

A TRIPTYCH OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN *BÓSA SAGA*
OK HERRAUÐS

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A PAIR OF ARMED STRANGERS knock on three farmers' doors on three different nights. They are invited to stay the night, as is the custom. They are fed, watered. Each farmer has a daughter and each night, when everyone else is asleep, one of the strangers goes to the daughter's bed, speaks riddles to her and shoves her hand between his legs. One of the daughters responds enthusiastically. The other two protest, but one is won over by pleasure. The other feels sick and asks the man to stop. Eventually, he does.

Sexual acts in the Old Norse corpus are rarely portrayed in extensive detail and while the *fornaldarsögur* are generally far less reticent than, for instance, the *Íslendingasögur* in depicting sex and sexual misdemeanours, there are still very few detailed 'sex scenes'. The saga that defies this trend is *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*. Jenny Jochens has commented that 'the only sexual, almost pornographic, scenes in the Old Norse corpus are found in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*' (1991, 380). Vésteinn Ólason echoes this statement, drawing attention to *Bósa saga*'s extraordinary outspokenness: 'nowhere else in saga literature is there a direct description of sexual intercourse' (1994, 120). Kate Heslop refers to the saga as 'one of the very few medieval Icelandic texts in which sex plays as central a role as it does in *Grettisfærsla*', the latter a poem existing only in 'mangled remnants' (2010, 216; 205). The 'pornographic scenes' in *Bósa saga* form a triptych of sexual conquests that become almost folkloric in their repetition: three times the eponymous heroes happen upon a farmstead; Bósi has sex with the farmer's daughter; she provides post-coital information that will aid Bósi and Herrauðr in the next part of their quest. The scenes are not only prominent in their graphic detail and their repetitive nature, but structure the saga's greater narrative. In this paper, by juxtaposing these three scenes and exploring their similarities and their differences, I will argue that *Bósa saga* is not just one of the most sexually explicit sagas in the Old Norse corpus, but the most sexually violent, with at least two and possibly even all three of the scenes depicting varying degrees of sexual coercion.

Numerous critics have claimed that *Bósa saga* is directly influenced by the French *fabliaux*, which were immensely popular in mainland Europe at the time of the saga's composition, probably in the fourteenth century.

Described by Kim Phillips and Barry Reay as ‘short comic verses that deploy erotic themes and imagery for satirical and moral ends’, around 150 of these Old French poems survive (2011, 169). Heslop attests that ‘metaphor and euphemism are at the heart of the *fabliau*’s (and *Bósa saga*’s) erotic effect’ (2010, 216). Jean Renaud has proposed similarities between the creative euphemisms in *Bósa saga* and *De l’escuiruel* ‘The squirrel’ and *De Porcelet* ‘Piglet’, in which lovers come up with euphemistic names to evoke humour in a sexual setting (1996, 70–71). Sverrir Tómasson has argued for direct *fabliau* influence on *Bósa saga* from *De la Damoisele qui ne pooit oïr parler de foutre* ‘Of the young girl who couldn’t stand to hear talk of fucking’, as well as elsewhere in the corpus, such as the influence of *Le prestre crucifié* upon *Sigurðar saga turnara*, based on the overwhelming similarity of events that unfold in both (1989, 217–19). Sverrir emphasises the parallels between the equine metaphors for male genitalia in *De la Damoisele* and *Bósa saga* as well as the indigenous *Völsa þátrr*, found in Flateyjarbók (Nordal 1944–45, II 441–46), in which a woman appears to worship a horse phallus. King Hákon Hákonarson’s (r. 1217–63) large-scale translation programme of French texts into Old Norse oversaw the transmission of a multitude of Continental texts into the Norwegian courts, and among the thirty-eight surviving Old Norse translations, one *fabliau* exists: *Möttuls saga*, a translation of the Old French *Lai du cort mantel*. The adaptor announces that the translation was commissioned by King Hákon *til gamans ok skemtanar* ‘for amusement and entertainment’ (Kalinke 1999, 6), and the misogynistic threads of this *fabliau*’s plot, which oversees a series of chastity tests forced upon courtly women, have led Liliane Irlenbusch-Reynard to comment that this amusement ‘is at the expense of the ladies of Arthur’s court, and of women in general’ (2011, 391). This theme of amusement at the expense of a woman’s sexual autonomy chimes with *Bósa saga*. King Hákon’s programme is evidence of French literary transmission into Norse through direct translation as well as through literary themes and motifs that peek through into indigenous Old Norse texts. With its strong evocation of the *fabliaux*, this certainly seems to be the case with *Bósa saga*.

There is a degree of discord in scholarly discourse as to whether *Bósa saga* is overtly or euphemistically sexually explicit. According to Lars von Wezel, ‘genitals are not mentioned explicitly but rather metaphorically’, and he adds that ‘this attitude never shifts towards a natural and explicit physical description of the act in progress’ (2006, 1038). Jonathan Hui, meanwhile, describes the sexual content of *Bósa saga* as a series of ‘explicitly pornographic set-plays’ (2018, 461). The saga is, in my view, both flagrantly and metaphorically sexually explicit: the metaphors used in

it hardly seem employed for the evasion of sexual topics, as the setting is blatantly sexual and the metaphors crude. Indeed, the metaphors add, as they do in the *fabliaux*, to the sexual humour of the scene. Bósi's penis — a jarl, a foal, a stump — is never described literally. But the graphic nature of the euphemisms, which are accompanied by talk of sexual fluids, sexual positions and an oblique discussion of Bósi's apparently peculiarly shaped glans, still imbue the scenes with 'grossly physiological detail' (Hallberg 1982, 21).

These erotic scenes, in fact, appear to have been considered so distasteful that each one of them has been very deliberately scratched off the saga's primary manuscript, AM 586 4to (ff. 15r; 16v–17r; 17v–18r), meeting the same fate as the sexual scenes in *Grettisfærsla* (Heslop 2010, 207). Sverrir Tómasson suggests that any stories with sexual themes, particularly those stemming from the *fabliaux*, may have existed orally but were probably considered too distasteful to be committed to vellum, which would explain why there is only one saga with such explicit sexual content, and why in its principal manuscript the scenes have been forcibly removed (1989, 221). The eradication therefore seems to be a deliberate attempt to omit the pornographic aspects of the saga, to the extent that the information provided by each farm girl is likewise eradicated despite being integral to the trajectory of the narrative.

