



Women: Mischief and ‘Materiality’ in *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njáls Saga*.

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Materiality in the Old-Icelandic family sagas can be considered to represent not just a concern with physical objects and wealth, but with someone’s ‘significance’: their value or, in Old Icelandic terms, honour.¹ Indeed, Sørensen comments that ‘Society’s principal juridical and economic institutions ... were all vested in the family’, which suggests that there was little to distinguish social hierarchy and the concept of honour from materiality and the concept of value.² Thus, where this essay uses the term ‘materiality’, it will refer to the interlinking concepts of socio-monetary value and pride. The women of *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njáls Saga* act as the origins and inciters of the conflicts which propel the narratives of these sagas.

This essay argues that the materiality of the saga-world prompts responses of pride and, to a lesser extent, greed in the women who inhabit it. Whilst she was on the marriage market, a woman was ‘her family’s most important asset’, and could bring wealth, both in property and people.³ As a *húsfreyja* she had ‘considerable power over the day-to-day running of the farm’, and had to manage both her property and the household’s inhabitants.⁴ Thus, a woman’s entire life and duty was governed by socio-material value, or materiality, and could thus instigate pride, greed and mischief. Miller argues that a woman ‘depended on her men for her status, her property, and safety’, and that this is what caused her to incite conflict when a family member was killed.⁵ This idea that a woman caused trouble in order to preserve or better her status and property can be extended beyond the limited literary role a vengeful inciter, into one of the main reasons a woman might make mischief.

Njáls Saga’s introduction of Hallgerd treats her as an object of material and social value. When Hoskuld summons her to boast of her beauty, Hrut’s responding comment that ‘munu margir þess gjalda’ is often overlooked in comparison to his observation of her ‘þjófsaugu’.⁶ However, the word ‘gjalda’ meaning to ‘pay’, demonstrates that Hallgerd’s beauty is a valuable asset on the marriage market.⁷ In this introductory scene Dronke sees ‘the seeds of a dissatisfied — and therefore vengeful — nature’ sown through the reference to ‘þjófsaugu’.⁸ However, it seems plausible to suggest that Hallgerd’s sense of her own material value, instilled in her as a child, also moulds her into the over-proud woman who causes turbulence throughout the saga. This idea gains credence when it is considered how

¹ Catherine Soanes, ed., *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th edn. (Oxford: OUP, 2009), p. 880.

² Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘Social institutions and belief systems of medieval Iceland (c. 870-1400) and their relations to literary production’, in *Old Icelandic literature and society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 22.

³ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society: an introduction to Old Norse literature*, trans. John Tucker (Odense: Odense University Press, 1993), pp. 30-31.

⁴ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking age* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991), p. 187.

⁵ William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and peacemaking: feud, law, and society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 212.

⁶ Einar Ól Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga* (Rekjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), p. 7.

⁷ E. V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: OUP, 2009), p. 349.

⁸ Ursula Dronke, *The role of sexual themes in Njáls saga* (London: Published for the College by the Viking Society for Northern Research, 1981), pp. 14-15.

ill-matched Hallgerd seems to feel when she is told of her impending first marriage. Her displeasure and sense of betrayal are made clear when she accuses her father of not fulfilling his promise and valuing her correctly, saying ‘enda þykki mér ráð þetta ekki svá mikils háttar sem þér héuð mér’.⁹ Indeed, the way in which this sentiment is reiterated by the saga’s narrator, who comments ‘ok fannsk þat á öllu, at hon þóttisk vargefin’, gives greater prominence to the foreboding sense that Hallgerd’s self-valuation will cause trouble in her first marriage.¹⁰ Sveinsson comments that ‘Every event in her life either heralds a coming one or is an echo of one from the past’, an approach which suggests that this sense of foreboding and prefiguring serves a narratological function.¹¹ The introduction of Hallgerd’s prideful personality so early on, and Hrut’s portent of ‘þjófsaugu’ serves to establish her, and her sense of value, as a major source of conflict within the saga.

