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Gender and Subversion in Medieval Icelandic Legend and Saga

Género y subversión en las leyendas y sagas medievales islandesas

Abstract:

The saga writers of medieval Iceland rhetorically engage with contemporary social issues in their narratives, including issues faced by women and, in particular, the treatment of women in regard to their marriages. Many of these medieval social issues are still relevant today, including gender politics, matters of consent, and spousal abuse. This study limits its analysis of these themes to narratives in two genres of medieval Icelandic literature: the heroic cycle (heroic eddic poetry and the legendary *Völsunga saga*) and the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*). In all of the narratives much is at stake for the leading female characters; the primary difference is that depending on genre, the actions females make to subvert the dominant patriarchy vary greatly, from drastic on the one hand to subtle yet effective on the other.

Keywords:

Saga literature; Gender; Marriage; Patriarchy.

Resumen:

Los escritores de la saga en la Edad Media de Islandia se involucran retóricamente con cuestiones sociales contemporáneas a sus narrativas, entre ellas, las problemáticas a las que se enfrentan las mujeres y, en particular, el tratamiento respecto de sus matrimonios. Muchas de las mencionadas cuestiones sociales medievales siguen siendo relevantes hoy en día, incluyendo la política de género, las cuestiones de consentimiento y el abuso conyugal. Este estudio limita el análisis de estos temas a narraciones de dos géneros de la literatura medieval islandesa: el ciclo heroico (poesía eddica heroica y la legendaria *Völsunga saga*) y las sagas de islandeses (*Íslendingasögur*). En todos los casos analizados, mucho se pone en juego para los principales personajes femeninos; la diferencia principal es que, dependiendo del género, las acciones que las mujeres hacen para subvertir el patriarcado dominante varían considerablemente, siendo en ocasiones drásticas, mientras que en otras resultan sutiles pero eficaces.

Palabras-clave:

Literatura de las sagas; Género; Matrimonio; Patriarcado.

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Introduction

The thirteenth century in Iceland marked the dawn of an age of great saga writing and the introduction of many strong female literary characters who challenge the patriarchy. During this time, as Jenny Jochens writes, “women were still exchanged as commodities in marriage negotiations, subject to male violence as wives, and obliged to acquiesce to their husbands’ numerous sexual partners” (Jochens, 1991: 392). She cites Christianity as opening women’s possibilities for marital and sexual equality, but states that misogyny and “inveterate masculine habits” prevented “full implementation of the program” (Jochens, 1991: 392). Saga writers responded to these social conditions with their depictions of strong female characters who resort to often extreme measures to challenge the patriarchal structure of their society. Heroines from two different genres of medieval Icelandic literature—the heroic cycle (heroic eddic poetry and the legendary *Völsunga saga*) and the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*)—challenge the patriarchal structure that dictates much of their lives, albeit in varying ways.²

In the Sagas of Icelanders, Jochens writes, “women clearly exercised considerable rights and privileges over their own lives, and their advice—for good or bad—carried weight in the men’s world” (Jochens, 1986b: 41). In the heroic cycle, on the other hand, women were often forced to resort to extreme measures to exert their will. How these women exert their agency thus differs in the two genres and is greatly affected by, and affects, their kin and marriage relationships. In the heroic cycle, for example, female characters often have a strong and enduring loyalty to their kin families, whereas in the Sagas of Icelanders feminine loyalty is problematized and the women are not as enduringly loyal to kin, especially when refused the right to consent to their marriages. Reading these depictions of strong saga women allows us to observe an interesting critique by saga writers of the society in which they lived. These writers identify and depict how suppression of women (or, as modern readers may surmise, of any marginalized group) necessarily leads to subversive action.³

² It would be possible to extend this study to include many other characters and genres in medieval Icelandic literature; however, the scope here is limited to encourage consideration of connections between archetypal medieval Icelandic heroines found in the heroic cycle and in the Sagas of Icelanders.

³ Primary source quotations are given in the text to modern English translations and in the footnotes to corresponding passages from Icelandic editions. When analyzing literary sources specific wording is important and translations can sometimes be misleading. Wendolyn Weber has discussed the manipulation of medieval texts made by translators and she highlights the importance of consulting editions of the original sources. She argues that the ambiguity of the original sources needs to be respected by modern critics who identify power relations between characters based on gender. She concludes: “disconnected from the legacy of sexist translation, perhaps future interpretations of medieval Germanic heroic women should seize on the linguistic and cultural ambiguities of the texts to offer alternatives to the ideology of patriarchy” (Weber, 2012: 325). The present author agrees that any translation misrepresenting its original in important respects needs to be critically evaluated before interpretations proceed; however, the present interpretation of the sources does not align with Weber’s, arguing that there is no clear alternative to “the ideology of patriarchy”

Legendary women of the heroic cycle

In the context of the heroic cycle, women are given no choice in their marriage partners. Their actions may therefore be considered logical, albeit extreme, reactions to their marital circumstances. These women are given no choice but to act as pledges to their husbands from their kin. Signý Völsungsdóttir is married to King Siggeirr at the insistence of her father. On how Siggeirr gains his bride, the saga narrative tells us:

“He paid a visit to King Volsung and asked him for Signy’s hand in marriage. The king was favourably disposed to the idea, as were his sons, but she herself was against it, though she asked her father to decide about this as he did about other matters concerning her. And the king thought it advisable for her to be married, and she was betrothed to King Siggeirr.”⁴ (*Saga of the Volsungs*: 4)

Siggeirr quickly leaves the wedding feast with his new bride, but upon his departure he invites his in-laws to visit him at his own hall. Völsungr agrees, and he and his sons arrive at Siggeirr’s on the agreed-upon date. Siggeirr betrays Völsungr, defeats him in battle, and has nine of Völsungr’s ten sons killed. Signý is instrumental to her brother and Völsungr’s eldest son Sigmundr’s survival, and she hides him away without her husband’s knowledge. Early in her life Signý is thus unhappily married to a husband who has killed her father and nine of her brothers, but she immediately and silently challenges the power dynamic of the marriage from its outset by keeping Sigmundr alive.