These scenes, which I will be discussing in depth, are taken from the edition in Guðni Jónsson's *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, which appears to follow Otto Jiriczek's edition of the text. Jiriczek uses all the saga's major manuscripts, drawing primarily from AM 586 4to; due to the eradication in AM 586 4to, however, Jiriczek uses AM 510 4to for 'die drei obscenen Stellen' [the three obscene episodes], referring to AM 586 4to for comparison where possible given the eradications (1893, xxxv–vi). There is also a much younger version of the saga, the late seventeenth-century *Yngri Bósa saga*, which features only one (far less crude) sex scene, with a farm girl whom Bósi is later forced to marry. It thus omits his status as a womaniser, owing possibly to deliberate changes or to oral and written variation. Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir cogently proposes that given the range of possibilities that could result in such differences between the older and younger versions, and the manuscript variation, it is perhaps best to think of them as independent versions rather than the younger being a direct result of deliberate alterations to the older (2020, 65). The present paper is concerned, because of these innate differences, only with the older *Bósa saga*.

A history of 'mutual enjoyment'

Much like Carolyne Larrington's article "'What Does Woman Want?'" Mær und munr in *Skírnismál*', which illuminates Gerðr's response to unwanted

sexual advances in the Eddic poem *Skirnismál* and in doing so reveals the source of ‘[gender-related] uneasiness’ (Larrington 1992, 3), my reading of *Bósa saga* promotes a departure from the majority of existing critical responses which do not interrogate the girls’ reactions to Bósi’s sexual advances. Despite the resounding acknowledgement of *Bósa saga* as portraying ‘a rollicking sexuality’ (Jochens, 1991, 381) and ‘a robust popular pornography’, as well as the recognition of the ‘comic sexual imagery’ (Hallberg, 1982, 21), no study, to my knowledge, has addressed the coercive nature of some of these sex scenes. The only allusion to coercion that I have found in relation to Bósi comes from Hans-Peter Naumann, who says that Bósi is ‘willens, sexuellen Zwang auszuüben’ [willing to exercise sexual coercion] (1978, 46). This, however, is in reference to the coercion of Princess Edda in the walnut grove and not to the three sex scenes, although it certainly speaks to Bósi’s character and the themes of the saga as a whole.

I have found no scholars that have identified any traces of sexual violence in the sex scenes of *Bósa saga*, but several who assert the saga’s positive depiction of sex. Vésteinn Ólason highlights ‘the sheer, and mutual, enjoyment of sexuality described in *Bósa saga*’ (1994, 121). Jochens is primarily concerned with the fact that Bósi takes the initiative, thus fueling her argument for male-led seduction in a study largely focused on the *Íslendingasögur*, and simply says of *Bósa saga* that ‘the women clearly enjoy the activity’ (1991, 381). Her justification for this statement is that ‘the second episode even indicates that “the missionary position” was not universal’, i.e. that the *mulier equitans* position is a good indicator of the second farmer’s daughter’s enjoyment and enthusiasm during the sexual encounter with Bósi. This is a fair enough claim, but one that does not account for the other two women, neither of whom is said to adopt this position. Renaud, whose study is entitled ‘Eroticism in the *Saga of Bósi and Herraúðr*’, likewise detects no negativity in any of the three sex scenes. Particularly noteworthy is that Renaud actually compares the eroticism of *Bósa saga* to the scene with the maid in *Grettis saga*, stating that ‘both verses are full of double meanings and the whole scene has the same playful tone as those in *Bósa saga*’ (1996, 74). Renaud does not appear to register the sexual violence that the *Grettis saga* scene and the first and third sex scenes in *Bósa saga* have in common (on the rape episode in *Grettis saga* see for instance Helga Kress 1994, 76; Gareth Lloyd Evans 2019, 123).

Quite a few scholars even draw attention to the lack of negative emotion or implication in the scenes. Alaric Hall, Steven Richardson and Haukur Þorgeirsson seem to pick up on the dubious circumstances of Bósi’s seductions but suggest that not one of the women is in any way bothered: ‘Bósi’s sexual exploits comprise Old Icelandic literature’s most unabashed account

of womanising, and the various women Bósi sleeps with are implausibly untroubled by his advances' (2013, 96). Hallberg too seems struck by the lack of bad feeling, suggesting that 'there are no traces whatsoever left of dangerous temptation and sense of guilt' (1982, 21–22). In her work on sexual violence, Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir expresses a degree of surprise that the most explicit sexual scenes in the corpus are violence-free (2016, 195):

The descriptions are explicit, and in fact unique in Old Icelandic literature, and one thing they have in common is that no force is used on the girls. Even if they do not take the initiative themselves, they are curious about the handsome guest, and share a bed with him of their own free will. All of them have learnt something more about the pleasures of this world by the time he leaves in the morning.

These scholars thus seem to be mindful of the potential for sexual violence, discomfort, shame or discord, but **not to** detect any. Lucy Anne Keens notes some of the **reticence** of the third farmer's daughter, acknowledging that 'this time the girl is not as open to his advances', but goes on to state that 'Bósi's metaphors help reassure her and secure his final sexual encounter' (2016, 70). Keens, unlike the other scholars searching for sexual violence, **determines reticence** but in my view greatly understates it. The third sex scene in particular is a glaring example of non-consensual sex, and the first scene takes place, as I shall argue, under coercive circumstances.