Gudrun of *Laxdæla Saga* is markedly similar to Hallgerd in numerous ways, as ‘Both are described as very beautiful and both marry four times’.¹² They are also introduced in a similar way, as Gudrun is also depicted in terms of value. She is compared in worth to other women, and described as ‘kvenna vænst, er upp óxu á Íslandi’, and her ornaments are described as making other women’s look like ‘barnavípur’.¹³ Kristjánsson comments that Gudrun ‘stands lofty above’ the other women in her saga, and it seems that, in these descriptions, the saga-author wishes to encourage this sense of her superiority.¹⁴ In depicting Gudrun as peerless among women, the saga-author demonstrates her value, which sets the scene for demonstrations of pride similar to, although not so extreme as Hallgerd’s. As with Hallgerd, this pride is first exhibited concerning Gudrun’s first marriage, which she considers beneath her. This sense of being under-valued in her first marriage is portended by her prophetic dream, in which her husband is represented by a head-dress which she dismisses with the comment ‘þótti mér illa sama’.¹⁵

Gudrun and Hallgerd’s displeasure at being undervalued is embodied in their interactions with their first husbands. Both women make use of their roles as *húsfreyjar* in order to punish their husbands. Hallgerd is described throughout *Njáls Saga* as ‘orlynd’ and ‘fengsöm’, which suggests that she is over-extravagant by nature.¹⁶ This over-extravagance is arguably bred in her by her pride and belief in her own self-worth, which translates into a taste for the lavish. Indeed, as Motz comments, ‘Free and lavish spending ... contribute[s] ... to a man’s honour’, and Hallgerd obviously feels that she ought to be able to spend as befits her perceived status.¹⁷ She spends Thorvald’s resources until he runs out of both flour and dried fish, and blames him for it, saying ‘Ekki fer ek at því, þóttú hafir svelt þik til fjár ok faðin þinn’.¹⁸ This derogatory comment against her husband’s household further suggests that Hallgerd’s grievance against him is a material one, that he is not able to provide for her to the level which her pride dictates. It further demonstrates the way in which a woman’s sense of value and pride can cause conflict. Thorvald’s response is to slap her across the face, an action which wounds Hallgerd’s pride further and leads her to orchestrate his death. Gudrun also questions her husband’s ability to provide by asking for personal ornaments, which the marriage contract obliged him to buy her.¹⁹ When she requests a trinket he becomes irate and

⁹ *Brennu-Njáls*, p. 31.

¹⁰ *Brennu-Njáls*, p. 31.

¹¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Njáls saga: a literary masterpiece*, ed. and trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), p. 137.

¹² Jesch, *Women*, p. 197.

¹³ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed. *Laxdæla saga; Halldórs þættir Snorrasonar; Stúfs þátr* (Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), p. 86.

¹⁴ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and sagas: Iceland’s medieval literature*, 3rd edn, trans. Peter Foote (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1997), p. 276.

¹⁵ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 88.

¹⁶ *Brennu-Njáls*, pp. 29, 33, 90.

¹⁷ Lotte Motz, ‘Female Characters of the Laxdoela Saga’, *Monatshefte* 55 (April-May 1963): 162.

¹⁸ *Brennu-Njáls*, p. 33.

¹⁹ *Laxdæla*, p. 93.

slaps her, saying that her demands have no limits, 'hana ekki hóf at kunna'.²⁰ Her husband's outburst suggests that Gudrun, like Hallgerd, may have been stretching his income to the limit in order to maintain a sense of her own value. As with Hallgerd, this slap prompts Gudrun's revenge, albeit a less violent one, of a divorce. In this instance, the slap is explicitly considered a threat to Gudrun's sense of self-worth, as it is referred to as a 'svívirðing', which suggests that it has offended Gudrun's pride.²¹ The first marriages of Gudrun and Hallgerd, then, demonstrate how the women of the sagas could create conflict, directly or indirectly, because of a sense of their own socio-material value, using the material power they wielded as *húsfreyjar*.

