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The importance of dreams in Icelandic Sagas: how saga writers use dreams to different effects in the historical sagas *Laxdaela Saga and Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*, compared to the mythological saga *Jómsvíkinga Saga*

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'My destiny was fashioned down to the last half day, and all my life was determined.'[1]

It is Skírnir, in the Poetic Edda, who provides us with this utterance, a revealing and succinct expression of the importance given to the notion of fate within Old Norse literature - and in particular the Old Norse sagas. Equally inherent to the sagas are dreams, which can be seen as the cipher to unravelling the path of fate, and it is the portrayal of these same dreams that this essay will attempt to explore. The first part of this essay will discuss the relationship between dreams and fate in two historical sagas, Laxdaela Saga and Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu, and will draw contrasts to a mythological saga, Jómsvíkinga Saga. The second part of this essay will look at the varying levels of power dreams bestow unto women, and will once again seek to illuminate the similarities and differences in the literature. The essay will conclude by looking at dreams as a narrative device in the sagas, and will draw the two sections together to look at how saga genre may effect the portrayal of dreams, fate and women in these texts.

Before moving on however it is necessary to outline the genre classification of these sagas that will be used in this essay, and in the case of *Jómsvíkinga Saga* to look at the possible categories it could inhabit. It should be noted that for this purpose, and with respect to the rest of the essay, the historical reliability of these sagas will not be a primary focus, and in referring to *Laxdaela Saga* and *Gunnlaugs Saga* as historical sagas, this essay looks only to acknowledge that the dominant modality within these texts is that of the realistic, and partly, historical. The saga form is distinctive due to its 'multiple modalities' defined by Ross as 'modes of writing that present different dimensions of represented experience'.[2] This characteristic 'allows the uniting of history and fiction under one textual roof', and is part of the reason why the sagas are so rich in content, and diverse in their possible interpretations and meanings.[3] While the potential historical accuracy of these two sagas may be offered as one reason why the portrayal of dreams differs from those in the *Jómsvíkinga Saga*, the finer details of this argument will be left to the workings of historians and historiographies.

The *Jómsvíkinga Saga* itself has drawn the attention of many critics due to the difficulty of classifying it among the various saga genres. Halldórsson claimed that 'it must be classified as an entertaining fiction', and for a time this view was perhaps accepted among many to be the case.[4] More recently, Aalto has suggested that the saga should perhaps be considered among Old Norse historiography, claiming that the genre division framework is 'inflexible'.[5] While both may, in part, be right it is possibly more useful to refer back to Ross's discussion of mixed modalities, and instead view the *Jómsvíkinga Saga* through a lens that incorporates the historical role that this saga plays, but that focuses more towards a mythical narrative.

Dreams and fate

Returning to Skírnir's words from the *Poetic Edda,* it is not only the importance of fate in the Old Norse sagas that is illuminated - these words are after all are not just spoken by anyone but rather by a messenger of one of the Gods - but the understanding of destiny as a concept in these texts. As Turville-Petre has argued, this expression symbolises that 'the future, therefore, is not something unformed, but

[1] 'Skímrnismál', in *Edda*, ed. by Gustav Neckel (Heidelberg: Winter Signatur, 1927), p. 69; quoted in Gabriel Turville-Petre, 'Dreams in Icelandic Tradition', *Folklore*, 69:2 (1958), 93-111 (p. 95).
[2] Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Intellectual Complexion of the Icelandic Middle Ages: Towards a New Profile of Old Icelandic Saga Literature', *Scandinavian Studies,* 69:4 (1997), 443-453 (p. 449).
[3] Ibid., p. 449.
[4] Ólafur Halldórsson, 'Jómsvíkinga saga', in *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia.*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano, (Garland Publishing: New York, 1993), 343–44 (p. 343).
[5] Sirpa Aalto, '*Jómsvíkinga Saga* as a Part of Old Norse Historiography', in *Scripta Islandica* 65*,* ed. by Lasse Mårtensson and Veturliði Oskarsson, (Uppsala University: Sweden, 2014), 33-58 (p. 34).