A vast chasm separates medieval and modern concepts of consent, but the contrasting attitudes and reactions of the three daughters speaks to the intent of the saga writer to differentiate between positive and negative responses to Bósi's sexual advances. Vésteinn Ólason says that 'three times Bósi gets into bed with farmers' daughters and spends a merry night there' (1994, 120), but he does not interrogate the differences between the three scenes. Although it is possible to view Bósi as understanding each scene to be a repeated enjoyable experience, the reactions of the girls are very different, and the third in particular does not seem to have a good time. Looking at all three scenes in succession, I will discuss why *Bósa saga* is the most graphic depiction not just of sex in the Old Norse corpus, but also of sexual violence.

The three scenes have a folkloric similarity: in each, the two heroes happen upon a farm with a beautiful farmer's daughter and Bósi has sex with her. The language used in each instance appears to establish this similarity purposefully:

[1] *Einn dag kómu þeir at húsabæ einum* 'One day they came to a cottage' (Guðni Jónsson 1954a, 297)

[2] *Þeir kómu at húsabæ litlum ok kyrfligum* 'They came to a humble little cottage' (307)

[3] *Þeir gengu til byggða* 'they went to a residence' (315)

- [1] *Dóttur áttu þau væna* ‘They had a beautiful daughter’ (297)
 [2] *Þau áttu dóttur væna ok vel kunnandi* ‘They had a beautiful, well-informed daughter’ (307)
 [3] *Þau áttu dóttur væna* ‘They had a beautiful daughter’ (315)
 [1] *‘Um kveldit var þeim fylgt at sofa með góðum umbúningi* ‘As evening drew in, they were led away for some sleep with good bedding’ (298)
 [2] *Um kveldit var þeim fylgt at sofa* ‘In the evening they were led away to sleep’ (308)
 [3] *Litlu síðar fóru menn til svefnis* ‘A little while later people went to sleep’ (315)

Likewise, each girl is nameless and referred to with the same word, *bóndadóttir*, yet each has a distinct personality, and their reactions to Bósi’s advances all differ in significant ways. The fact that the *bóndadóttir* scene occurs three times is crucial, and Naumann in particular draws attention to *Bósa saga*’s tripartite structure (1978, 46–47):

Nach dieser schematischen Triade richtet sich die Gesamtstruktur der *Bósa saga*, dem Gesetz der Dreizahl unterliegt darüber hinaus ihre episodische Gliederung. Dreimal gelangt Bósi zum einsamed Waldgehöft, dreimal hat er dort Liebesnächte mit Bauernmädchen zu bestehen, die ihm dreimal die erforderlichen Informationen zur Bewältigung seiner drei Abenteuer liefern . . . und so fort: der Zwang zur formelhaften Wiederholung ist augenfällig.

[The overall structure of *Bósa saga* is based on this schematic triad, and its episodic structure is also subject to the law of three. Three times Bósi arrives at the lonely forest farmstead, three times he has to endure *love nights* with country girls, who three times provide him with the necessary information to cope with his three adventures . . . and so on: the compulsion to formulaic repetition is obvious.]

This folkloric number has been established as significant to European storytelling by Axel Olrik, who calls it *das Gesetz der Dreizahl* ‘the rule of three’ (1909, 3–4). Three sexually violent scenes in apposition are found elsewhere in the corpus: the threefold rape of Sedentiana by Sigurðr in *Sigurðar saga þögla* in which he disguises himself variously as a dwarf, a swineherd and an ogre (Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1949, 206–15), and in *Helga þátr* of *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans* with Helgi’s three rape victims, Ólöf, Yrsa and the *álfkona* ‘elf-woman’ (Guðni Jónsson 1954c, 14–29). These sexually violent episodes are certainly not isolated incidents in the *riddarasögur* or the *fornaldarsögur*, and highlight a cognisance of sexual violence and a desire to depict it in literature. The disjunction between modern and medieval concepts of consent and rape should not be understated; however, to suggest that Old Norse writers had no concept of consent — although they may not have given it that name — would be inaccurate. In *Örvar-Odds saga*, the overtly moral Hjálmar frames

an aversion to sexual violence as the very foundation of his *vikingsalög* (Guðni Jónsson 1954b, 234):

ok eigi skal konur til skips leiða nauðgar, ok ef hún kann þat at segja, at hún fari nauðig, þá skal sá engu fyrir týna nema lífi sínu, hvárt sem hann er ríkr eða óríkr
 no woman is ever to be brought to my ship against her will, and if she can show that she has been taken to the ship against her will, the one who took her shall be put to death, whether he is powerful or not.

It is certainly not impossible to suggest a sympathy for victims of sexual violence on the part of the author of *Bósa saga*. Indeed, that there are such astute similarities between the *bóndadóttir* scenes renders their differences all the more palpable. The enthusiasm of the second girl highlights the reticence of the first and third, which strongly implies that there was authorial intent to frame these scenes with coercion and discontent.

The first bóndadóttir

In the episode with the first girl, it seems that she is initially unwilling but eventually complies with having sex with Bósi. Hers is a classic example of the ambiguous qualities that often veil sex in the sagas, in which ‘the lines between consent and coercion are thin indeed’ (Bell 2023, 9). In the initial flirtation stage—a staple of each scene—Bósi behaves playfully towards her and she reciprocates: *Bósi leit oft hýrliga til hennar ok sté fæti sínum á rist henni, ok þetta bragð lék hún honum* ‘Bósi often looked at her smilingly and trod on her instep with his foot, and she played the same trick on him’ (Guðni Jónsson 1954a, 298). Since, in both subsequent sex scenes, this flirting appears to be a marker of the girl’s sexual attraction to Bósi, this could be interpreted as her being sexually interested in him. However, when Bósi does go to her bed, she appears confused about what he wants from her. As already mentioned, the sex scenes in *Bósa saga* are strongly reminiscent of the *fabliau De la Damoisele qui ne pooit oïr parler de foutre*.¹ Renaud

