaying of Kolr:

„Hallgerðr leitaði á Gunnar mjök, er hann hafði sætzk á vigit. Gunnarr kvezk aldri bregðask skyldu Njáli né sonum hans; hon geisaði mjök.“ (99)

[Hallgerd was very cross with Gunnar for having settled the slaying peacefully. Gunnar said that he would never turn against Njal or his sons, and she went on

⁵⁵ One should not fail to notice the similarity in this scene, and the scene from *Laxdæla saga*, wherein Kjartan asserts his wife Hrefna's right to the seat of highest honour (Chapter 46). Robert Cook, discussing the hostility of the couple at Bergþórshváll toward Hallgerðr, comments that, after demanding that Hallgerðr relinquish the high seat, Bergþóra “assert(s) her authority in blunt language more appropriate to a drill sergeant than to a hostess at a feast with old friends,” and that, “at this point, a sensitive husband would have noticed the offensiveness of Bergþóra's demand,” noting that both Gunnarr and Njáll remain silent throughout. [Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 26] Ursula Dronke discusses this quarrel at length, seeking to find the root of Bergþóra's strong dislike of Hallgerðr, and suggesting that it can be found in her insult regarding the death of her second husband Þorvaldr (See n.54, Ch.V above). To Bergþóra, Dronke writes, “Hallgerðr was a traitor to her first husband, she had him killed. She betrayed the principle that a wife should live by: she did not build her life upon the marital bond,” and thus, “is a woman of bad character and not socially acceptable.” [Dronke, 22]

⁵⁶ „... enda á ek Njáli marga sœmð at launa, ok mun ek ekki vera eggjanarfífl þitt.“ (91) [I am in debt to Njal for many honours, and I'm not going to be a cat's paw for you. (40)]

⁵⁷ Ursula Dronke writes that Hallgerðr “knew he [Gunnarr] has rejected her in his heart from the moment when he refused to defend her dignity at a feast at Njáll's home: when he chose to ally himself with Njáll and not with her.” [Dronke, 21] However, it is difficult to determine what sort of revenge Hallgerðr might have had in mind, as it seems entirely unreasonable to expect Gunnarr to attack his wife's assailant, a middle-aged housewife.

⁵⁸ Andersson, *The Growth of The Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, 191.

fuming. (45)]⁵⁹

And so, from the beginning, and in her reactions to the manner by which Gunnarr handles himself in the subsequent feud, the true nature of Hallgerðr's relationship to her husband is revealed, that is, she measures him by the extent to which he lives up, and in this case fails, to her notion of manliness.⁶⁰

Although the feud between the two women eventually peters out,⁶¹ it is not long before trouble begins anew, and one time, during a great famine Gunnarr runs short of hay and food. He approaches Otkell Skarfsson, seeking to purchase some supplies, is refused in a humiliating manner, and strangely returns only having purchased a slave named Melkólfr. Later, Hallgerðr conscripts the slave Melkólfr to steal butter and cheese from Otkell's farm at Kirkjubær, and to set fire to the storage shed.⁶² After Gunnarr

⁵⁹ The first killing in this feud is brought about after Bergþóra sends a *húskarl* [servant] to Rauðaskriður, to a woodland commonly owned by Gunnarr and Njáll, to cut some wood. Hallgerðr, upon hearing about this from her own *verkstjóri* [overseer], Kolr, comments that, „Svá mun Bergþóra til ætla, ... at ræna mik mǫrgu“ (93) [It seems that Bergþóra is out to rob me in a big way. (41)] Hallgerðr's specific refusal to accept the men's agreement over this woodland might suggest a larger refusal to accept the unyielding fidelity that they share throughout the saga, and perhaps points to a certain jealousy that she feels towards Njáll, who has penetrated a region of her husband, that they have consolidated a degree of love, that will forever remain unknown to her. As Ármann Jakobsson suggests, “No women, and especially not Hallgerðr, are allowed to disrupt the intense bond between the two men.” [Ármann, “Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*,” 214]

⁶⁰ Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 22. Based on Hallgerðr's difficult character, and her propensity, as cited in the previous chapter, to be „mannvǫnd mun ek vera.“ (86) [very demanding when it comes to men. (37)] there is perhaps little surprise that Gunnarr later reveals his own self-doubt when he says, „Hvat ek veit, ... hvárt ek mun því óvaskari maðr en aðrir menn sem mér þykkir meira fyrir en qðrum mǫnnum at vega menn.“ (138-9) [What I don't know, ... is whether I am less manly than other men because killing troubles me more than it does them. (66)]

⁶¹ William Ian Miller writes that this particular dispute, “is articulated wholly in terms of the balance-sheet model. In fact, it seems that part of the author's concern in this episode in to describe the model in its pure form.” [William Ian Miller, “The Central Feud in *Njáls saga*” (*Sagas of Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Tucker, New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989) 294-5.]