Signý subverts her husband further by getting Sigmundr to kill her first two sons by Siggeirr. With the first son, Signý coldly tells Sigmundr, who does not know the child is hers, “then seize and kill him ... There’s no need for him to live any longer”⁵ (*Saga of the Volsungs*: 9); the same action occurs with the second son the next winter. These two filicides present Signý’s greater allegiance to her kin family than her marriage family, even though her kin family treated her as a pledge in marriage. The act of murdering her innocent children is horrible, but their deaths are required for the revenge Signý seeks against her husband to avenge her kin.

in the “culture” of the sources, and it is argued below that prominent female characters often seek to subvert the dominating patriarchy. This approach agrees with that of Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, who, in a recent book-length study, provides a valuable overview of female power in medieval Icelandic sources in relation to, as she states at the outset, “the restraints of patriarchy” (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 2013: 1).

⁴ “Hann fór á fund Völsungs konungs, ok bað hann Signýjar til handa sér. Þessu tali tekr konungr vel ok svá synir hans, en hún sjálf var þessa ófús, biðr þó föður sinn ráða sem öðru því, sem til hennar tæki. En konunginum sýndist þat ráð at gifta hana, ok var hún föstnuð Siggeiri konungi” (*Völsunga saga*: 113).

⁵ “Tak þú hann þá ok drep hann. Eigi þarf hann þá lengr at lifa” (*Völsunga saga*: 120).

Once these two children with Siggieir are dead, Signý exchanges shapes with a sorceress and sets out to visit Sigmundr in disguise. She is impregnated by her brother and eventually gives birth to Sinfjötli, a pure Völsung male who will aid his mother in her revenge quest. On her motive for incest, Grace Fleming von Sweringen writes that “Signý knew that only a pure Wælsung [Völsung] would be brave enough to assist in carrying out the revenge” (Sweringen, 1909: 508). The incest is secretive, intentional, calculated, and ultimately subversive.⁶ Judy Quinn adds that as a result of being the incestuous child of two Völsungar, Sinfjötli indeed “surpassed Sigmundr in the demonstration of loyalty to the Völsung line by killing Signý’s next two children by King Siggeirr (his own step-siblings) without hesitation when ordered by his mother, an act Sigmundr had refused to do” (Quinn, 2009: 126).

Siggeirr imprisons Sigmundr and Sinfjötli as a result of their actions, but Signý continues her subversion and helps them to escape. They set fire to Siggeirr’s hall, trapping and killing him. Signý leaves the burning hall, but her final words in the saga reveal her loyalty; she speaks to her brother and their son:

“You’ll know now whether or not I have remembered King Siggeirr’s killing of King Volsung against him! she answered, and I had our children killed when they seemed to me all too tardy in avenging our father, and in the shape of some sorceress I came to you in the forest, and Sinfjotli is your son, and mine. His immense vigour comes from being King Volsung’s grandson on his father’s as well as his mother’s side. Everything I have done has been to achieve vengeance that to go on living is out of the question. I shall now gladly die with King Siggeirr, reluctant though I was to marry him.”⁷ (*Saga of the Volsungs*: 13–14)

Signý’s vengeance was more important than her life, and her final words indicate that even though she reluctantly married Siggeirr, she decides to die with him and remain loyal to her husband. Moments before his death Völsungr tells Signý that she must be a good wife to Siggeirr: “Of course you must go back to your husband,” King Volsung replied, ‘and stay with him, whatever happens to us’⁸ (*Saga of the Volsungs*: 7).

⁶ The theme of incest is subtly introduced earlier in the saga when Völsungr marries Hljóð. Hljóð had given an apple of fertility to Rerirr, Völsungr’s father, when he and his queen were unable to conceive a child. Hljóð is thus involved in the fertility of Völsungr’s unnamed mother and later becomes his wife (Raudvere, 2009: 160).

⁷ “Nú skaltu vita, hvárt ek hefi munat Siggeiri konungi dráp Völsungs konungs. Ek lét drepa börn okkur, er mér þóttu of sein til föðurhefnda, ok ek fór í skóg til þín í völuvíki, ok er Sinfjötli okkarr sonr. Hefir hann af því mikit kapp, at hann er bæði sonarsonr ok dóttursonr Völsungs konungs. Hefi ek þar til unnit alla hluti, at Siggeirr konungr skyldi bana fá. Hefi ek ok svá mikit til unnit, at fram kæmist hefndin, at mér er með engum kosti líft. Skal ek nú deyja með Siggeiri konungi lostig, er ek átta hann nauðig” (*Völsunga saga*: 127–8).

⁸ “Þú skalt at vísu fara heim til bónda þíns ok vera samt með honum, hversu sem með oss ferr” (*Völsunga saga*: 117).

From the moment Siggeirr betrays his in-laws, Signý is torn in two opposing directions, between loyalty to her kin or loyalty to her husband. In her final act of dying by her husband's side, she demonstrates that she did not forget the instruction her father gave her to be a good and loyal wife:

“The author has drawn in Signý the full consequence of the most ancient and important feature of Germanic women, their revenge for native family. Signý's single-minded thought was for vengeance, to the point that she was not only willing to offer up her own children, whether unsuitable or as yet untried, but also to deploy her own reproductive powers with her brother to obtain a better candidate.” (Jochens, 1986a: 157)

The filicides were prerequisite to the attainment of Signý's revenge; all four of Siggeirr's children are dead by the time of his own death, which leaves him with no living heirs. Signý then dies alongside her husband knowing none of his descendants remain alive, descendants who would have in turn sought revenge for his death. Signý's actions are necessary responses to the actions of two principal male characters in her life, her father and her husband. She acts violently to gain revenge and end the cycle of vengeance.

Guðrún Gjúkadóttir's life runs parallel to that of Signý. She has the bad marriage, her kin are slain by her husband, and she also murders her own children. However, unlike her predecessor, Guðrún cannot kill herself, even though she once “took up an armful of stones and walked into the sea, intending to do away with herself. Then huge waves bore her along over the sea, and with their aid she was carried away and came at length to the castle of King Jonakr”⁹ (*Saga of the Volsung*: 74). Both women were pledged into bad marriages by their kin, and, as Carol Parrish Jamison contends, “both Gudrun and Signy take clan solidarity to an extreme by sacrificing their own children to enact vengeance on their husbands” (Parrish Jamison, 2004: 30).