¹ This *fabliau* exists in three different versions: *AEC* (*De la Damoisele qui ne pooit oïr parler de foutre* ‘Of the young girl who couldn’t stand to hear talk of fucking’); *AEC* stands for MS A: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 837, MS E: Paris, BnF, fr. 1593, and MS C: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Hamilton 257; edition here taken from de Montaiglon and Raynaud, 1878. *B* (*De la Damoisele qui n’ot parler de fotre qui n’aüst mal au cuer* ‘Of the young girl who didn’t hear talk of fucking without heartache’); *B* stands for MS B: Bern, Bibliothèque de la Bourgeoisie, 354; edition here taken from de Montaiglon and Raynaud, 1883. *D* (*De la Pucele qui abevra le polain* ‘Of the virgin who watered the foal’) *D* stands for MS D: Paris, BnF, fr. 19152; edition here taken from de Montaiglon and Raynaud, 1880. Note that Sverrir Tomasson refers to the poem as *De la demoiselle qui ne*

(1996, 71) has compared the *bóndadætr* and their evasiveness about referring to genitalia by their proper terms to the *damoisele*'s unwillingness to hear sexual language in this *fabliau*; however, the latter should not be confused with a lack of awareness, but in fact gives the French poet the opportunity to come up with lots of humorous metaphors: 'the often playful language of the *fabliaux* is not usually coy or euphemistic; rather it testifies to the composer's skill and is central to the works' entertainment value' (Phillips and Reay 2011, 171). Indeed, the *damoisele* in AEC initiates the sexual touching and in B and D she devises the metaphors. In each version, the dialogue is a back-and-forth of wit for wit. In B, the young man asks the *damoisele* (of her vagina): *que est ce* 'what is this?' and she responds: *Ce est . . . ma fontaine* 'This . . . is my fountain' (*Damoisele* B, 29). She then asks (of his testicles): *Que est ici, / Daviet, si roide et si dur, / Que bien devroit percier .i. mur?* 'What is here, Daviet, so rigid and hard, which could so easily pierce a wall?'. He responds that they are his *polains* 'foals', which he then says *muert de soi* 'are dying of thirst', and she replies, *Va si l'abroive à ma fontaine* 'Come and give them water in my fountain' (*Damoisele*, 29–30). They thus collaborate to initiate sex via metaphor. Similarly, in *De l'escuriel*, the girl responds to Robin's *escuriel* 'squirrel', that is, his penis, by telling him to let it go hunting for *Bones nois* 'delicious nuts', that is, to penetrate her (de Montaiglon and Raynaud 1880d, 170). In *De Porcelet*, which Renaud (1996, 71) also invokes as a point of comparison, the boy encourages the girl to come up with metaphors for the genitalia of them both (de Montaiglon and Raynaud 1880b, 144):

— Dame, » fait il, « ice est droiz
 Que les nons amedeus metoiz,
 Teus con vostre plaisir sera.

'Lady,' said he, 'it is only right that you pick names for us both, as will please you.'

She comes up with the metaphor *porcelez* 'piglet' for her own vagina and *fromant* 'wheat' for her lover's penis (de Montaiglon and Raynaud 1880b, 144; 145). The *bóndadóttir* in *Bósa saga*, however, lacks this agency and seems confused by Bósi's metaphors. Vésteinn Ólason has described the exchanges between Bósi and his lovers as follows (1994, 120):

His conversations with his lovers and the descriptions of their actions sparkle with witty metaphors and much good humour, so that these parts of the saga may be considered pearls of bawdy literature.

pooit oït parler de foutre but quotes from *De la Damoisele qui n'ot parler de fotre qui n'aüst mal au cuer* in de Montaiglon and Raynaud 1973, 24–31).

But *Bósa saga*'s metaphors are not presented in a back-and-forth like those of the *fabliaux*; rather, Bósi comes up with metaphors for both sets of genitalia in all three scenes. In each version of *De la Damoisele* the girl names her body parts and the young man comes up with metaphors for his own that complement her metaphors. The French girls do not have the naïveté of the first and third *bóndadætr*.

In *Bósa saga*, the first girl's repeated questions about what Bósi wants do facilitate the coining and development of the 'jarl' metaphor which, if we can assume it draws on the *fabliau* tradition, is probably intended to be humorous and witty. It is possible that she is coyly pretending not to know what he means by his 'jarl' in order to encourage him, in a *fabliau*-like manner, as in the examples above. However, this apparent naïveté is accompanied by an active desire not to cooperate with Bósi. He tells her where to touch — *milli fóta sér* 'between his legs' — and she immediately pulls her hand back and the word *ófagnað* 'joyless; unwelcome' unambiguously expresses unhappiness (Guðni Jónsson 1954a, 298). It seems that unlike in the *fabliaux*, where euphemisms are deployed to add to the sexual play and both parties are fully aware of what the euphemisms stand for, the *bóndadóttir*'s sudden reaction to Bósi's penis indicates that she did not comprehend his euphemism. She therefore seems very reluctant and inexperienced. Unlike those of *Bósa saga*, the women of the *fabliaux* are not asked or forced to touch their lovers, but instead both lovers curiously touch each other. The *bóndadóttir* seems not to know what Bósi's penis is, questioning why it is so *óvæni* 'wretched' and *svá hart sem tré* 'as hard as wood'. The girl's use of this simile shows that she is not playing along with his 'jarl' metaphor, and she seems genuinely clueless. The exchange does not 'sparkle with witty metaphors', as Vésteinn suggests, but appears as miscommunication built on uncertainty. Bósi is undeterred by her lack of comprehension. He persuades her by suggesting that his penis — which has alarmed her with its hardness — will soften in *myrkholunni* 'the dark hole', although he does not say what this is.