⁶² Magnús Sigurðsson reasons that Gunnarr buys Melkólfr in order to have him burn the shed at Otkell's farm at Kirkjubær, and thus avenge himself of Otkell's refusal to sell him supplies. [Magnús, 82-5] It is also interesting to note here that Melkólfr, who was described in an incredibly negative manner upon his introduction (Chapter 47) is reluctant to follow Hallgerðr's orders, telling her, „Váðr hefi ek verit, en þó hefi ek aldri þjófr verit.“ (123) [I may be bad, but I've never been a thief. (57)] This already dishonourable character's remark suggests just how serious allegations of thievery might be, and the gravity with which Hallgerðr's initial characterization must have been met with.

realizes what his wife has done, it is said that, „Gunnarr reiddisk ok mælti: „Illa er þá, ef ek em þjófsnautr,” - ok lýstr hana kinnhest.“ (124) [Gunnar got angry and said, “It's a bad thing if I'm partner to a thief” - and he slapped her on the face. (57)] Hallgerðr then, „kvazk þann hest muna skyldu ok launa, ef hon mætti.” (124) [said she would remember this slap and pay it back if she could. (57)]

To this point it would be an understatement to suggest that ideas of honour and pride lie to the forefront of many of Hallgerðr actions and her behaviour, and, despite the fact that she performs a heinous act of theft and enforced arson, her efforts here are likely an attempt to avenge the public humiliation that Gunnarr had suffered by way of Otkell's refusal.⁶³ Furthermore, as Robert Cook suggests, it must have been particularly disgraceful for Hallgerðr that Gunnarr agreed, without hesitation, to the purchase of the disreputable slave Melkólfr from the man who had just humiliated him.⁶⁴ Thus, Hallgerðr's response to her husband's seemingly ungrateful slap, for – at least in her own eyes – her actions were undertaken primarily in his defence, is not surprising in the least.⁶⁵ The slap itself distinctly recalls two earlier incidents, when both her first and her second husbands had treated her in a similar fashion, however, this slap is in some ways worse than the others in that it is public rather than private, and because of the attached accusation of thievery.⁶⁶ Additionally, in all three cases the men who strike Hallgerðr are

⁶³ Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 27-8; Einar, *Njáls Saga*, 133.

⁶⁴ Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 28. Cook further writes that the reasons behind Gunnarr's purchase of Melkólfr have long been a mystery, but that, if it is not the case that Gunnarr purchased him to exact revenge (See n.62, Ch.V above), then, “perhaps it was added simply to show how far Gunnarr was ready to be humiliated, and thereby to justify further his wife's honor-motivated retaliation against Kirkjubær.” [Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 28 n.86] Providing a more simple explanation, Theodore Andersson comments that, “it is one of Gunnar's characteristics that he makes repeated mistakes.”

⁶⁵ Einar, *Njáls Saga*, 134: “... her anger grows all the more bitter because of the motives underlying the theft: her desire to avenge Gunnar's humiliation and her hope to improve their marital relation.”

⁶⁶ Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 27.

met with different responses. Þorvaldr's slap, so forceful that it draws forth blood, is met with anger, and Hallgerðr soon enlists her foster-father Þjóstólfr to avenge the slight. On the other hand, after Glúmr strikes Hallgerðr, it is asserted that Hallgerðr loves him very much, and first struggles to calm herself and to hide her tears, before forbidding Þjóstólfr from doing the same to her second husband as he had done to her first.⁶⁷ And then, what is the outcome of Gunnarr's blow?

