



A STUDY OF THE FIGURE OF THE PROMINENT WOMAN IN THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS, WITH A PARTICULAR FOCUS ON *NJÁLS SAGA*, *LAXDÆLA SAGA*, AND *GUNNLAUGS SAGA ORMSTUNGU*.

The figure of the prominent woman is a common image throughout the Sagas of Icelanders, often resulting in some of the most memorable female characters found on Old Norse literature. The prominent woman is characterised by some admirable qualities, for example, wisdom, beauty, determination, and strong-mindedness. However, she is also often attributed with some less desirable characteristics, such as spite, greed, a vengeful nature, and a taste for violence. These women function in different ways in the sagas, sometimes appearing as the beautiful temptress, the whetter, or the wise woman, but all ultimately cause tragedy as a consequence of their actions. In this essay I am going to argue that the prominent women of the sagas represent the male's misogynistic fear of the powerful masculine woman who threatens male dominance. I will focus on the prominent women in *Njáls saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, particularly the figures of Hallgerd Hoskuldsdottir, Gudrun Osvifsdottir, and Helga Thorsteinsdottir (the Fair). In the texts, all of these women deviate from the societal norms expected of medieval Icelandic women, albeit in different ways. Indeed, all of these women have similar functions in the texts, appearing as scapegoats for male weakness and serving as a warning for both men and woman alike against the destructive power of the strong female figure.

Women in medieval Icelandic society were under the control of the men in their family, whether that be a husband, father, or brothers.¹ Indeed, women had little say in the important events of their lives and were expected to marry whomever the men in their family decided. According to Jochens, a betrothal was arranged 'between the bride's

¹ Jenny Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality: Men, Women, and Beasts', in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. by Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York and London: Garland, 1996), p. 381.

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guardian and her future husband in the presence of witnesses... the bride herself was not asked and her presence was not even necessary.² However, the prominent woman of the Sagas of Icelanders often deviates from this societal expectation, taking matters into her own hands when things are not settled to her satisfaction by her male guardians. This can be seen in chapter 11 of *Njáls saga* as Hallgerd, furious with her father for arranging her first marriage without consulting her, persuades her foster-father to avenge her husband's violence towards her by murdering him. Indeed, this has the desired effect as, when her father is next asked for her hand in marriage by Glum, he insists that 'skal nú ok eigi svá fara sem fyrr, at Hallgerðr sé leynd'³ ('this must not be done without Hallgerd's knowledge'⁴). This time, to avoid her displeasure and vengeance, she will decide for herself if she wishes to marry this man. Thus, Hallgerd's 'dissatisfied and... vengeful nature'⁵ is indulged as it is reinforced to her that her beauty and temper can be used on men to get her own way. Indeed, the impossible paradox of Hallgerd is shown in the saga; to displease Hallgerd is, more often than not, fatal, but to follow her whims and desires also results in societal breakdown. It is in this way that she can be seen to play upon male fears of the strong woman, as she threatens masculine dominance in the societies through interfering in what was considered to be the male sphere.

Similarly, in *Laxdæla saga*, Gudrun's marriage to her first husband, Thorvald, is arranged by her father without her consent; 'ekki var Guðrún at þessu spurð, ok heldr gerði hon sér at þessu ógetit, ok var þó kyrrt,'⁶ (She 'was not asked for her opinion and, although she was rather against the idea, nothing was done'⁷). Again, we can see the male

² Jenny Jochens, 'Gender Symmetry in Law: The Case of Medieval Iceland', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 108 (1993), 46-67 (pp. 62-3).

³ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Íslensk Fornrit XII, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson gaf út (Reykjavík : Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), ch. XIII.

⁴ *Njáls saga*, trans. Robert Cook (London: Penguin, 2001), ch. 13.

⁵ Ursula Dronke, 'The Role of Sexual Themes in *Njáls saga*', *The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies* (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1981), p. 15.

⁶ *Laxdæla saga*, Íslensk Fornrit V, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson gaf út (Reykjavík : Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), ch. XXXIV.

⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, trans. Keneva Kunz, in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Jane Smiley and Robert Kellog (London: Penguin, 2000), ch. 34.



relatives of the prominent woman of the saga attempting to exert their dominance over her femininity by treating her like a possession to be traded and passed along to the next owner. Indeed, Jochens suggests that marriage in medieval Iceland illustrates the 'fundamental connection between marriage and property,'⁸ as can be observed here as both Gudrun and Hallgerd are treated not like women, but objects. Where Hallgerd was cold and calculating, however, Gudrun, described as 'inn mesti kvenskörungr'⁹ ('the most determined of women'¹⁰), is much cleverer in ending her marriage to a man she cared little for. Gudrun is viewed as an 'extremely wise, clever, [and] eloquent'¹¹ woman. Indeed, instead of resorting to violence to end her marriage as Hallgerd does, she makes her husband a shirt with a neckline so low that his nipples can be seen, knowing that, in the eyes of the law, this will give her reason to divorce him. Gudrun's wisdom is evident here as this demonstrates that she is aware of the laws of medieval Iceland and how to manipulate them to her advantage, in this case the law that stated 'if men adopt women's fashion... the penalty for that is lesser outlawry.'¹² In the cases of both Gudrun and Hallgerd taking control of their lives and ending their unhappy marriages, the figure of the prominent woman who threatens male dominance can be very clearly seen.

Whilst Gudrun is aware of the laws of medieval Iceland, however, women were not expected to have any part in the law. According to Jochens, even if their own personal safety was involved, women were not allowed to raise a lawsuit themselves, but 'were only allowed to act through intermediaries.'¹³ A woman who went against these societal rules would be very brazen indeed to assume a role which was traditionally designated to

⁸ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 20.

⁹ Sveinsson (1934), *op. cit.*, ch. LXVIII.

¹⁰ Kunz, *op. cit.*, ch. 68.

¹¹ Ármann Jacobsson, 'Laxdæla Dreaming: A Saga Heroine Invents Her Own Life', in *Nine Saga Studies: The Critical Interpretation of the Icelandic Sagas*, ed. by Ármann Jacobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2013), p. 178.

¹² *Laws of Early Iceland. Grágás II*, tr. Andrew Dennis *et al.* (2000), pp. 69-70

¹³ Jochens (1993), *op. cit.*, p. 49.

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men. Indeed, Clover comments on the expected roles of men and women in medieval Icelandic society, suggesting that women existed 'within the household' and were in charge of domestic duties, whilst men lived in 'the world beyond: the world of... trade, politics, and law.'¹⁴ However, in *Njáls saga*, Hallgerd can be seen to be encroaching on the masculine sphere of law as she has an active role in negotiating agreements for her second and third marriages and, significantly, she also betroths her daughter, Thorgerd. As previously discussed, it was the job of the male members of a woman's family to arrange her marriage and so it is significant that, whilst Thorgerd's grandfather is initially consulted when Thrain wishes to marry her, it is ultimately her mother's opinion that matters as, once Hoskuld is found to have no objections, it is Hallgerd's approval and permission which is sought as she is asked if she will accept the agreement. Only then is Thrain's proposal accepted, and it is Hallgerd who carries out the act of betrothing her daughter to him, taking part in an agreement that was traditionally made between two men.¹⁵ As the sagas were presumably written by men, this episode in which Hallgerd is seen to be defying both custom and law¹⁶ again reflects the male fear of the masculine woman who threatens male power with her unfeminine behaviour.

Also representing the misogynistic fear of the dominating female in the sagas is the figure of the temptress, who 'exerted power by using [her] sexuality'¹⁷ and whose beauty drives men to violence and, ultimately, death. This image is particularly relevant to the figure of Helga who, whilst passive in the saga and not overtly asserting control over events like Gudrun and Hallgerd, is nonetheless the cause of much tragedy. Helga is constantly characterised by her beauty throughout *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, often described as the 'fegrst kona verit á Íslandi'¹⁸ ('the most beautiful woman there has ever

¹⁴ Carol J. Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Representations*, 44 (Autumn 1993), 1-28 (pp. 2-3).