Guðrún suffers greatly, and after her first husband Sigurðr Fáfnisbani has been killed by her brothers Gunnarr and Högni she leaves her family for several years. Her kin eventually track her down, at which time her mother Grímhildr drugs her with a magic potion. Grímhildr then speaks with her, while Guðrún is under the influence:

“Greetings, my daughter. I will give you gold and treasures of all kinds, an inheritance from your father, precious rings and the bed hangings of

⁹ “Guðrún gekk eitt sinn til sævar ok tók grjót í fang sér ok gekk á sæinn út ok vildi tapa sér. Þá hófu hana stórar báur fram eptir sjánum, ok fluttist hún með þeira fulltingi ok kom um síðir til borgar Jónakrs konungs” (*Völsunga saga*: 213).

the most graceful Hun maidens, and then your husband will be atoned for. Afterwards I shall give you in marriage to that powerful king, Atli. Then you'll have control of his wealth. And don't forsake your relatives for the sake of one man. Do rather as we ask.' 'I will never marry King Atli,' replied Gudrun. 'It would not be seemly for us to continue the line together.'"¹⁰ (*Saga of the Volsungs*: 63)

Guðrún is given no choice but to marry Atli, even though she refuses: "You are destined to marry this king,' said Grimhild, 'and you shall marry none other'"¹¹ (*Saga of the Volsungs*: 63). Guðrún marries Atli, "but her heart never smiled upon him and they had little happiness from their life together"¹² (*Saga of the Volsungs*: 64). The Gjúkungar are then invited to Atli's court, echoing the fateful voyage of the Völsungar to Siggeirr's court. Gunnarr and Högni travel with their men to visit their sister,¹³ and upon their arrival at Atli's court, the Gjúkungar are predictably ambushed by Atli's men and captured. Högni is killed first, at the request of Gunnarr, and then Gunnarr is killed soon after.¹⁴

In an extraordinary act of revenge, Guðrún serves Atli food and drink, then reveals the food to be their children's flesh and the drink their blood. Once Atli retires to bed, Guðrún murders him and burns down his hall, killing all those inside who were responsible for the deaths of her kin. Guðrún's killing of her children is instrumental to the killing of her husband, for if she did not kill them they would be bound to avenge their father's death: "if vengeance for brothers necessitated killing a husband, the wife first had to sacrifice their children in order to make him

¹⁰ "Vel verði þér, dóttir, ek gef þér gull ok alls konar gripi at þiggja eptir þinn föður, dýrliga hringa ok ársal hýnskra meyja, þeira er kurteisastu eru, þá er þér bættr þinn maðr. Siðan skal þik gifta Atla konungi inum ríka. Þá muntu ráða hans auði, ok lát eigi frændr þína fyrir sakir eins manns ok ger heldr sem vér biðjum.' Guðrún svarar: 'Aldri vil ek eiga Atla konung, ok ekki samir okkr ætt saman at auka'" (*Völsunga saga*: 197).

¹¹ "Þenna konung mun þér skipat at eiga, en engan skaltu elligar eiga" (*Völsunga saga*: 197).

¹² "En aldri gerði hugr hennar við honum hlæja, ok með lítilli blíðu var þeira samvista" (*Völsunga saga*: 198).

¹³ Vésteinn Ólason contrasts Gunnarr's willingness to enter into the trap Atli sets for him with the inaction of Hamlet: "there is a striking contrast between the barbaric and glorious king, who immediately reacts to an invitation to risk his life when honour is at stake, and the thoughtful Dane who hesitates and reflects on his situation before he acts, between the swift action of this heroic lay and the drawn-out and complicated development of the plot in Hamlet. It seems obvious that while Hamlet's is a modern mind (although his surroundings are medieval), Gunnarr is a hero of the remote past" (Vésteinn Ólason, 2005: 165).

¹⁴ Carolyne Larrington contends that Gunnarr's decision to have his brother killed first is an instance of brother killing brother: "a partial exception to the general rule that there are no true fratricides in the heroic poetry is Gunnarr's insistence that Atli must kill Högni before he will reveal the whereabouts of Sigurðr's treasure hoard in *Akv*. Gunnarr's complex motives are not readily explained by fraternal hostility, since he and Högni have exhibited a close bond until now; although Högni disputed the advisability of killing Sigurðr, both brothers eventually procured Guttormr to do the deed. The motif is nevertheless unusual; often brothers vie to die before one another, so that they do not have to witness the death of someone they love. Gunnarr stoically takes the responsibility of witnessing the brother's death upon himself and his demand shapes for Högni an exemplarily heroic death" (Larrington, 2011: 179).

understand that he himself could no longer hope that he would be avenged” (Jochens, 1996: 140). Guðrún’s forced marriage has, like Signý’s, produced deadly results, and Atli dies knowing there will be no compensation for his death.

Carolyne Larrington proposes that Guðrún’s motivations for killing her own children are somewhat different than Signý’s. In her view, Guðrún may project onto her children her pent-up anger for the death of her late husband Sigurðr at the hands of her now-deceased brothers, Gunnarr and Högni:

“Guðrún’s killing of her sons in *Akv.* and *Am.* could be read as the projection of the sister’s unresolved hostility towards her brothers onto another set of brothers. Erpr and Eitill function as substitutes for the brothers who are, and thanks to the patriarchal politics of the kin-group have always been, beyond her reach.” (Larrington, 2011: 179)

Although Larrington’s psychological interpretation is compelling, a comparative view acknowledging the role of Signý’s filicides as prefiguring Guðrún’s own deeds may be more logical, especially considering the fact that Guðrún fights alongside her brothers in *Völsunga saga*,¹⁵ which challenges any resentment she may hold towards them:

“She now saw that her brothers were having a hard time of it, and so she decided on stern action. She put on a coat of mail, took up a sword and fought alongside her brothers, and advanced to the attack as boldly as the boldest man, and everyone said the same, that they would hardly see a stouter defence than that.”¹⁶ (*Saga of the Volsungs*: 69)

The fall of the Gjúkungar, as it was for Völsungr and nine of his sons, results from deceit within an extended family, a struggle between in-laws. The same is true for the death of Guðrún’s first husband, Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, killed as a result of a dispute involving his in-laws and a former lover (see below). The fall of Atli is no less domestic, for Guðrún slays him in his own bed. Guðrún’s filicides and subsequent tricking of Atli into eating their children’s flesh at his final dinner is yet another family affair.¹⁷ This heroine, like her predecessor Signý, utilizes the home as

¹⁵ In *Atlamál* Guðrún also fights alongside her brothers, whereas in *Atlakviða* she only speaks with them before they are seized.