From this point, until his eventual death, Gunnarr's life is entirely consumed with feuding, first with Otkell and the liar Skammkell, (Chapters 47-56) then with Starkaðr Barkarson and Egill Kolsson, (Chapters 57-64) and, finally, culminating in his feud with the two Þorgeirrs, (Chapters 65-77) Þorgeirr Otkelsson and Þorgeirr Starkaðarson, the second of whom was not content with the outcome of the earlier feud, and who fatefully seeks the advice of Mörðr Valgarðsson to bring about Gunnarr's downfall.⁶⁸ During this interval of the saga, after the theft at Kirkjubær, Robert Cook notes that Hallgerðr carries out her self-appointed role as the wife of the most heroic man in Iceland, seemingly satisfied with his active role in the feuds, and the fact that he chooses to face his enemies at home rather than seeking safe exile abroad, although there is still no explicit mention of love between husband and wife.⁶⁹

In the end, after refusing to abide by the decision of the court to leave the country

⁶⁷ Robert Cook comments on the difference between the verb used in Glúmr's case, *drepa*, and the verb used in the two others, *ljósta*. He writes, “*drepa*, is less strong than *ljósta*, used of the slaps administered by Þorvaldr and Gunnarr, and in addition it is not certain that the blow was directed at the face, as it was explicitly in with the other two.” [Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 19]

⁶⁸ Lönnroth, *Njáls saga*, 77. Lönnroth, in this work, also discusses Mörðr as a demonic agent, (131) and as Njáll's evil counterpart, (27) and writes that, “when attention focuses on Mörðr, he is usually working a crooked scheme, ... This makes it almost impossible for us to see him as anything but an alien intruder, even had he not been presented as a villain from the start.” (87-8)

⁶⁹ Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 23-4.

for three years, Gunnar is attacked by a large party of men at his home. He defends himself skillfully with his bow until one of the men, Þorbrandr Þorleiksson, manages to cut his bow-string, whereupon Gunnarr turns to his wife, and it is said,

Hann mælti til Hallgerðar: „Fá mér leppa tvá ór hári þínu, ok snúið þit móðir mín saman til bogastrengs mér.” „Liggr þér nokkut við?” segir hon. „Líf mitt liggr við,” segir hann, „því at þeir munu mik aldri fá sóttan, meðan ek kem boganum við.” „Þá skal ek nú,” segir hon, „muna þér kinnhestinn ok hirði ek aldri, hvárt þú verr þik lengr eða skemr.” (189)

[Gunnar spoke to Hallgerd: “Give me two locks of your hair, and you and my mother twist them into a bowstring for me.”

“Does anything depend on it?” she said.

“My life depends on it,” he said, “for they'll never be able to get me as long as I can use my bow.”

“Then I'll remind you,” she said, “of the slap on my face, and I don't care whether you hold out for a long or a short time.” (89)]

Without his bow Gunnarr eventually falls in the battle, and Hallgerðr is left with Gunnarr's parting words, „Hefir hverr til síns ágætis nokkut, (189)” [Everyone has some mark of distinction, (90)] and those of his mother Rannveig, „Illa ferr þér, ok mun þín skömm lengi upp. (189)” [You are evil, and your shame will live long. (90)] Gunnarr and Rannveig's words have proved incredibly prescient, and Hallgerðr has almost universally earned the lasting infamy that they had predicted. However, Hallgerðr's actions, when read in the context of the events that preceded them, are not of a singular maliciousness, and, in fact, they are, at least in part, retribution for the blow she had suffered earlier at her husband's hands, a blow that she had sworn she would avenge. This marriage, which is never discussed in terms of love, ends on the only note that it had ever properly managed to tune itself to, that is honour: Gunnarr dies at home, defending himself valiantly in a manner befitting „[maðr] er vaskastr er á Íslandi,” (91) [the bravest man in Iceland, (40)], and on Hallgerðr's behalf, in the end she has finally managed to repay her

husband, as she had promised, for his slap.⁷⁰

Each of Hallgerðr's three marriages ends – like Guðrún's, but for the exception of her first – with the premature death of her husband, although, perhaps an even greater contiguity is found in the three blows delivered by the men, which seem to signal the beginning of their respective demises. However, in the case of her first husband, Hallgerðr, like Guðrún uses her husband's violent outburst to escape an undesirable and unhappy marriage, but rather than simply divorcing him, Hallgerðr recruits her foster-father Þjóstólfr to avenge the slight. Again, similar to Guðrún, Hallgerðr's third marriage, her “failed romance,”⁷¹ is her most prominent in that it is likewise framed by an extended period of feuding among prominent male heroes, a large portion of which is attributed to Hallgerðr's unruly behaviour, and the blow that Gunnarr administers early in their marriage is ultimately repaid, and hastens his own death. However, to remember Hallgerðr in this light, tells only half the story, and her second marriage, her only loving marriage, as discussed above, reveals as much about her character as her earlier forced and her later failed marriage. In this instance, Hallgerðr is no less emotionally effected by the slap delivered by her husband Glúmr, but rather than using this as an opportunity to escape her marriage, she struggles to rein in her tears, knowing full well how her