it is a state which exists already'.[6] Consequently, if we consider that dreams and fate are depicted as inseparably linked in many cases, then we can begin to partially understand the intentions of the saga writers, inasmuch as Lönnroth articulates, claiming hence that the **'**saga narrators do not primarily see dreams as a key to the inner soul but as a key to the future'.[7] This is perhaps evident most notably in the *Jómsvíkinga Saga* as Þyri, 'who had no equal… in the art of interpreting dreams', chooses not to make the decision on marriage herself but to leave it instead to the dreams of her suitor.[8] 'When she had heard the dreams, she told the men they might inform the king that she would marry him'. (ch.2)

This is a series of events that compares greatly to the predicament that Guðrún finds herself in, in the *Laxdaela Saga.* While further comparisons between Þyri and Guðrún will be drawn in the second part of this essay, the progression of the latter's dreams - about the four husbands she will take - into reality is unwaveringly accurate, and during Gest's interpretation of her dreams Guðrún is said to turn 'blood red'.[9] The clues the narrator gives us as to Guðrún's reaction to Gest's interpretation is here intriguing, as for a woman described as 'the goodliest… both as to looks and wits', the connection between dreams and fate is surely accepted: earmarked as Guðrún shortly after states 'there is much to think on, if all this shall come to pass'. (ch.32-33). This sense of foreshadowing also appears in *Gunnlaugs Saga* following the Norwegian's attempt at interpreting Thorstein's dream: after drawing the ire of his host by his suggestion, the Norwegian responds 'you'll find out for yourself how far it will come true'.[10]

As shown, the extent to which the characters are willing to accept these foresights vary, however the end results are much the same. The life of Helga, Thorstein's daughter, imitates the Norwegian's interpretation of Thorstein's dream minutely, and in this way it is further revealed to the saga audiences the unity between dreams and fate, and likewise between the waking and sleeping worlds. In *Laxdaela Saga* Óláf Pái is visited by a dream-woman and the following exchange takes place: 'She began to speak: "Are you asleep?" He said that he was awake. The woman said: "you are asleep, but that makes no difference.' (ch.31) As Cochrane has identified, this is a motif that occurs across the range of sagas where the dream-man or woman states that it does not matter if the subject of the dream is asleep 'as what will follow will happen as if he were awake'.[11]

Later in this same saga, Kjartan bestows on Hrefna a '*motr*' (a form of headdress) – which he received as a present and was to be given to his future wife under the command of princess Ingibjorg. (ch.45) This moment is significant, especially as it follows Guðrún's four dreams of her future husbands, in which each is symbolised as an item of clothing adorning her, and one nonetheless as a headdress. That Kjartan should mark the union of himself and Hrefna with the bridal gift of a headdress, shows that clothing being used to symbolise marriage to another is not purely consigned to dreams. This point only serves to reinforce the way in which the state of sleep is unified with the state of being awake, in marching along fate's path in these two historical sagas.

On the other hand, *Jómsvíkinga Saga* provides us with a contrasting representation of this unification in saga literature. In the waking world of *Jómsvíkinga Saga,* the link remains intact – symbolised by the three portents that stop Earl Harald from visiting King Gorm near the opening of the saga. The blossoming tree, the whelps barking in their mother's wombs and the rising waves, interpreted as a change in faith across Denmark, the rebellion of Sveinn against his father and the clash of Knútr and Harald Gormsson, are all later fulfilled as predicted by Earl Harald. In the sleeping world however, whereas fate, forecast through the dreams of a prominent character, appears unalterable in the historical sagas - a path to embrace or submit oneself to - in this mythical saga fate appears to be something changeable. After interpreting King Gorm's dreams symbolic of a great famine, Þyri reponds 'I shall take steps to combat the famine'. (ch.3) Practical steps are then taken in the saga, such that when the famine arrived 'it harmed neither them nor any of their neighbours, for they distributed the abundance among their countrymen'. (ch.3) It may be argued that, as in Gorm's dreams, the famine does occur as prescribed and is simply negotiated effectively by Þyri, thus potentially invalidating the argument presented here, however in Blake's translation Þyri explains 'the significance of the oxen