¹⁶ “Nú sér hún, at sárt er leikit við bræðr hennar; hyggur nú á harðræði, fór í brynju ok tók sverð ok barðist með bræðrum sínum ok gekk svá fram sem inn hraustasti karlmaðr, ok þat sögðu allir á einn veg, at varla sæi meiri vörn en þar” (*Völsunga saga*: 206).

¹⁷ Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, act 5 scene 3 is similar to this scene, when Titus himself serves the slain Chiron and Demetrius to their mother, Tamora, before he stabs her to death. The theme of paternally-charged cannibalism is not uncommon in narrative history. Stories about the House of Atreus demonstrate this further, where two males in the family line kill children and serve them as food: Tantalus kills his son Pelops and serves him as food to the Olympian gods (see Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 1, 46–58), and then his grandson Atreus kills his own brother Thyestes’s sons in revenge for an earlier act of usurpation and serves

her greatest weapon: the safety of her children, the life of her husband, and the hall they call their home are the weapons she uses for bloody revenge.¹⁸

Even though they are subject to the patriarchy, women in the heroic sources are dangerous. This potency arises from the restrictions placed on the female characters by the dominating males who make important decisions without their consent. If a woman is not allowed to have a say in her marriage, the results could be horrible. These women were also bound by the ethics of the heroic age, and thus their drastic actions reflect their circumstances. In reference to Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, Jón Helgason writes that even though she murders her children, “móðurást hennar var sjálfsagt engu minni en annarra kvenna, en hefndarskyldan var miskunnarlaus” (Her motherly love was no less than other women, but revenge was a merciless obligation) (Jón Helgason, 1962: 85–86).¹⁹

Heroines in the Sagas of Icelanders

For female characters in the Sagas of Icelanders the social dynamics had changed; there was less emphasis on loyalty to kin, but still no lack of disrespect for women. In *Gísli saga* much of the action results from the entanglement of duties of revenge with marriage ties. Gísli Súrsson, the saga’s hero and outlaw, is required by the honour code of saga-age Iceland to kill his sister Þórdís’s husband, Þorgrímr Þorsteinsson, for Þorgrímr killed Vésteinn Vésteinsson, Gísli’s friend and brother-in-law. Gísli also removes the murder weapon from Vésteinn’s wound after he is slain, which further binds him to blood vengeance. Gísli thus demonstrates his loyalty to his marriage family, and sometime after Gísli has killed Þorgrímr, his sister Þórdís likewise indicates her loyalty to her marriage family, highlighting a change in ethics from the heroic cycle, where kin came first.

After Þorgrímr is slain, Þórdís marries his brother Börkr inn digri Þorsteinsson, which further showcases her dedication to her marriage family. In full public view, Gísli recites a skaldic verse in which he obscurely confesses his guilt in Þorgrímr’s murder. Þórdís deciphers Gísli’s verse and dutifully informs Börkr. Gísli

them to him as food (see Seneca, *Thyestes*, act 5). There is also the case in the eddic mythological poem *Völundarkviða*, when Völundr the smith kills the sons of King Níðuðr and fashions drinking vessels out of their skulls; this is another case of revenge killing of children, for Níðuðr had imprisoned and maimed Völundr.

¹⁸ In the *Atlamál* version Guðrún is said to receive assistance in her dirty deeds from Niflungr, the son of Högni and the last living male Gjúkung.

¹⁹ In the heroic cycle, Hjördís, the mother of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and the second wife of Sigmundur Völsungsson, is given a choice for her marriage partner, choosing Sigmundur over Lyngvi. This is a rare instance of a female character in the heroic cycle consenting at the time of her betrothal, although, as the present essay illustrates, female consent for marriage emerges in the Sagas of Icelanders.

learns of his sister's betrayal and composes a verse contrasting her to Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, who went to great lengths exacting revenge for her kin (see above):

“My sister, too taken
 with her fine clothes,
 lacks the firm-rooted spirit
 of Gudrun, Gjuki's daughter,
 that sea-fire's goddess,
 adorned with pearls, who killed
 her husband with undaunted courage
 to avenge her brave brothers.”²⁰ (*Gísli Súrsson's Saga*: 23)

Attitudes had changed, and, Jochens writes, “Guðrún's name alone recalled to Icelandic listeners the story of the fifth-century Bergundian woman who by her own hands murdered her two sons to take revenge against her husband Atli, who had killed her two brothers” (Jochens, 1995: 11). Unlike Guðrún, who sides with her kin even though they are cruel, Þórdís sides with her marriage family. Gísli, according to David Clark,

“resurrects the image of Guðrún as a pre-eminent example of sisterly loyalty—as *Atlakviða* details, her husband Atli had her brothers Gunnarr and Högni killed, and, rather than side with her spouse, Guðrún prioritized her kinship bonds and avenged her brothers by murdering Atli.” (Clark, 2007: 496)

The result of Þórdís's betrayal is Gísli's outlawry and eventual death.