⁷⁰ Whether Hallgerðr could have in fact prevented Gunnarr's death by supplying him with a replacement bowstring is a matter of much scholarly debate. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson writes that, “the crux of the matter is this: the episode would be valid and credible if Gunnar and Hallgerður thought it possible to make a bowstring from her hair, and this alone is decisive, whether it is really possible or not,” and suggests some possible earlier models and source material for the incident. [Einar, *Njáls Saga*, 122-3] Along similar Theodore Andersson suggests that, “The scene is so dramatic that not even the absurdity of using human hair for a bowstring detracts from the effect.” [Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, 194] Although, perhaps following the text, and the characters' own utterances, Robert Cook comments that, “Gunnarr had no chance of surviving the assault, but as a result of Hallgerðr's refusal, his end will come sooner than otherwise.” [Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 29]

⁷¹ Robert Cook, in a summation of what he labels a “failed romance,” writes that Gunnarr and Hallgerðr, “did marry, but they did so rashly, taking no time to develop a viable relationship. They proved to be a seriously incompatible couple.” [Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr,” 30]

foster-father Þjóstólfr will react should he discover their source, that he will again – though this time controverting her will – avenge the slap and will kill Glúmr.

The nature of divorce in the sagas, at least from the examples offered above, seems largely a function of the manner by which marriages begin, as discussed in the previous chapter. The disproportionate power that the patriarchy holds over the initial negotiation process is counteracted by the control that women seem to enact in finding myriad ways to escape those marriages they deem unsuitable, by both lawful and questionably unlawful means.⁷² However, marriages do not always end by means of divorce or by the express intentions of a dissatisfied wife. Thus, in the examples above, the four successful, happy marriages all likewise end prematurely with the unwelcome death of the husband. And so marriage, countering the auspices under which it is often initiated, often acts an entirely destabilizing force, and even in the case when both parties are satisfied with the arrangement, when a loving relationship is developed, success and contentment are hardly sustainable, and often strikingly ephemeral.

⁷² In this respect, according to Jenny Jochens, the sagas “report four times as many cases of divorce instigated by women as by men,” and, in these cases, likewise attested from the select sample of this study, one of the “most frequently cited reason(s) was the insult suffered by the wife when her husband slapped her.” [Jochens, “The Medieval Icelandic Heroine,” 105]

CHAPTER VI - CONCLUSION

Although this study has largely restricted itself to a focused discussion on women and marriage, more specifically the way that they can begin and end in the sagas, it is my hope that the three-walled exhibition space that has been constructed above offers at least a glimpse, contrary to Alexander Bugge's comment cited in the first chapter above, of the particular richness of the larger gallery of women in the *Íslendingasögur*, and in medieval Icelandic literature as a whole. Additionally, but for the few diversions into the arena of blood-feud, the discussion above further belies the common assumption that the sagas consist entirely of escalating disputes between, and among prominent land owners,¹ and provides ample evidence to dispute Bugge's second claim, that the men of the sagas are more interesting than the women.

From the very beginning, from their respective points of entry into *Gísla saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, and *Njáls saga*, Auðr, Guðrún and Hallgerðr, when placed alongside one another offer an incredibly diverse landscape, whose subsequent cartography is poorly mapped when restricted to purely archetypal formulations, not only the manner by which they are characterized, but in the characterizations themselves. With Auðr's entry the narrator relies entirely on genealogical information, which doubtlessly means a great deal, although the specific nature of its import is not entirely clear outside of a medieval context. While the introductory passages of the others, Guðrún and Hallgerðr, are likewise bolstered by lengthy genealogies, their respective introductions do not end here, but continue to provide acutely individuated information, on Guðrún's behalf,

¹ Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 1-2; See also Allen, *Fire and Iron*, and Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga*.

concentrating on the notably exceptional aspects of her personality, but painting her physical beauty only in wide strokes. Hallgerðr's entry, on the other hand, is, on the surface, solely concerned with her physiology, and, more specifically, in one of the most memorable scenes in all of medieval Icelandic literature – why stop there? – the narrator, remarkably, introduces her as a young child playing on the floor, when her uncle offers a foreboding premonition of her troublesome nature – physically manifested in her eyes – that seems to follow her into womanhood, and through what remains of the saga.