[6] Gabriel Turville-Petre, 'Dreams in Icelandic Tradition', *Folklore*, 69:2 (1958), 93-111 (p. 95).
[7] Lars Lönnroth, 'Dreams in the Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies,* 74:4 (2002), 455-464 (p. 456).
[8] *Jómsvíkinga Saga*, ed. by Norman F. Blake, (Thomas Nelson and Sons: London, 1962), ch.2. http://vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/ [Accessed 21 April 2017] *
[9] *Laxdaela Saga,* trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (Penguin Books: Middlesex, 1969) ch.33. *
[10] *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu,* ed. by Peter G. Foote, trans. Randolph Quirk, (Thomas Nelson and Sons: London, 1957) ch.2. http://vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/ [Accessed 21 April 2017] *

* *(hereafter chapter numbers included in text).*
[11] James Alan Cochrane, 'Bright Dreams and Bitter Experiences: Dreams in Six Sagas of Icelanders', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2004), p. 98.

having big horns is that many shall lose all they possess'. (ch.3) The saga audience is given no subsequent indication that this is indeed the case, and hence Þyri is presented as altering fate's disastrous path. As such, the connection between dreams and fate, previously seen to be infallible, is severed in the mythological saga.

Women and dreams

By changing fate's predicted outcome, Þyri succeeds in doing what no woman – or indeed man – otherwise achieves in the three sagas. Upon true interpretations of their dreams some, such as Thorstein, get angry and question the skill of those offering interpretation 'it can't be true that you know anything about interpreting dreams'. (ch.2) Others such as Óláf choose to fashion their own beliefs 'those who seemed to him to interpret it best were those that said that it was a false dream'. (ch.31) Guðrún is on her own therefore, in offering a form of positive response to hearing a depiction of her destiny. She herself manufactures the divorce of her first husband on grounds of transvestism, and later blackmails Bolli, her third husband, into starting a bloodfeud that eventually leads to his death. Jakobsson argues that, as a result, the four dreams are 'her way not of losing anything but rather of gaining control over her own fate'.[12] Contrary to those who choose not to pay heed to their dreams in these two historical sagas, Guðrún appears to embrace them and 'act out her fate'.[13] This allows her an element of control over her life, and over fate - not quite to the extent of Þyri who appears to alter its direction – but control nonetheless.

The direct antithesis to Guðrún is Helga, the most submissive female in any of these three sagas, who has drawn the wrath of critics such as Ólsen who derides her as 'without initiative, a ball in the hands of fate'.[14] The differences between the two women are obvious throughout, and while in Guðrún's dreams men are seen to be adornments of her, from the very beginning Helga is seen to be an adornment of men. Her depiction as a swan, graceful and passive in comparison to the eagles that fight over her, sets the tone from the very beginning of *Gunnlaugs Saga*, and thus it is no surprise that she offers little resistance to the life that is 'pre-ordained' for her in her father's dream.[15]

Helga's existence does serve a purpose when drawing comparisons to Guðrún however. Jakobsson goes on to argue that Guðrún 'could have changed her fate but chose not to do so', and although this interpretation has its merits, the evidence already presented here perhaps suggests that Guðrún does not have free will to this extent.[16] The nature of the relationship between dreams and fate in these two historical sagas would certainly suggest otherwise, and Helga's story as a baby serves to further this. Despite refusing to accept the Norwegian's interpretation of his dream, Thorstein orders his pregnant wife – Jófríd - to have the baby 'put out to die' if it is a girl. (ch.3) While the saga itself claims that this was a 'custom', there is the sense that perhaps the Norwegian's words were affecting Thorstein's judgement of the situation, despite Jófríd's protests. (ch.3)

We can't know whether Jófríd was privy to Thorstein's dreams, although the fact that he chooses not to have her attempt to interpret them might suggest not. If not, this means her decision to have Helga sent away, and Thorstein's later decision to take Helga back are surely then products of either fortune or fate. While it could simply be put down to a mother's desperate actions to save her child, there were no guarantees that Thorstein wouldn't find out – or indeed take the baby back if he did. That Thorstein does, and eventually takes Helga back because he '[likes] the look' of her, is potentially significant in marking the submission of her life to fate's course, and in symbolising his inability to change fate regardless of his earlier intentions. In comparison therefore, it is questionable whether Guðrún would thus have been able to offer much resistance to fate as it is presented in these two historical sagas. Rather she accepts what she sees to be the inevitable, in such a way that allows her to construct her own dialogue for her story.