¹⁵ Jochens (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁶ Clover, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 171. Hereby referenced as Jochens 1996b.

¹⁸ *Borgfirðinga sögur*, Íslensk Fornrit III, ed. Sigurður Nordal og Guðni Jónsson gáfu út (Reykjavík : Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), ch. IV.



been in Iceland¹⁹). However, this legendary beauty is dangerous and comes at a price. Indeed, Helga's father, Thorstein, has a prophetic dream prior to her birth which warns that his daughter's beauty will be the cause of much tragedy, resulting in the death of two men who will both love her desperately and fight to the death over her. Remnants of the prehistoric conception of female sexuality as 'wild, untamed, raw, dangerous',²⁰ and thus justifying male domination, is apparent here, as Helga's beauty is revealed to be dangerous as it causes the primary feud of the saga and results in the deaths of two men of prominent birth, Gunnlaug and Hrafn, who were once friends. Indeed, Helga can be read as a siren-like figure, a woman whose passive but dangerous beauty tempts men to their deaths.

Hallgerd is also characterised throughout *Njáls saga* as being exceptionally beautiful, an attribute which she takes full advantage of as she uses it repeatedly to persuade men to do as she wishes.²¹ This is evident in chapter 15, as Hallgerd attempts to coax Glum into doing as she wishes, against his better judgement, by putting her arms around his neck and using her feminine sexuality to control him.²² Jochens suggests that, in medieval Iceland, 'what made a woman beautiful... was her clothing.'²³ Indeed, this is evident in the descriptions of Hallgerd's beauty throughout *Njáls saga*, for example the rich description of her appearance when she meets her third husband, Gunnar, which states that 'hon var í rauðum kyrtli, ok var á búningr mikill; hom hafði yfir sér skarlatsskikkju, ok var búin hlöðum í skaut niðr,'²⁴ ('She had on a red gown, much

¹⁹ *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, trans. Katrina C. Attwood, in Smiley and Kellog *op. cit.*, ch. 4.

²⁰ Uli Linke, 'Manhood, Femaleness, and Power: A Cultural Analysis of Prehistoric Images of Reproduction', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 34 (1992), 579-620 (p. 579).

²¹ Dronke, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

²² Cook, *op. cit.*, ch. 15.

²³ Jenny Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze: The Absence of the Female Body in Old Norse', in *Sex in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Joyce E. Salisbury (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1991), p. 6.

²⁴ Sveinsson (1954), *op. cit.*, ch. XXXIII.

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ornamented; over that she had a scarlet cloak trimmed with lace'²⁵). Hallgerd's beauty is also emphasised in descriptions of her body; she is nicknamed 'Long-legs' and her long, blonde hair is frequently commented upon as being one of her most attractive attributes. However, despite her uncommon beauty, Hallgerd is still cold, sharp-tempered, bitter, and ruthless in her behaviour. Dronke suggests that Hallgerd is a severe, exacting test for any man who becomes her husband,²⁶ and indeed, this is true as marriage to Hallgerd proves fatal for all three of her husbands; the first and third meet their deaths as a result of her vicious nature, whilst her second husband, although loved by her, is murdered by her jealous foster-father as a result of a disagreement with his wife. Evidently, then, the cases of Helga and Hallgerd illustrate the destructive and dangerous quality of feminine sexuality in the sagas. Both women serve as a warning for men against the temptation of exceptionally beautiful women who will use this beauty to persuade men to do their bidding, before ultimately driving these men towards their deaths.