It is at this point that the girl appears to consent verbally to sex: *Hún bað hann fara með sem hann vildi* 'She told him to go on with it as he wanted'. Her autonomy in consenting to the sex is certainly in doubt at this point, however, given her apparent lack of comprehension, as well as the coercive context in which she finds herself. With reference to consent in a modern context, Quill R. Kukla discusses in great detail the degrees not just of consent but autonomy in consenting to sex, stating that 'consensuality is in turn not the only ethical dimension of sex' (2021, 290). In the context of *Bósa saga*, if the *bóndadóttir* truly does not under-

stand what is happening, we could consider her inexperience and lack of understanding a reducing factor of her autonomy, although autonomy is rarely absolute and cannot fully account for willingness to engage or not engage in a sexual encounter, as Kukla points out: ‘people with memory problems, mildly drunk people, people out of their element, and people at a power disadvantage should not be assumed to be incapable of real sexual consent’ (2021, 281–22). But other episodes in the corpus do show how magic and alcohol are weaponised to inhibit a woman’s sexual autonomy and thereby facilitate sexual assault: in *Hávamál* st. 161, Óðinn boasts of knowing a charm with which he could magically alter a girl’s thoughts and partake of her love by mentally and sexually violating her (Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I 355):

Þat kann ek it sextánda,
 ef ek vil ins svinna mans
 hafa geð allt ok gaman,
 hugi ek hverfi
 hvítarmri konu,
 ok sný ek hennar öllum sefa.

The sixteenth [spell] I know, if I want all the heart and love of a clever woman.
 The mind I turn of the white-armed maid, and I alter all her thoughts.

Similarly, alcohol is a vehicle for the sexual assault of Þoðvildr in *Vølundarkviða* st. 27 (Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I 434–35). In both these instances, a woman’s autonomy is compromised and she is vulnerable to sexual assault as a result. It is difficult to assess whether the *bóndadóttir*’s lack of comprehension would be considered an issue of consent in medieval terms, however. Her naïveté may prompt concern from the modern reader, but it is certainly possible that it was largely intended for comedic effect, as in the case of the *fabliaux*.

Notwithstanding, the discomfort and awkwardness of the scene is consistently underlined; Bósi puts his jarl between her legs, and the saga writer makes a point of saying: *Var þar gata eigi mjök rúm, en þó kom hann fram ferðinni* ‘The path was not particularly spacious, but he managed to make the journey’ (298). Not only does this suggest any combination of virginity, lack of arousal and lack of care on his part to prepare the girl for penetration, but it also does not complement the ‘jarl’ metaphor or indeed the ‘wood’ metaphor. Again, the witty back-and-forth of euphemistic banter is undermined by an incongruous euphemism. It is only at this point that the narrative shifts into mutual enjoyment: *Lágu þau nú um stund, sem þeim líkar* ‘They lay now for a time, as pleased them’ and the girl suggests that she wants him to *herða oftar* ‘harden again’, so they can have more sex (299). But the lead-up to

this depicts not an eager partner but a very naïve, inexperienced one who does not appear to know what is happening, who does not respond to Bósi's euphemisms and who must be persuaded into having sex with him after initial reluctance and who even recoils when he tells her to touch his member.

There is also the matter of the transactional nature of this interaction. In each of the three sexual encounters Bósi gives the girl a ring: he gives it to the first girl as he enters her bed, and it seems at first to be a token to encourage her to sleep with him, even a payment. However, the girl seems to view both the ring and the *góða nætrskemmtan* 'enjoyable night-play' (299) as currency for the information; after she gives the information, Bósi in turn rewards her with more sex *í skemmtanarlaun* 'as pleasure-payment' (300). The sex is transactional but not on the part of the girl, as it originally seems; indeed, Bósi's ability to provide good sex is exchangeable for the girl's information. There is thus a high value placed on Bósi's sexual ability, implying perhaps that the girl's original reticence was transformed into lust and pleasure by his prowess. The encounter is a complex one, beginning as coercive but turning into a depiction of mutually enjoyable sex. Bósi's aphorism after the sexual encounter could even be read as his acknowledgement that she was reluctant at first but her fears were transformed into pleasure: *'eru þeir ok margir hlutir; at oft snúast til gæfu, þó at háskasamliga sé stofnaðir'* 'there are many things that often turn to good fortune, even though at first they seem perilous' (299). This comment suggests a lack of accountability on Bósi's part, and the girl's eventual pleasure could even constitute a wish-fulfilment narrative in which Bósi finds a young girl attractive, and decides to seduce her knowing that her parents will probably be able to do nothing about the seduction, and will face the repercussions, such as a resultant pregnancy. That the first *bóndadóttir* is, at the end of the saga, said to have had a son seems to have no impact on Bósi one way or the other (322). Girls of lower social status, for example those of labouring or enslaved classes, as Amy Eichhorn-Mulligan has noted, are often presented as more easily sexually accessible because of their reduced rights, and because 'slaves, and their bodies, were often figured as undesirably subhuman, unnatural, and "Other"' (2006, 199).

There is a clear trend in medieval writing that supports the notion of women being governed by their lust and enjoying rape. This trend is explored most famously by Evelyn Birge Vitz (1997), whose assessment is that medieval audiences may have had a conception of unsolicited penetration as something that could still be enjoyed, even if it was unwanted. Corrinne Saunders (2001, 169) points out that Lydgate's defamatory depiction of Lucretia, for instance, 'affirms the male fantasy that women

ultimately enjoy rape despite their protestations, and that they are governed by the physical reflex of desire'. In this depiction, Lucretia laments being overcome by lust: 'Al-be I was ageyn my will oppressid, / Ther was a maner constreynd lust in deede' (Fall of Princes, ll. 1282–83; Lydgate 1992, xxx). Writing in the fifteenth century, Christine de Pisan expresses her disgust at such depictions (2000, 186):

je suis navrée et outrée d'entendre des hommes répéter que les femmes veulent être violées et qu'il ne leur déplaît point d'être forcées, même si elles s'en défendent tout haut. Car je ne saurais croire qu'elles prennent plaisir à une telle abomination.

I am sorry and outraged to hear men insist that women want to be raped and that they do not mind being forced, even if they defend themselves out loud. Because I cannot believe they take pleasure in such an abomination.