[12] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Laxdaela Dreaming: A Saga Heroine Invents Her Own Life', *Leeds Studies in English*, 39 (2008), 33-51 (p. 47).
[13] Ibid., p. 47.
[14] Bjørn Magnússon Ólsen, *Om Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu. En kritisk undersøgelse*, Det kongelige Danske videnskabernes selskabs-skrifter, vii, 2:1 (Copenhagen: 1911), 3-54, (p. 32); quoted & trans. in Molly A. Jacobs, 'Hon stóð ok starði: Vision, Love, and Gender in Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu', *Scandinavian Studies*, 86:2 (2014), 148-168 (pp. 148-149).
[15] Jacobs, p. 151.
[16] Jakobsson, p. 47.

Dreams as a narrative device

The differences between the level of autonomy that dreams and fate allow the women in these three sagas is thus apparent. What is far less apparent is the extent to which saga genre may have an impact on this. That 'dreams already played an important part in the lives of Icelanders, as they do to this day' is a conclusion drawn by Turville-Petre, yet the significance of these dreams is something he later goes on to question.[17] Returning to the idea of mixed modalities, it is quite possible that dreams in the saga are the epitomisation of this idea: partly used as a narrative device, for entertainment, and partly used to reflect the contemporary culture of the saga writers - thus serving a historical purpose also.

Dreams therefore offer, for the two historical sagas, a way of structuring the text that allows for the saga writer to 'lead the action casually' towards its conclusion, while simultaneously mixing parts of Icelandic folklore in with historical fact.[18] L**ö**nnroth discusses this in relation to *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, stating that without the inclusion of dream-women in the saga, it 'would probably still move us but not fascinate us as much'.[19] The dreams of Thorstein and Guðrún are consequently multipurpose; they direct the narrative while simultaneously enriching the text.

Accordingly it is possible to investigate how this differs from the use of dreams in *Jómsvíkinga Saga*. Guided more by entertainment, dreams are not inherent to the narrative framework but rather used to adorn the piece. In contrast to the historical sagas in which dreams play a prominent part throughout, and are frequently revisited, Gorm's dreams are fleeting and forgotten. Instead, the saga is awash with symbolism, and it seems that the coloured oxen and the theme of the number three from Gorm's dreams are more important than the dreams themselves. The theme of the number three is continued, for example, in the number of portents Earl Harald sees, the number of invitations to both the Christmas and funeral feasts and on many more occasions, whereas Gorm's dreams are not mentioned outside of the opening chapters.

Mythical elements are therefore the focus, and entertainment the end product in *Jómsvíkinga Saga*. That Þyri can influence the outcome of fate is not surprising in a text that delights in the mysterious and the heroic, and that she - and Gorm's dreams - are swiftly passed over is equally expected in a saga that has been described as 'a series of colourful set pieces'.[20]

To conclude therefore, the three sagas discussed here each have their own way of exploring the link between dreams and fate as it has been seen in Icelandic literary culture. The nature of the historical saga genre encourages both *Laxdaela Saga* and *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormunstungu* to incorporate dreams as a way of foretelling the future and guiding the narrative, whereas the mythical *Jómsvíkinga Saga* is flexible with regards to the link between dreams and fate - depicting dreams more as a decoration to provide entertainment. Equally, the varying levels of agency that dreams allow women in these sagas can too be attributed, in part, to this difference.

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[17] Turville-Petre, p. 111.
[18] Cochrane, p. 97.
[19] L**ö**nnroth, p. 462.
[20] Alison Finlay, 'History and Fantasy in *Jómsvíkinga Saga'*, in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Preprint Papers of the 13th International Saga Conference*, ed. by John McKinnell, David Ashurst & Donata Kick (Durham: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), p. 256.

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