Conversely, whilst Gudrun is certainly described throughout *Laxdæla saga* as being physically very attractive, 'beauty is never her principle asset or accomplishment... the saga itself draws attention to her mental powers rather than her looks.'²⁷ Her first appearance in the saga is significant as she, as a fifteen-year-old girl, has a philosophical and complex discussion about her prophetic dreams with Gest Oddleifsson, 'höfðingi mikill ok spekingr at vitti',²⁸ ('an important chieftain and especially wise man'²⁹). Jakobsson is sceptical about Gudrun's ignorance as to the meaning of her dreams, however, suggesting that, as she is revealed to be an 'extremely clever woman' throughout the saga, she may be 'goading him to find the dead husbands in the dream.'³⁰ Indeed, this is an entirely plausible explanation for this strange episode, as it may be that Gudrun is testing her intellect against those of the most renowned thinkers in the district. Indeed, we have

²⁵ Cook, *op. cit.*, ch. 33.

²⁶ Dronke, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

²⁷ Jakobsson, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

²⁸ Sveinsson (1934), *op. cit.*, ch. XXXIII

²⁹ Kunz, *op. cit.*, ch. 33.

³⁰ Jakobsson, *op. cit.*, p. 180.



already seen that Gudrun is extremely wise in the male territory of law, and throughout the saga she can also be seen engaging in 'intelligent conversation of the kind that would normally be restricted to men of some stature.'³¹ The threat from Gudrun, then, comes not only from her beauty, as in the cases of Hallgerd and Helga, but from her mind. She is more than capable of keeping up with the intellectual and philosophical conversations of men and is evidently dissatisfied with conforming to the circumscribed life of the conventional medieval Icelandic female. This is demonstrated in chapter 40 as she asks Kjartan, the man she loves, to take her travelling with him, stating 'því at ekki ann ek Íslandi,³² ('it's not Iceland I love'³³). Unsurprisingly, she is unimpressed when he refuses and instead asks her to wait for him to return, a request which ultimately ends in his murder. Jakobsson argues that it is Gudrun's 'wisdom that makes her so attractive to the men of Iceland,³⁴ and indeed, it is again a fatal attraction; Gudrun's wisdom challenges male dominance and refuses to conform to the societal norms expected of medieval Icelandic women.

The figure of the beautiful wise woman is not the only role Gudrun fulfils in *Laxdæla saga*, however. She also functions as the female inciter, or whetter, who goads the men of the saga into taking revenge. Jesch suggests that that 'the sagas can give the impression that because of men's essentially peaceful natures, there would have been no feuds were it not for the incitement of women.'³⁵ Indeed, this is something which is apparent in Gudrun's case as she, after being tricked into an unhappy marriage with Bolli, feels scorned and rejected by Kjartan. She therefore makes it her mission to goad her husband and brothers, who really have no inclination to do so, into killing her former lover. Jochens claims that, in the act of verbal whetting, 'women charge men with failure to live

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

³² Sveinsson (1934), *op. cit.*, ch. XL.

³³ Kunz, *op. cit.*, ch. 40.

³⁴ Jakobsson, *op. cit.*, 179.

³⁵ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991), p. 188.

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up to expectation', frequently raising 'more specific charges that often pierced the core of masculine self-worth.'³⁶ This can be observed in Gudrun's whetting, as she threatens her brothers' manhood by claiming that they would have made their father a better group of daughters than sons,³⁷ and gives her husband an ultimatum, telling him that, if he does not kill Kjartan, their marriage will be over. This is particularly cold of her, given Bolli's former close relationship with his foster-brother, Kjartan. Indeed, he later comes to instantly regret his role in Kjartan's murder, something which Gudrun no doubt expected but obviously did not regard as more important than her spite and vengeance. She has evidently been blinded by her resentment towards Kjartan and, in a last attempt to control him, orders his murder. Jochens suggests that the female inciter functions in the sagas as 'a scapegoat for men's failures in establishing a peaceful society,'³⁸ an assertion which I wholly agree with in the case of Gudrun. In this episode the strong female figure can be seen to manipulate the men around her, playing on their insecurities and pressuring them into carrying out her bidding. She represents the misogynistic fear of the strong woman by providing men with a scapegoat upon which they can lay the blame for all of their unlawful misdeeds.