Christine's welcome rebuttal of this abject misogyny is backed up with her defences of women such as Lucretia, and her reference to men with such thoughts 'illuminates too a powerful strand of patriarchal thought' (Saunders 2001, 30). Christine dissects the all-too-prevalent patriarchal thought that 'sexual violence was a ubiquitous, if infrequently punished, crime, one that found considerable legitimacy in fictional and scientific accounts of women who resisted, but were ultimately conquered by their own desire' (Guynn 2007, 170). Speaking with deep concern about the ubiquity of these opinions among a long list of men, Christine is especially critical of the *Roman de la Rose* for its propagation of such notions, as, for instance, in Jean de Meun's continuation of the work (Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun 1970, xxx):

cuillez la rose tout a force
 et moutrez que vos estes hon,
 quant leus iert et tens et seson,
 car riens ne leur porroit tant plere
 con tel force, qui la set fere
 (Roman de la Rose, ll. 7660–64)

cut the rose by force and show that you are a man, when there is place, time and season, for as long as someone knows how to do it, nothing could please them so much as such force.

This, according to Mary Flannery, 'contains an implication that sexually experienced (male) readers will join him in a bit of a wink over how women pretend to resist masculine sexual aggression when what they really want is to be overcome by it' (2011, 344). De Meun and many others writing on love draw heavily on Ovid's immensely influential treatise on love and how to pursue it, the *Ars Amatoria*. Ovid's treatise interprets a woman's

rejection as desire, and accordingly advises the (presumably male) reader to proceed in the seduction of an unwilling woman (Ovid 1991, xxx):

Quaeque roget, ne se sollicitare velis
 Quod rogat illa, timet; quod non rogat, optat, ut instes;
 Insequere, et voti postmodo compos eris.

(*Ars amatoria*, ll.484–86)

She asks you not to bother her because what she asks you for she fears, and what she doesn't ask you for she wants you to pursue. Proceed and then you'll get what you pray for.

Perhaps, in *Bósa saga*, Bósi's ability to coerce the *bóndadóttir* into feeling pleasure is a by-product of this widespread medieval male fantasy of women being unable to resist their lustful nature even when forced into sexual acts. Andreas Capellanus's twelfth-century treatise on courtly love, *De Amore*, follows the Ovidian model and propagates similarly misogynistic advice. Andreas's encouragement of rape is especially class-based, and he proposes that 'a courtly lover (clearly not a farmer) ought simply to rape peasant women at will' (Moi 1986, 18):

Si vero et illarum te feminarum amor forte attraxerit, eas pluribus laudibus efferre memento, et, si locum inveneris opportunum, non differas assumere quod petebas et violento potiri amplexu. Vix enim ipsarum in tantum exterius poteris mitigare rigorem, quod quietos fateantur se tibi concessuras amplexus vel optata patiantur te habere solatia, nisi modicae saltem coactionis medela praecedat ipsarum opportuna pudoris. (*On Love*, 222–23; Capellanus 1982, xxx)

But if the love even of peasant women chances to entice you, remember to praise them lavishly, and should you find a suitable spot you should not delay in taking what you seek, gaining it by rough embraces. You will find it hard so to soften their outwardly brusque attitude as to make them quietly agree to grant you embraces, or permit you to have the consolations you seek, unless the remedy of at least some compulsion is first applied to take advantage of their modesty.

Saunders interprets Andreas's advice on peasant women as implying that they 'cannot understand the polite game of *fin'amors*, and, perhaps, that they do not qualify as "maidens" because of their low status' and furthermore that the 'rape of the peasant woman fulfils an accepted and basic, if bestial, male sexual need' (2001, 190; 191). In line with this, Bósi's repeated actions towards the daughters of a *karl* and a *kerling* — vocabulary which denotes them as of lower social status — adds a social dimension to the power-interplay of these sexually coercive scenes. Bósi will face no repercussions for seducing their beautiful daughter, and furthermore, she will end up enjoying his seduction despite having initial reservations. This plays into a classist fantasy of the availability of lower-status women as well as the

deeply misogynistic, widespread patriarchal belief in the inherent lustfulness of women and their tendency to be conquered by their own desires.

Kathryn Gravdal's work on French *pastourelle*, a twelfth-century lyric form originating in southern France, is relevant here. Gravdal explains how lower-class women can be acceptably raped by a knight and that rape itself is depicted as a 'game' (1991, 104–21). By the end of the game, the woman would find sexual pleasure, and this has a voyeuristic effect for the male listener and plays into the male fantasy of rape (1991, 110):

Rape is aestheticized in a way that both manages and encourages the erotic satisfaction of the listener. The *pastourelle* aestheticizes assault as a socio-sexual game and therefore a source of pleasure for the playful, resilient, and plastic female character, thus enabling rape to become a source of pleasure for the male listener and critic as well. The shepherdess bounces back pertly after an attack: unhurt, dry-eyed, cheerful, and refreshed.

Gravdal counts twelve scenes in *pastourelles* in which a 'scene of forcible rape is interrupted by coos of female pleasure or followed by the victim's thanks and request for more of the same' (1991, 111). This chimes remarkably with the encounters in *Bósa saga*, as a socially inferior girl (usually a shepherd girl in the *pastourelle*, here a farm girl) is subject to the sexually violent desires of a higher-class male (the knight in the *pastourelle*, the warrior Bósi here) and is won over after a bout of force. Vésteinn in particular has underscored the European nature of the saga: 'a typical fornaldarsaga matter, the matter of the North, has been written into the genre of chivalric romance' (1994, 122), and given the likely influence from French *fabliaux*, it is perhaps not unreasonable to think that there may also be a connection to this trope in the French *pastourelle*.