The differences continue and in fact widen when the respective marriage histories of these three women are juxtaposed, and examined in a deeply contextual manner. In the above discussion concerning the negotiation and the betrothal proceedings, the concept of the fiercely independent woman is quickly dismissed as neither Guðrún, nor Hallgerðr were able to act under their own volition in this regard, and moreover, they were entirely unable to subvert the will of their male guardians though they raised their objections in several instances; on Auðr's behalf, little is said in this respect, but for the fact that Gísli asked for her hand, and soon after they married. Additionally, although not always necessary, it remains that in several instances, at the behest of the patriarchy, Guðrún and Hallgerðr are both consulted before a betrothal is confirmed, and that often this portends well and results in a successful – both in terms of love and in terms of power and wealth – marriage. However, even this stipulation cannot provide insurance against failure, as Gunnarr is given more than an earful concerning Hallgerðr's past before they are married, an agreement that nevertheless produces an ill-matched and ill-fated coupling.

It also remains, as noted above, that in every instance cited, whether the prospective bride was consulted or ignored – or, in the negotiation of Guðrún and Bolli's marriage, both – the intentions of a woman's male guardians are never obstructed. This again contrasts with the dated image of the proudly independent northern heroine, but it also poses problems with respect to more recent scholarship regarding the idea of gender in Old Norse culture. Carol Clover has proposed the idea that, with respect to a social binary in this culture, “the fault line runs not between males and females per se, but between able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman) on one hand, and, on the other, a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men).”² Although this a division seems applicable in some instances, Jenny Jochens suggests that women, “signalled adherence to these ideals in their inciting discourse,” and so it remains that if this gender blurring does exist in the sagas, the one gender that was defined is clearly masculine, and that, “the female [gender], was not defined on its own terms and accomplishments.”³ As such, and in light of the marriage histories of Guðrún and Hallgerðr – who must surely belong to the category of exceptional women – it seems that the idea that the women of the sagas were not inhibited by a theoretical ceiling above which they could not rise is applicable only in a limited sense.⁴ In fact, when Kjartan bluntly refuses to take Guðrún along with him on

² Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 380. For furthering reading on old men in the sagas, and the parallel between old age and femininity, see Ármann Jakobsson, “The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders” (*The Journal of English and German Philology* 104:3, Jul. 2005) 297-325.

³ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 213.

⁴ Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 380. Jenny Jochens further notes that, “Norse society articulated ideals that epitomized men in their prime. When women were described in this way and even made to incorporate these ideals themselves, they were often in situations where men lacked these qualities and women were required to incite them to rekindle the approved masculine action of the narrative.” [Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 213]

his travels abroad, she in fact seems to crash abruptly into it, and likewise, Hallgerðr's persistent frustration at the limits of her influence throughout the early part of *Njáls saga* is loudly accompanied by the resounding thuds of her fists against the very same surface.⁵

If the discussion of marriage negotiations above strove to measure the lengths of rope that anchored the women of the sagas in the social sphere, the examination of the ways that marriages can end sought to measure their material flexibility. In other words, as demonstrated above, an engagement in the sagas is anything but a life sentence without the possibility of parole, and a woman can work both within, and beyond, the legal framework to secure her “freedom.” This is played out in the stories of Guðrún and Hallgerðr, who count no less than seven marriages between them, but Auðr, on the other hand, and contrary to several other women that populate *Gísla saga*, is steadfast in supporting her husband while he – and likewise, she – suffers through his outlawry, and is eventually killed. Though often less remembered than their more epic, failed marriages, Guðrún and Hallgerðr also experience loving marriages, however, like Auðr's, they also end in the premature and unwelcome death of the husband. And so marriage in the sagas, despite its important role in strengthening the families involved, and in forming important kinship bonds, functions, and can be used expressly, no less as a destabilizing force. To offer only three examples, in *Gísla saga*, it is Þórdís' second marriage, to her first husband Þorgrímr's brother Borkr, that ultimately results in the death of her brother Gísli, and soon after he is killed the marriage ends; in *Laxdæla saga*, the central feud between Guðrún and Kjartan,⁶ or at least its escalation, is brought about in response to Guðrún's

⁵ Along with these specific examples are several instances throughout the sagas when women bears arms against men, sometimes failing, in other instances finding very limited success. See also n.13, Ch.5.