The figure of the whetter can also be seen in Hallgerd, 'the proud, strong-willed woman who is frequently the catalyst for, if not the cause of, trouble.'³⁹ Indeed, Hallgerd's incitement of the men around her in the saga is even more vicious than Gudrun's. She is widely known for having her first husband killed and goes on to wage a murderous war against Njál's wife, Bergthora, constantly goading her slaves kill Njál and Bergthora's slaves. According to Jochens, the figure of the whetter is 'a woman whose fame rested on murderous deeds,'⁴⁰ and this is certainly true of Hallgerd. She is known for her harsh

³⁶ Jochens (1996b), *op. cit.*, pp. 189-90.

³⁷ Kunz, *op. cit.*, ch. 48.

³⁸ Jochens (1996b), *op. cit.*, p. 175.

³⁹ Jesch, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

⁴⁰ Jochens (1996b), *op. cit.*, p. 163.



temper and volatile nature, and indeed, this is something which her father and uncle warn all of her potential suitors, although this does not seem to dissuade them.

Achieving vengeance as the whetter depends upon remembering the offence which has provoked it, a skill which Hallgerd certainly possesses as she holds grudges throughout the saga, most notably towards her third husband, Gunnar. Again, her cold nature is demonstrated as she resents Gunnar for hitting her in anger for stealing from their neighbours and, as punishment, later passively watches him being killed, ultimately an act carried out as a result of her thievery, without doing anything to help. The spiteful nature of the whetter can be read, then, as providing the saga authors 'with an excuse for male failure to provide peace.'⁴¹ Hallgerd as the female inciter is certainly a terrifying force, and illustrates the male need to dominate the strong, masculine woman.

Whilst Helga is not a whetter in the same aggressive, forward sense as Gudrun and Hallgerd, I would argue that she does passively whet the appetites of Gunnlaug and Hrafn for violence. Similarly to the active, aggressive whetter, she sets up the two men against each other, fostering resentment and hatred where there previously existed friendship. However, she never actually actively incites either man to attack the other with words, although her actions tell a different story as, after Gunnlaug's return to Iceland, she does not attempt to hide her admiration and affection for him from her husband, Hrafn, whom she will no longer share intimacy with. Indeed, she encourages Gunnlaug's existing affection for her and thus breeds jealousy between the two, a jealousy which eventually provokes a duel to the death between the men, both of whom want to claim Helga as their prize. Whilst she does not fulfil the traditional role of female inciter, then, I would still argue that Helga, as the passive whetter, represents the male fear of powerful women and functions as a scapegoat upon which to blame their weakness.

⁴¹ Jochens (1996b), *op. cit.*, p. 203.

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All of these prominent women who deviate from societal expectations, then, are shown to be dangerous and destructive forces which, if left unchecked by men, will result in complete societal breakdown and chaos. They function in the sagas as both a scapegoat upon which to blame the male failure to achieve a peaceful society, and as a warning for their thirteenth century audiences that, if they do not stick to societal convention, the consequences will have a tragic impact. This is most overtly apparent in the figure of Hallgerd who, through her spite, ends the entire family line of Njál. Indeed, all of the prominent women mentioned in this essay are seen to act in ways which have tragic and fatal consequences for those around them, even if they, like Helga, do not actively and overtly try to dominate and control those around them. The figure of the prominent woman in the sagas, then, appears in the role of the beautiful temptress, the wise woman, and the whetter, encroaching on the male spheres of vengeance and law, and thus attempting to exert her control over the masculine influences in the sagas. Indeed, the women discussed in this essay, Hallgerd, Gudrun, and Helga, all function in one or more of these roles. Whilst she may have little historical grounding, then, the prominent woman does serve an important purpose as she drives the action of the sagas, fuelling the fires of feuds between men and pushing them towards their deaths. She is perceived as a dangerous force threatening the superior male, and therefore must be controlled; she is a warning against strong female sexuality and serves as a reminder to the thirteenth century male audiences to whom the sagas were written that gender boundaries must be strictly policed and enforced.

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