The second bóndadóttir

That the second *bóndadóttir* fully consents to sex with Bósi is clear for several reasons. First, Bósi's flirting is explicitly reciprocated: *Bósi var glaðkátr ok gerði henni smáglingrur; hún gerði honum ok svá í móti* 'Bósi was good-humoured and flirted with her; she did the same in return' (Guðni Jónsson 1954a, 308). As the night proceeds, Bósi repeats his actions with the first girl by lifting her bedclothes: *þá kom Bögu-Bósi þar, sem bóndadóttir lá, ok lyfti klæði af henni* 'then Bögu-Bósi came to where the farmer's daughter lay, and lifted the bedclothes from her' (308). However, the ring-giving here does not occur until the following morning. This is possibly because the girl needs no convincing; after her initial quizzing about what he wants, which echoes the words of the first *bóndadóttir*, this girl responds immediately to Bósi's metaphor of the foal at the *vinkelda*

‘wine-well’ (308), even suggesting that her *brunnhús* ‘well-house’ is beyond Bósi’s experience. She is the only girl of the three to be introduced not just as *væn* ‘beautiful’ but also *vel kunnandi* ‘well-informed’, and this second epithet sets her apart: she seems much more sexually experienced or knowledgeable than the other two (307). This is much more of an exchange of wit in the style of the *fabliaux*, and the use of the drinking horse as a euphemism for sex appears not only in *De la damoiselle qui ne pooit oït parler de foutre* but also as a creative euphemism for a sexual act in Heslop’s reconstruction of *Grettisfærsla*: <o>k gefur hestum<;> / *drykk at blanda* ‘and feeds horses to blend drink’ (2006, 81), and it also recalls the *heldr röskligr / vingull* ‘rather doughty horse member’ in *Völsa þátrr* (Faulkes 2007, 52). This second scene thus evokes an established sexual metaphor known not only in mainland Europe but also in the North.

Unlike the other girls, this *bóndadóttir* refers to Bósi with pet names: *maðr minn* ‘my man’ and *hjärtavinrinn* ‘heart-friend’; and the biggest contrast of all is her willingness to touch his penis (Guðni Jónsson 1954a, 308). In all three scenes, Bósi encourages the *bóndadóttir* to touch *Á millum fóta mér* ‘between my legs’, but this girl is very different from the others: the first *kippti hendinni ok bað ófagnað eiga jarl hans* ‘yanked her hand back and told him his jarl was unwelcome’ (298) and the third *kippti at sér hendinni ok bað ófagnað eiga stúfa hans* ‘yanked her hand back, and told him his stump was unwelcome’ (315). The second girl, meanwhile, is more forthcoming and even dominant: *Hún tók nú um göndulinn á honum ok strauk um ok mælti*: ‘*Þetta er fímligr foli ok þó mjök rétt hálsaðr*’ ‘She now seized his penis and stroked it and said: “This is a nimble foal, but very erect at the neck”’ (308). She does not at any point recoil and say his penis is unwelcome. Notwithstanding, it is implied that she is startled by how quickly he progresses to full penetration: *Bóndadóttur varð mjök dátt við þetta* ‘The farmer’s daughter was very overwhelmed by that’. This indicates that Bósi is far from a considerate sexual partner, going at his own speed and not his partner’s. Bósi is unrepentant about this, extending the ‘foal’ metaphor further by calling it *óstýrinn* ‘unbridled’ (309). It appears that Bósi then ejaculates, and his flaccid penis is equated with an *ölsjúkr* ‘ale-sick’ man, but this is not necessarily a negative euphemism: the phrase *hafi hann ælt upp* ‘he has vomited up’, that is, ejaculated, can be compared to *De l’escuiruel* in which Robin’s ‘squirrel’ *a vouchié et a vomí* ‘vomited and threw up’ (de Montaiglon and Raynaud 188d, 107). The metaphor thus has precedent in a very consensual, apparently enjoyable instance of intercourse in the *fabliau*.

Bósi and the *bóndadóttir* then continue to have sex for a while longer and, as Jochens suggested, the enjoyment on the part of the girl is indicated

by the inclusion of a reference to a female-dominant sexual position. Excepting some discomfort at the beginning of the sexual intercourse, then, in this scene the sexual experience is positive for both partners. Bósi gives the girl a ring not before the sex but in the morning, supporting the idea that with the other girls it is a coercive bribe to persuade them to have sex with him; here it is not necessary as a bribe but functions more as a token of gratitude for the girl's information, as she is a willing sexual partner from their first meeting to their parting the following morning.

The AM 577 4to variant

There is, however, a complication to this scene: the jarringly different version in AM 577 4to (c.1450–99), which Jiriczek includes in his annotations to the primary version in AM 510 4to (c. 1540–60), as well as the legible parts of the censored AM 586 4to (c. 1450–99). In AM 577 4to, the encounter with the second *bóndadóttir* resembles far more closely the encounters with the first and third (Jiriczek 1893, 39–40):

Ek vildi at þú skeptir kylbu mína, sagði hann. Þú munt þat betr kunna en ek. Betr tekzt tveimr en einum, segir hann. Síðan fór hann í sængina hjá henni. Hún spurði, hvar kylban væri. Hann bað hana taka [hdschr. tack] í millum föta sér, en hún kipti hendinni ok bað ófagnað eiga hans kylbu, ok spurði, því hann færi með óvæni þetta, en hann kveðzt eigi missa mega. En hann kvað hana eigi til **enskis** skyldu liggja ok bað hana fara vel í rúmi ok láta sem hljóðazt ok liggja sem hann skipaði. Gaf hann henni fingrull mikit ok gott, ok var eir í innan, líkaði henni þá vel ok bað skepta kylbu sína, sem hann vildi, ok kvómu þeim nú allir hlutir vel saman, ok skemtú þau sér um **nottina**.

‘I want you to give my club a handle,’ he said. ‘You must know how to do that better than I. It is more easily done with two than with one.’ Then he went into bed beside her. She asked where his club was. He told her to take (what was) between his legs, but she yanked her hand back and said his club was unwelcome, and asked why he was travelling with that deformity, and he said he was unable to do without it. But he told her not to lie like that and told her to spread out and say nothing and lie as he told her. He gave her a nice, big gold ring which was copper on the inside; she was pleased then and offered to make his club a handle as he wished, and now all things between them went well and they entertained themselves throughout the night.

In this version, the metaphor is the fashioning of a club-handle. Philips and Reay particularly draw attention to the metaphors in the *fabliaux* which emphasise ‘male dominance or military allusions’, which certainly chime with Bósi's first encounter, in which his penis is a jarl (2011, 171). The club is a weapon-based metaphor more closely aligned with military allusions, which could be read as more violent.