Theodore M. Andersson concludes that although heroic ethics are alluded to in some places in the Sagas of Icelanders, such as Gísli's reflection on his sister's lack of heroic ethics, the older ethical standards were not shared in the same manner by the saga writers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, or by the society depicted in the sagas (the so-called “saga age,” tenth- and eleventh-century Iceland). Andersson writes:

“The family sagas, despite all the heroic modes and gestures borrowed from tradition, portray a normal society. They tell the stories of strong individuals who disrupt the social fabric, but despite the respect paid many of these strong personalities, the sagas are ultimately opposed to social disruption.” (Andersson, 1970: 593)

²⁰ “Gatat sǫl fastrar systir, / sveigar, mín at eiga, / gætin, Gjúka dóttur / Goðrúnar hugtúnun; / þás log-Sága lægis / lét sinn, af hug stinum / svá rak snjallra bræðra / sør-Freyja, ver deyja” (*Gísli saga Súrssonar*: 62).

Gísli thus laments the passing of a code of conduct he does not follow. Andersson even goes so far as to question the nature of Gísli's sense of honour. Writing about the scene in which Gísli murders Þorgrímr, he observes:

“The scene is the culmination of Gísli's record of offenses against his sister, who has now lost three admirers and, most grotesquely, a husband to Gísli's purblind sense of family honor. The drama culminates when Thórdís overhears an inculpatory stanza recited by Gísli; she wrestles with her conflicting obligations to husband and brother but finally opts for her husband and divulges Gísli's guilt.” (Andersson, 2006: 81)

While Þórdís's lack of loyalty to Gísli represents the passing of a heroic ethic, Gísli's own actions also represent this passing, even though Gísli does not recognize it himself.

Near the end of *Gísla saga*, Þórdís reveals her mixed allegiance; after Gísli has been killed by Eyjólfur inn grái Þórðarson, her current husband's henchman, she attacks the hired assassin:

“And later in the evening, when she brought in the food, she deliberately dropped a tray of spoons. Eyjólf had laid Gísli's sword between the bench and his feet, and Thordis recognised it. When she bent down to pick up the spoons, she grabbed it by the hilt and thrust out at Eyjólf, meaning to strike him in the guts. But she had not noticed the blade-guard which turned upward and caught against the table. Moreover, she struck at him lower than she intended, hitting him in the thigh and thereby wounding him sorely.”²¹ (*Gísli Súrsson's Saga*: 47–48)

In the context of the saga Þórdís's action is too little and too late. Her attempt to do right by her brother does not come close to the revenge gained by her heroic predecessors Signý and Guðrún. Þórdís's mixed allegiance, which at first aligns with her marriage family but in the end with her kin, indicates her own change of heart in relation to her brother and also the perception by thirteenth- and fourteenth-century saga writers that heroic values had faded but had not disappeared completely from saga-age Iceland. After the incident, Eyjólfur receives self-judgement from Börkr, and Þórdís promptly divorces her second husband, a sign that in Sagas of Icelanders women are granted more self-determination than in the heroic cycle.²²

²¹ “Ok um kveldit, er hon bar mat fram, fellir hon niðr spánatrogit. Eyjólfur hafði lagt sverð þat í milli stokks ok fóta sér, er Gísli hafði átt. Þórdís kennir sverðit, ok er hon lýtr niðr eptir spánunum, þreif hon meðalkaflann á sverðinu ok leggtr til Eyjólf's ok vildi leggja á honum miðjum. Gáði hon eigi, at hjaltit horfði upp ok nam við borðinu; hon lagði neðar en hon hafði ætlat, ok kom í lærit, ok var þat mikít sár” (*Gísla saga Súrssonar*: 116).

²² The scene of Þórdís wounding Eyjólfur and divorcing Börkr is also narrated in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where Snorri goði, who is Þórdís's son by Þorgrímr, is involved extensively in the settlement, buying Börkr out of his share of the property at Helgafell. It is after this deal that Þórdís names witnesses and divorces Börkr on grounds of repeated domestic abuse. Snorri goði is thus involved in Þórdís's change of heart, helping her to deal with the

The three marriages of Hallgerðr Höskuldsdóttir in *Njáls saga* are great case studies of a strong saga-age woman steering her own course in life within the constraints of a patriarchal society. For her first marriage, a man named Þorvaldr Ósvífrsson and his father approach Hallgerðr's father, Höskuldr Dala-Kollsson, to propose a marriage agreement between the two families. Höskuldr warns Þorvaldr of his daughter's difficult disposition, but Þorvaldr desires the agreement:

“Then they discussed the contract – Hoskuld did not consult his daughter, because he had made up his mind to marry her off – and they came to full agreement on the terms. Hoskuld extended his hand, and Thorvald took it and betrothed himself to Hallgerd. With this matter settled, he rode home.”²³ (*Njal's saga*: 13)

Hallgerðr is understandably upset with her father when he tells her about the contract: “Now I have proof of what I have long suspected, that you do not love me as much as you have always said, since you don't think it worth consulting me on this matter.”²⁴ (*Njal's saga*: 13–14).

Hallgerðr's first marriage is not about love, but about money. William Ian Miller argues that the marriage is a “plundering marriage,” intended to last only a short time and serve to pay for subsequent marriages:

“Such marriages only make sense if the girl's guardian, in these cases her father, understands that the girl will be married more than once. A marriage of this sort is a high-risk game whose success or failure depends on the vagaries of fertility and mortality. And one variable without as much vagary: divorce.” (Miller, 2014: 36)

Miller contends that men, like women, had little say in their prospective marriage partners, and that “the consent issue is less about men controlling women than about mostly older men controlling the younger generation of both sexes” (Miller, 2014: 39). Hallgerðr's marriage to Þorvaldr Ósvífrsson is poorly suited, and after a disagreement, Þorvaldr strikes Hallgerðr. Soon after, Hallgerðr's foster-father, Þjóstólfr, kills Þorvaldr, incited to the act by Hallgerðr. Hallgerðr thus works within the limits set by her male kin and the patriarchal society to end her unhappy marriage, doing so with violence.

aftermath of her revenge for Gísli, the man who was his maternal uncle and also the man who killed his father.

²³ “Síðan tala þeir um kaupit, ok spurði Høskuldr dóttur sína ekki eptir, því at honum var hugr á at gipta hana, ok urðu þeir á sáttir á allan kaupmála. Síðan rétti Høskuldr fram hōndina, en Þorvaldr tók í ok fastnaði sér Hallgerði ok reið heim við svá búit” (*Brennu-Njáls saga*: 31).