Gudrun's dismissal of her first husband, as well as a response to his slap, could arguably be considered a result of her desire to upgrade to a husband who she felt was nearer to her own value: Thord Ingunnarson. This idea that Thord is an upgrade from Thorvald is validated by her comment at the end of the saga that 'Þórðr Ingunnarson var maðr þeira vitrastr ok lagamaðr mestr', while she refuses to make mention of Thorvald.²² This desire to upgrade, despite her acknowledgement in her dream that 'margir tölðu um, at ek skylda þat eigi gera', ultimately results in the loss of Thord Ingunnarson's arm at the hand of his wife, Aud.²³ The story of Geirmund and Thurid is another example in *Laxdæla Saga* of mischief being caused by a woman's desire to better herself materially against the advice of others. The Norwegian, Geirmund, offers Thorgerd money to convince her husband to accept his marriage proposal to their daughter, Thurid. Although her husband had already refused the proposal, 'Hon tók við fénu, því at eigi var smám fram lagt. Síðan vekr Þorgerðr þetta mál við Óláf'.²⁴ This suggests that women can be prompted to action by monetary value, as well by the sense of social materiality which, for example, led Gudrun to abandon her first husband. Thorgerd's greed leads to Geirmund's abandonment of Thurid. In vengeance, Thurid 'greip upp Fótbit', his sword, and replaces it with their child.²⁵ Geirmund curses the sword, saying 'at þetta sverð verði þeim manni at bana í yðvarri ætt, er mestr er skaði at, ok óskapligast komi við'.²⁶ This sword is the same one which kills Kjartan. In this way, the narrative which leads to Kjartan's death is begun through a woman's greed, while it is ended by Gudrun's pride. This episode demonstrates, along with Gudrun's divorce proceedings, that even in *Laxdæla Saga*, which is arguably more sympathetic to women than *Njáls Saga*, women's pride and material concerns can lead to mischief.

Even Bergthora, the wife who 'remains a loyal wife to the end', choosing to die saint-like by her husband, can spark trouble when she feels that the honour, or value, of herself or her family is being drawn into question.²⁷ The feuding between Hallgerd and herself can be considered a battle of pride, which originates from their attempts to outweigh each other in value. When Bergthora removes Hallgerd from the cross-bench, she settles the matter by saying 'Ek skal hér ráða', which demonstrates that she wishes to remind Hallgerd that she is in charge of the household, and to assert her social superiority over Hallgerd.²⁸ The position on the cross-bench was governed by the social hierarchy, and was a position of great value, one which Hallgerd clearly thinks she should occupy. Her response to Bergthora's insult is telling in this scenario, as she turns to her husband, Gunnar, to defend the slight and voices aloud that he is 'þann mann er vaskastr er á Íslandi'.²⁹ It seems that where Hallgerd belittled

²⁰ Keneva Kunz, trans., 'The Saga of the People of Laxardal', in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 332; *Laxdæla*, p. 93.

²¹ *Laxdæla*, p. 94.

²² *Laxdæla*, p. 228.

²³ *Laxdæla*, p. 88.

²⁴ *Laxdæla*, p. 79.

²⁵ *Laxdæla*, p. 82.

²⁶ *Laxdæla*, p. 82.

²⁷ Jesch, *Women*, p. 188.

²⁸ *Brennu-Njáls*, p. 91.

²⁹ *Brennu-Njáls*, p. 91.

her first husband's value, she turns to Gunnar's value as a warrior in order to support her claim to superiority over Thorhalla and Bergthora. Bergthora's decision to weigh herself and her kin against Hallgerd's pride prompts a series of feuds and killings which the men of the households desperately try to calm. While this has more to do with Hallgerd's pride than Bergthora's action, which was justifiable, Bergthora refuses to back down. Allen observes that the two of them 'bend the men about them to their will' in an attempt to 'escalate the conflict', which is only 'kept in check by the friendship between their husbands'.³⁰ The men to whom Allen refers are slaves at first, but as the feud progresses Bergthora and Hallgerd begin to make use of relatives. At first, the women dispense of material property in the form of slaves, but the feuds later incur a social cost. This again demonstrates the ways in which trouble-making women are motivated by, and utilise, materiality in *Njáls Saga*.