⁶ See n.28, Ch.5 above.

marriage to Bolli, which is forced upon her under the duress of her father, and culminates in the deaths of both men; similarly, in *Njáls saga*, Hallgerðr's marriage to Gunnarr, which – according to both Hrútr and Njáll – is ill-fated from the beginning, despite the fact that both parties enter the relationship openly and willingly, and seems to signal the beginning of a period full of deceit, deception, and death.

The three women that form the basis of this study in anything but an entirely superficial reading refuse to adhere to a single model. Auðr, in *Gísla saga*, is certainly a loyal wife, serving the interests of her husband throughout the saga. However, Auðr's loyalty seems less entrenched by her subjugation to the patriarchy, than by her love for Gísli, and, in fact, unlike the Guðrún and Hallgerðr, she manages, on two occasions, to wield weapons against men, (Ch. 32, 34) in one very memorable scene, bringing forth blood and shame in equal measure. Guðrún's story however, contrary to Auðr's, is one of subjugation at the hands of the patriarchy, and this story of submission, wherein one of the most intelligent and potent women encountered in the sagas is forced into a largely passive role, forms the central tragedy of *Laxdæla saga*.⁷ However, Guðrún's capable and cunning nature ensures that she finds some success, and in most cases, through measured actions and wise counsel, both sought and dispensed, she gets exactly what she wants. Nevertheless, the one thing that eludes her, and which remains unrequited, is the most important thing, that is her love for Kjartan, and the fact that she gets everything but this makes her story all the more tragic.

Although she has sometimes been met with an unreasonably hostile attitude,⁸

⁷ Auerbach, 30.

⁸ See Peter Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga*, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962) 78; Peter Hallberg, “Några anteckningar om replik och dialog i Njals saga” (*Festschrift Walter Baetke dargebracht zu seinem 80. Geburtstag am 28. März 1964*, eds. Kurt Rudolph, Rolf Heller, and Ernst

Hallgerðr arguably provides the most interesting story among the three women, and perhaps one of the most interesting in all of medieval Icelandic literature. Like Guðrún, she suffers from the overbearing authority of her father, and, in fact, he bears culpability for the failure of her first marriage in words, as well as in his subsequent approach to her second and third marriage negotiations. Likewise, as Einar Ólafur Sveinsson writes, “there is much that explains and extenuates her faults,”⁹ but it is not my intention to provide a defence, or to justify Hallgerðr's behaviour, for, as Theodore Andersson writes, “a similarly negative view can be taken of most of the characters of *Njáls saga*,” and that even her heroic husband Gunnar is not beyond reproach.¹⁰ Rather, in contrast to Guðrún, Hallgerðr, though quite capable in her own right, and not from lack of effort, essentially, apart from bringing about the death of her first husband, fails to accomplish anything that she desires. This is her tragedy, that a promising young child, the proverbial apple of her father's eye, is, as noted by Hrútr, rotten from the beginning, and, as expressed in her utter frustration at her misguided effort to drive Gunnar into action, that ultimately she does not succeed even as a failure.

Walter, Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger) 141; P. A. Suhm, *Critisk Historie af Danmark, udi den hedenske Tid fra Odin til Gorm den gamle*, (Vol.4, Copenhagen, 1781) xi.

⁹ Einar, *Njáls saga*, 118.

¹⁰ Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, 185-6. In this regard, Andersson comments that, “Gunnar's story is the story of his indeterminate moral status. He is at once the unsurpassed hero victimized by ubiquitous malice and a man whose instincts, despite his own protestations, are open to question. He is a party to legal trickery. He bullies Hrútr to recover a dowry. He marries a notorious wife despite ample warnings. He buys a villainous slave and accepts a horse match with challengers whose ill will is plain for all to see. And, finally, he contravenes the terms of his exile with no attempt at explanation. It therefore seems difficult to believe that Gunnar is not a partner, voluntarily or involuntarily, in his own undoing.” [Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, 195.]

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