²⁴ “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, er þér þótti eigi þess vert, at við mik væri um talat þetta mál” (*Brennu-Njáls saga*: 31).

Hallgerðr's second suitor is Glúmr Óleifsson, and when he and his brothers approach Höskuldr to propose a marriage agreement, Höskuldr calls on his brother Hrútr for advice, which he did not do for the first marriage. Hrútr advises:

“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.”²⁵ (*Njal's saga*: 19)

Hallgerðr is consulted about the marriage proposal, agrees to it, and she and Glúmr live happily together for a time, until Þjóstólfr comes to live with them. Eventually, and predictably, Glúmr and Þjóstólfr get into an altercation; Glúmr speaks with Hallgerðr about it, but Hallgerðr sticks up for Þjóstólfr. As Þorvaldr did before him, Glúmr strikes her in the face, and Glúmr is killed shortly after by Þjóstólfr, leaving Hallgerðr widowed for the second time. Each time a husband strikes her in the face, he ends up dead.²⁶

Hallgerðr's third and most distinguished husband is the great Gunnarr Hámundarson of Hlíðarendi. Gunnarr, unlike her earlier suitors, proposes marriage directly to Hallgerðr: “‘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’”²⁷ (*Njal's saga*: 37). For her first marriage, Hallgerðr was not consulted at all, which angered her, and for her second marriage she was consulted only after Hrútr insisted she be brought into the discussion. Gunnarr asks her directly before speaking with any of her male kin, yet Hallgerðr tells him to talk with her father, reminding Gunnarr and the audience that

²⁵ “Skal nú ok eigi svá fara sem fyrr, at Hallgerðr sé leynd; skal hon nú vita allan þenna kaupmála ok sjá Glúm ok ráða sjálf, hvárt hon vill eiga hann eða eigi, ok megi hon eigi öðrum kenna, þó at eigi verði vel; skal þetta allt vélalaust vera” (*Brennu-Njáls saga*: 43).

²⁶ Torfi Tulinius makes the wise interpretation: “there is also a suggestion that Þjóstólfr is motivated by sexual passion for Hallgerðr when he kills Glúmr. Before that, Þjóstólfr had taunted Glúmr about ‘bröltá á maga Hallgerði’ (Bouncing around on Hallgerd's belly)” (Torfi Tulinius, 2015: 110). Þjóstólfr's commitment to Hallgerðr can certainly be interpreted in sexual terms, and Richard F. Allen has pointed out the structural similarities of Hallgerðr's first two marriages: (i) the insult of the slap in the face; (ii) Þjóstólfr's slaying of the husband; (iii) announcement of the slaying to Hallgerðr; (iv) Þjóstólfr's flight from the scene; (v) pursuit of Þjóstólfr by the kin of the slain; (vi) bafflement of the murderer's pursuers; and (vii) compensation paid by Höskuldr to the kin of the slain (Allen, 1971: 63). Þjóstólfr demonstrates great commitment to Hallgerðr, and it is more than possible to question his motives. The repetition of a slap in the face followed by death further serves to set up the narrative account of Hallgerðr's third marriage; when a slap in the face is delivered, the audience surely knows the outcome, although Þjóstólfr is by that point dead, killed by Hrútr, Hallgerðr's uncle.

²⁷ “‘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 föður minn’” (*Brennu-Njáls saga*: 86).

even though she is a widow, her kin are still in charge of her, or at least remain party to any marriage arrangement.

Hallgerðr proves to be a troublesome wife for Gunnarr. After she serves stolen food at their table: “Gunnar got angry and said, ‘It’s a bad thing if I’m partner to a thief – and he slapped her on the face. Hallgerd said she would remember this slap and pay it back if she could’”²⁸ (*Njal’s saga*: 57). The repercussion for Gunnarr striking Hallgerðr will be death, for that has happened to her first two husbands. When Gunnarr needs his wife’s assistance more than ever, while he is under siege from his enemies, she gets her revenge; she denies his request for two locks of her hair to use as a bowstring, reminds him of the slap he delivered to her, and afterwards he dies, unable to defend himself any longer.

Hallgerðr gets revenge on each of her three husbands, promoting or allowing the use of violence by others to rid herself of abuse; she incites Þjóstólfr to kill Þorvaldr, fails to prevent Þjóstólfr from killing Glúmr, and does not help Gunnarr avoid death. She does so not because they harmed her kin, but because each of them hit her in the face. Women in the Sagas of Icelanders could be as dangerous as the women in the heroic cycle, causing death for men, yet their role is more in the background: Þórdís reveals Gísli’s secret and Hallgerðr facilitates her husbands’ deaths.²⁹ The strength of these archetypal characters has not changed, but the societal circumstances which the narratives represent had. Both genres importantly critique the hegemonic patriarchy of the societies they represent.

²⁸ “Gunnarr reiddisk ok mælti: ‘Illa er þá, ef ek em þjófsnautr,’ — ok lýstr hana kinnhest. Hon kvazk þann hest muna skyldu ok launa, ef hon mætti” (*Brennu-Njáls saga*: 124).

²⁹ There is, however, extensive variation in character traits between women even in the same saga. Hallgerðr’s primary rival in *Njáls saga* is Njáll’s wife Bergþóra, who rather than cause the death of her husband, chooses instead to die with her husband. Yoav Tirosh compares the two women, noting that in the beginning Bergþóra is troublesome, playing her part in the developing feud with Hallgerðr, but later relaxes and is much more passive, showing how “we can also learn much from the different reactions that Hallgerðr and Bergþóra show in face of their husbands’ deaths. While Hallgerðr uses the opportunity to repay her husband for an earlier slight against her honor, Bergþóra joins hers in his death, linking her fate to that of her husband” (Tirosh, 2014: 220–1). Even the character of Hallgerðr is contradictory, due largely to the saga’s depiction of her as beautiful yet cruel. Chris Crocker writes that “Hallgerðr’s outward appearances—her beauty, somatic responses, and speech—so often seem to run contrary to her hidden core, a theme that reverberates throughout her story in the saga” (Crocker, 2015: 281). Furthermore, depictions of the same scene involving female characters can vary from one saga to another. In *Egils saga*, Egill Skallagrímsson is asked by Óláfr pái directly about the prospect of a marriage agreement between he and Egill’s daughter Þorgerðr, and it is said that Egill uses his own judgment to agree to the marriage agreement. In *Laxdæla saga* a scene is depicted in which Þorgerðr is consulted by her father Egill at length about the prospect of marrying Óláfr pái, and Óláfr and Þorgerðr even discuss it without their fathers. Eventually, after much delay and the consent of Þorgerðr, the marriage is agreed upon. Therefore, even though the present argument identifies themes and trends, variance must be acknowledged, as in most criticism.