In *Laxdæla Saga*, Gudrun also makes use of materiality in her vengeance upon Kjartan for leaving her behind and marrying someone else. She organises the theft first of his sword and then his wife's headdress. Gudrun not only uses these material possessions to cause trouble, but sees them as representative of a person, or social idea. The iconography of material objects as people, which the saga-author has associated with Gudrun since her introduction with the narrative device of her dreams, encapsulates the blurred social-material construct of the materiality which this essay explores. Hrefna's headdress represents a particular slight to Gudrun. Gudrun feels that by rights this headdress should belong to her; the ornament 'becomes emblematic of Guðrun's destructive desire to carry her head higher than any other woman in the district'.³¹ This idea that the theft of the headdress is vengeance for being overlooked in favour of another woman is cemented by her bitter comment that 'en eigi þykki mér illa, þó at svá sé fyrir honum hagat, at Hrefna hafi litla búningsbót af motrinum heðan í frá'.³² Gudrun's pride and her sense of her social and material worth once again dominate her actions. Jesch comments that for Gudrun 'self-respect came before love'.³³ This observation is validated by the way Gudrun's pride, as a result of her sense of material value, causes her to hurt the man whom she admits was the one 'er ek unna mest'.³⁴

A woman's interpretation of material possessions to represent a person is prevalent in other sagas, like *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue*, which ends with an image of a woman dying whilst staring at her lost lover's cloak.³⁵ Indeed, this blurring of person and the objects which represent their social and material worth is taken further when Gudrun lays out Bolli's 'blóðug' garments, in order to incite revenge for his death from her sons. The garments symbolise both the father her sons have lost, and the loss of honour, or value, which his death has inflicted on their family. This exposition of bloodied garments receives a positive response. However, when a similar action, the placing of a bloody cloak over Flosi's shoulders, is performed by Hildigunn in *Njáls Saga*, Flosi responds with the famous words 'eru kold kvenna ráð'.³⁶ In this instance, Flosi notes that the loss of life in an act of vengeance will turn out badly for the men of the family. Miller argues that 'the bloody-token ritual' was a means of 'exercising upward social control', which again demonstrates the way in which women responded to the materiality of their world, and used it in order to negotiate their families', and their own, honour or value.³⁷ The rejection of this ritual in this episode in *Njáls*

³⁰ Richard F. Allen, *Fire and iron: critical approaches to Njáls saga* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), p. 85; Judith Jesch, "'Good men" and peace in Njáls saga', in *Introductory essays on Egils Saga and Njáls Saga*, eds. John Hines and Desmond Slay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1992), p. 69.

³¹ Judy Quinn, 'Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas', in *A companion to Old Norse-Icelandic literature and culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 522.

³² *Laxdæla*, p. 144.

³³ Jesch, *Women*, p. 200.

³⁴ *Laxdæla*, p. 228.

³⁵ Katrina C. Atwood, trans., 'The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-tongue', in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 594.

³⁶ *Laxdæla*, p. 292.

³⁷ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, p. 212.

Saga demonstrates the way in which female pride, and the socio-material economics in which they operate, can backfire and cause further damage.

Indeed, Hallgerd epitomises the way in which a woman's materiality and pride is censured in *Njáls Saga*. She is responsible for the death of Gunnar, which arguably acts as a secondary narrative climax to the burning of Njál.³⁸ The mode in which she is responsible for his death is telling, as it demonstrates that she places her own value above his own. In reference to her thieving, Jesch comments that 'The very seed of Gunnar's destruction is contained in that first description of Hallgerðr'.³⁹ However, it seems plausible to extend this argument to the first description of her hair, which is ultimately the tool she uses to destroy Gunnar.⁴⁰ Hallgerd is introduced as having 'hárit svá fagrt sem silki ok svá mikit, at þat tók ofan á belti', and this aspect of her beauty is referenced throughout the saga.⁴¹ As a large part of her beauty, her hair can thus be considered representative of the value which she brings to her family and the marriage market. However, at Gunnar's death she refuses to sacrifice two strands of the same hair to save his life. Gudrun had already turned a 'potential conflict is turned into an actual one' when she stole provisions from Otkel. The slap which she received for stealing or, as she sees it, for gaining vengeance for a slight to Gunnar's, and thus her, honour causes further conflict and the death of Gunnar. As in her first marriage, she sees the slap as an insult, or devaluation of herself, and her hurt pride grows in response. In refusing to give up her hair, after asking 'Liggr þér nokkurt við?' she seems to assert that her own value is more than the worth of Gunnar's life, and thus repays him in pride for the degradations which she perceives herself to have suffered at his hand.⁴²