Femmes fatales of the medieval north

The two most notorious Icelandic heroines from any genre are Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and Brynhildr Buðladóttir.³⁰ Both women demonstrate strength of will, greatly influencing events in their respective narratives, even though they are vulnerable to the patriarchy they are trapped in. Anne Heinrichs outlines their shared life-stories:

“A man and a woman of equal birth and standing, a pair seemingly destined for marriage, become engaged. The woman is grossly deceived and hurt by her betrothed; abandonment ensues. Both partners enter into a conventional marriage. The woman seeks revenge for her injury by inciting her husband to kill her former lover. In the end she is triumphant, whereas the victim’s wife is psychologically destroyed.” (Heinrichs, 1986: 112–13)

In *Laxdæla saga*, one of the masterpieces of the Sagas of Icelanders, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir marries four times. Her first and third marriages, to Þorvaldr Halldórsson and Bolli Þorleiksson, respectively, are two marriages she enters into without choice, which make them of great interest to this essay. Her third marriage, moreover, fits the pattern outlined by Heinrichs, and it is this marriage that is modelled on that of Brynhildr.

Guðrún’s first marriage is arranged completely without her consent: “Gudrun was not asked for her opinion and, although she was rather against the idea, nothing was done”³¹ (*Saga of the People of Laxardal*: 47). The marriage terms provide some independence for Guðrún, in particular that she controls the finances and her husband, Þorvaldr, must purchase for her what she likes. Guðrún and Þorvaldr are not well suited, and “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”³² (*Saga of the People of Laxardal*: 47). With the assistance of her husband-to-be, Þórðr Ingunnarson (husband number two), Guðrún devises a plan to divorce Þorvaldr. She succeeds, and she receives half of the marriage property, an example of Miller’s “plundering marriage” (see above). The successful divorce is a further example of the increased legal flexibility for women in Sagas of Icelanders.³³

³⁰ Andersson stresses the pre-eminence of Brynhildr, writing that “what sets the legend of Brynhild apart from all other Germanic tales of forceful women, with the possible exception of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir who was modelled on her, is the element of will” (Andersson, 1980: 243).

³¹ “Ekki var Guðrún at þessu spurð, ok heldr gerði hon sér at þessu ógetit, ok var þó kyrrt” (*Laxdæla saga*: 93).

³² “Þat var eitt sinn, at Guðrún beiddi Þorvald gripakaups. Þorvaldr kvað hana ekki hóf at kunna ok sló hana kinnhest” (*Laxdæla saga*: 93).

Guðrún's third marriage is to Bolli Þorleiksson, and this marriage has profound influence on the action of the saga. Returning to Iceland in advance of his foster-brother and cousin, Kjartan Ólafsson, whom Guðrún loves, Bolli proposes a marriage agreement between he and Guðrún to Guðrún's father:

“Osvif replied, ‘As you know, Bolli, Gudrun is a widow and as such she can answer for herself, but I shall give it my support.’ Osvif then approached Gudrun and said that Bolli Thorleiksson had arrived, ‘and has asked for your hand in marriage. You are to answer him. I can say without hesitation that if I were to decide, Bolli would not be turned down.’ Gudrun answered, ‘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.’ Osvif then said, ‘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.’ Since Osvif opposed her so, Gudrun did not, for her part, refuse, although she was very reluctant in all aspects.”³⁴ (*Saga of the People of Laxardal*: 66)

Guðrún is given little or no choice to consent to her union with Bolli, as men manipulate her and she accepts the proposal.³⁵

Kjartan returns from Norway to learn that Bolli and Guðrún are married, and Kjartan moves on and marries a woman named Hrefna. Guðrún is anguished at

³³ On divorce in Sagas of Icelanders, Jochens writes that “these narratives report four times as many cases of divorce instigated by women as by men. The most frequently cited reason was the insult suffered by the wife when her husband slapped her.... Other reasons permitting a wife to divorce her husband included her anger over his jealous violence, general dislike of and unhappiness with him, his failure to consummate the marriage, and his effeminate clothing” (Jochens, 1986: 39).

³⁴ “En Ósvífr svarar á þá leið: ‘Svá er, sem þú veizt, Bolli, at Guðrún er ekkja, ok á hon sjálf svǫr fyrir sér; en fýsa mun ek þessa.’ Gengr nú Ósvífr til fundar við Guðrúnu ok segir henni, at þar er kominn Bolli Þorleiksson — ‘ok biðr þín; áttu nú svǫr þessa máls. Mun ek hér um skjótt birta minn vilja, at Bolla mun eigi frá hnekkt, ef ek skal ráða.’ Guðrún svarar: ‘Skjótlitit gerir þú þetta mál, ok reddi Bolli eitt sinn þetta mál fyrir mér, ok veik ek heldr af, ok þat sama er mér enn í hug.’ Þá segir Ósvífr: ‘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 yðr bǫrnnum mínum um þá hluti, er ek kann gorr at sjá en þér.’ Ok er Ósvífr tók þetta mál svá þvert, þá fyrirtók Guðrún eigi fyrir sína hǫnd ok var þó in tregasta í ǫllu” (*Laxdæla saga*: 129).

³⁵ Conversely, it may be Guðrún's fate to marry Bolli. Earlier in the saga she describes a striking dream to the wise Gestr Oddleifsson, who interprets it for her, and she learns of her four marriages and how each will end. This raises the question of whether Guðrún is controlled more by the men around her, by her own will, or by fate. Her decision to not contest her father and Bolli may be because she knows her fate from the dream, which dictates she will marry Bolli. Ármann Jakobsson asks the question: “Are the dreams Guðrún's fate or does she have a free will? We might say that in her own eyes and those of the saga, Guðrún is responsible. She could have changed her fate but chose not to do so” (Ármann Jakobsson, 2013: 189). If Guðrún does have a free will, then her will is placed under pressure by men in her life, and the fate of the dream comes true. This leaves her responsible, or perhaps the men who coerce her into the marriage should be considered responsible.

being deceived and prevented from being with Kjartan, and she incites her brothers and Bolli to kill Kjartan; if she cannot be with him, neither can any other woman. Kjartan's own brothers later kill Bolli for revenge, even though he was a reluctant killer. Guðrún thus loses both Bolli and Kjartan, although she moves on and outlives a fourth husband, persevering through the tragedy. Brynhildr Buðladóttir, the tragic heroine Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is modelled on, does not endure, and her story is so tragic because she completely lacks choice. The Sagas of Icelanders represent women as having some ability to divorce or leave marriages without dying (although their husbands may die as a result), but in the heroic cycle bad marriages only end in complete tragedy.

Brynhildr never marries the man she loves the most, the man who pledges himself to her when they exchange promises: “No one is wiser than you,’ said Sigurd, ‘and I swear it is you I shall marry, and we are ideally suited.’ ‘I should wish to marry you,’ she answered, ‘even though I might have the choice of all the men there are’”³⁶ (*Saga of the Volsungs*: 40). The couple later renew their promise to wed, although by then Brynhildr insists they will not end up together. Events transpire that result in Sigurðr forgetting his promises to Brynhildr. He marries Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, and Guðrún's brother Gunnarr seeks out Brynhildr's hand in marriage, relying on Sigurðr's help to do so. Sigurðr's betrayal of Brynhildr is so piercing that Brynhildr, after married to Gunnarr, forces her husband to kill Sigurðr. Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir's marriage to Bolli thus echoes the tragic circumstances of Brynhildr, and both women directly confront the manipulative men in their lives, pushing against constraining forces. The struggle results in violence and death: strong women do not fit neatly in the patriarchal systems drawn up in these sources, but their actions are remembered most prominently (Heinrichs, 1986: 140).

The men who betray Brynhildr most, Sigurðr and Gunnarr, are the instruments of the cunning Grímhildr, a manipulative witch. The extreme actions Brynhildr takes—killing Sigurðr and then herself—result from Grímhildr's evilness, but Grímhildr goes untouched and is left to inflict pain and suffering on her family by later forcing her daughter Guðrún to marry Atli (see above).³⁷ Agency is stripped from Brynhildr, and to take it back “she took a sword and stabbed herself beneath the arm and sank back against the cushions”³⁸ (*Saga of the Volsungs*: 60). In her final act, Brynhildr joins Sigurðr on the funeral pyre, and together they enter the afterlife. Even though she is strong-willed, “on one side of the coin Brynhild is the most

³⁶ “Sigurðr mælti: ‘Engi finnst þér vitrari maðr, ok þess sver ek, at þik skal ek eiga, ok þú ert við mitt æði.’ Hún svarar: ‘Þik vil ek helzt eiga, þótt ek kjósa um alla menn’” (*Völsunga saga*: 163).

³⁷ Ironically, the most powerful agent in the saga is a woman. Thus, the patriarchy can be placed in question and the larger question of good succumbing to evil can be introduced. Alternatively, it could be argued that Grímhildr represents the largely silent Gjúkungr, and thus, even though a woman, she upholds the patriarchy on his behalf.

³⁸ “Tók hún eitt sverð ok lagði undir hönd sér ok hneig upp við dýnur” (*Völsunga saga*: 193).

dominant and triumphant figure in Germanic legend. On the other she is a hapless woman” (Andersson, 1980: 245). Brynhildr and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir share the same basic story; however, Brynhildr dies young, for the society she lives in constricts her more than she can bear, whereas Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir perseveres in *Laxdæla saga*.³⁹

Conclusion

The two genres dealt with here are interpretations of the distant past, a past which we as modern readers can learn about through texts such as these. Although they may not be historically-accurate depictions, there is an understanding that characters in the Sagas of Icelanders are modelled on historical persons, a basis which is not the case with characters in legends of the heroic cycle. In both genres, saga writers present an abundance of concern for the suppression of a minority, in this case, women. This is an issue we are all too familiar with in the modern age, and one that continually extends to many groups in societies throughout the evolving history of humankind.

The saga-age women are more able to manipulate their surroundings than their heroic predecessors. These women may not have been equal to men in society’s terms, but as the literary case studies above demonstrate, even though women were treated unfairly in Old Norse legend and saga, with odds stacked against them, they were often smarter than their male counterparts, they influenced the actions of their narratives profoundly, and they could inflict lasting damage on those who mistreated them. These texts may have served as stern warnings to contemporary Icelandic listeners on the value of a woman’s consent in marriage agreements and the ill nature of physical abuse between husband and wife. For modern readers of medieval Icelandic literature, they encourage us to continue to reach far into the past to identify and critically evaluate themes that require consideration. This endeavour continues in the hope that social conditions do change and to remind us that in texts produced in the present there are reflections of struggles that have passed and those that have not.

³⁹ Comparison between these two categories of medieval Icelandic literature is further heightened by the different degrees of emphasis given to the actions of the characters. In the case of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and Brynhildr Buðladóttir, Jonna Louis-Jensen writes: “throughout the saga Guðrún exercises remarkable self-control; the only reaction she shows to a particularly harsh treatment by the man who has just killed her husband is a smile (it is up to the reader to imagine what kind of smile). If saga-readers have generally not regarded Guðrún as an unfeeling monster, but rather as a woman who conceals strong passions under a cool and controlled surface, part of the reason might be the saga’s intertext with the Brynhild legend” (Louis-Jensen, 2002: 195). Brynhildr’s actions are anything but subtle, but in the context of the Sagas of Icelanders Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir had to be subtle to be influential.

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