Hallgerd is heavily censured for her pride and sense of self-value throughout the saga, and for her role in Gunnar's death. By contrast, women who place the value of others in their family above the value of themselves and above monetary value seem to be treated more kindly by the saga-authors. While this outlook seems to be demonstrated by women who act for themselves in *Laxdæla Saga*, the closest thing to a heroic woman in *Njáls Saga* is Bergthora. She, unlike Hallgerd, is willing to lay down not just her hair, but her life in service of her husband, saying that 'hefi ek því heitit honum, at eitt skyldi ganga yfir okkr bæði'.⁴³ Dronke argues that 'In this last moment of choice the saga-writer does not make her speak of love but of contract', which suggests that Bergthora has adopted the role which Hallgerd and, to a lesser extent, Gudrun reject.⁴⁴ She is willing to be a possession of Njáls, and is concerned with the family's honour over her own; her death is an act of family pride and materiality. In *Laxdæla Saga*, Vigdis' social pride means that she refuses to allow material possessions to corrupt her sense of honour. She forbids her husband to keep the money he was offered to betray her kinsman. Indeed, she demonstrates this disdain for money by literally flinging it back in the face of the man who offered it. When 'Vigdís hefr upp fésjóðinn ok rekr á nasar honum, svá at þegar fell blóð á jörð', the action appears to be symbolic.⁴⁵ The money was given in order to buy the blood of her kinsman, and in flinging the purse back into Ingjald's face she indicates that the value of her family, or blood, is worth more than Ingjald's, which shames him into leaving. This scene is similar to one in *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, in which Aud refuses to surrender her husband for the promise of money, and hits Eyjolf in the face.⁴⁶ It seems that women are most revered both when they take on the masculine role of exerting

³⁸ Allen, *Fire*, p. 124.

³⁹ Jesch, *Women*, p. 186.

⁴⁰ See: Allen, *Fire*, p. 80.

⁴¹ *Brennu-Njáls*, pp. 6; 29, 85.

⁴² *Brennu-Njáls*, p. 189.

⁴³ *Brennu-Njáls*, p. 330.

⁴⁴ Dronke, *The role*, p. 22.

⁴⁵ *Laxdæla Saga*, p. 36.

⁴⁶ Martin S. Regal, trans., 'Gisli Sursson's Saga', in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 548.

violence themselves, and when they place the value of another over themselves, and over monetary enticements. While these are portrayed as positive responses to the materiality of the saga-world, they are still capable of causing mischief, either through direct violence like Vigdis, or through the anger which a death can incite.

In conclusion, both of these sagas depict women and their concern with materiality as a potentially dangerous force. Allen argues that *Njáls Saga* has a 'theme of excess' and that people 'come to grief through greed ... through revenge out of all proportion to the offense'.⁴⁷ If this is true of *Njáls Saga*, it is also true of *Laxdæla Saga*, as the women of both sagas act and are motivated by pride and materiality when they cause 'grief'. *Njáls Saga* arguably makes disproportionate violence 'women's work'.⁴⁸ However, the pride or greed which motivated this violence was born out of the saga-world's materiality, and the way in which the women functioned in a man's world. While they 'figure larger in it than they figure in many societies before or since', the materiality to which they respond, and their means of responding, is formed by patriarchy.⁴⁹ On the marriage market they are traded as valuable objects, and when married they were expected to adopt new allegiances and manage the property of their husbands. Women could not 'participate in public life', which limited their ability to act.⁵⁰ In this light it can be suggested that the women who cause trouble in the sagas make use of their own value, their looks and beauty, and the property over which they have responsibility (which includes the rest of the family) in order to enact their will in a world in which they have a 'disenchantment with their limited role in society'.⁵¹ Constrained as they are, it seems reasonable to expect that women, more than men, felt the need to 'restore the balance between blow dealt and blow received' in order to retain or increase their idea of their own honour.⁵²

⁴⁷ Allen, *Fire*, p. 88

⁴⁸ Heather O'Donoghue, 'Women in *Njáls saga*', in *Introductory essays on Egils Saga and Njáls Saga*, eds. John Hines and Desmond Slay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1992), p. 89.

⁴⁹ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, p. 307.

⁵⁰ Sørensen, *Saga*, p. 24.

⁵¹ Jesch, *Women*, p. 199.

⁵² Motz, 'Female Characters', p. 166.

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