Indeed, this variant depicts a much more violent scene. The wording *Hann bað hana taka í millum fóta sér; en hún kipti hendinni ok bað ófagnað eiga hans kylbu* parallels the identical phrasing in the first and third scene: [1] *Hann bað hana taka milli fóta sér; en hún kippti hendinni ok bað ófagnað eiga jarls hans* and [3] *Hann bað hana taka á millum fóta sér. Hún kippti at sér hendinni ok bað ófagnað eiga stúfa hans*. This sentence is the greatest indicator of unwillingness in all three incidents. In AM 577 4to alone, all three incidents thus express hesitancy and the explicit idea that Bósi's penis is not welcome. In this variant of the second scene, Bósi also tells the *bóndadóttir láta sem hljóðast* 'to say nothing' which could be taken to imply either that he expects her to be loud in her pleasure as he has sex with her, or that he is telling her not to alert her family members, sleeping close by, that an uninvited man is trying to have sex with her. This polysemy of sound would certainly not have been lost on audiences, and appears in the *pastourelle* 'L'autre jour moi chivachai' (The Other Day I Was Riding) (Bartsch 1870, 150). Gravdal (1991, 117) notes that

the shepherdess's recurring line, 'ai! ai! ai!', is at first a cry of sadness, then after another stanza a cry of pain, and finally after the knight has forced himself on her a cry of orgasmic ecstasy: ai! ai! ai! Thus the audience is allowed both to laugh and to imagine that rape is a pleasurable game.

It is therefore possible to interpret the sounds of crying as the expression of either fear or sexual pleasure, and perhaps even both. Indeed, in the other versions of this scene, Bósi tells the *bóndadóttir* to *haf sem kyrrast* 'be as quiet as possible' (Guðni Jónsson 1954a, 308), but in that context, in which she is very encouraging and positively responsive to his sexual advances, it certainly seems that he is expecting her to express her pleasure loudly. In the AM 577 4to variant, given the context of her calling his penis unwelcome and recoiling, the order to stay quiet seems much more threatening. That Bósi's behaviour remains the same in either context suggests that he is proceeding as he wishes, without regard for the girl's reactions, even if she seems to express unwillingness and/or unhappiness.

This manuscript is also the only one to place the ring-giving of the second scene during the encounter, as it is in the first and third scenes, rather than the following morning, as it is in the other manuscripts. Rather than a token for the girl after the act, here it becomes much more transactional; indeed, it is only after seeing the ring that the girl seems inclined to sleep with him. The phrase *kvómu þeim nú allir hlutir vel saman* 'now all things between them went well' implies that up until that point, things between the pair had not been going well. The detailed sex scene that follows in the other versions is absent in this version. There is no description of

fluids, no more dialogue and no attempt at depicting sexual positions; it is just said that *skemtu þau sér um nóttina* ‘they entertained themselves throughout the night’, which is suggestive of mutual pleasure. Also noteworthy is that in both AM 510 4to and AM 577 4to, the ring is said to be made of copper on the inside ‘wodurch die Gabe zum Betrug gestempelt wird, ein Versuch komischer Wirkung, der [AM 586 4to and AM 343a 4to] fremd ist’ (thereby making the gift a fraud, adding a comic element that is alien to [AM 586 4to and AM 343a 4to]) (Jiriczek, 1893, 43; liv). This trickery adds a distinct malevolence to Bósi’s actions; it is difficult to tell whether he gauges the *bóndadóttir*’s unwillingness, but the bribery with the ring suggests that he knows she must be convinced. The fact that the ring, which she presumably believes to be solid gold, is in fact merely gold-plated means that the girl appears to be persuaded to sleep with him under a falsehood. Whether we are supposed to laud Bósi for fraudulently seducing her, or feel outraged on her behalf and see him as a swindler, is less clear. If rape in *Bósa saga* is a ‘game’, as it is in the *pastourelle*, then perhaps this is a joke at the girl’s expense.

In this variant, the girl is unwilling, Bósi’s member is the more combative club rather than a foal, she is told to keep quiet, and she is fooled with the ring. This is quite a departure from the second *bóndadóttir* of AM 510 4to and AM 586 4to, who is eager, experienced and shows every sign of consenting to Bósi’s sexual advances.

The third bóndadóttir

Compared to the first and second *bóndadóttir*, the third has a more lukewarm response to Bósi’s flirting: he smiles at her and she *var mjök tileygð til hans á móti* ‘was very *tileygð* to him in return’ (315). This clause marks the first of many reactions from the third girl that could be interpreted in multiple ways. Cleasby and Vigfússon gloss *tileygð* as ‘squint-eyed’ (1957, 631) and George Hardman translates the phrase as ‘she was quite reserved toward him’ (2011), indicating that she looks at Bósi with some level of suspicion or dubiousness. The only other attestation of this word, according to the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, is in the late romance *Vilhjálmss saga sjóðs*, in which a beautiful woman *var miog tileyg* ‘was very *tileyg*’ to Vilhjálmr with the goal of distracting him so that he loses a game, and so here the translation would be something more like she ‘made eyes’ at him (Loth 1964, 22). Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards translate the *Bósa saga* phrase *var tileygð til hans* as ‘eyed him’ (1985, 222), and this translation perhaps best encapsulates the ambiguity of the word: the girl may be eyeing Bósi with interest or with suspicion. This ambiguous

response, far more muted than those of the first and second girls, does not deter Bósi, however, although he possibly senses that she is less keen than the other two as she is the only one from whom he does not immediately lift the bedclothes, suggesting a slightly less aggressive approach.

As with the first *bóndadóttir*, it is possible to read the third *bóndadóttir*'s dialogue with Bósi as sexually responsive: if she understands what he means by *hólkr* 'sheath' and *stúfa* 'stump' (Guðni Jónsson 1954a, 315), she may be being coy, and intimating that she fears his penis may be too big: *Hún sagðist engan hafa, þann sem honum væri hæfeligir* 'She said that she didn't have one that would fit him'. When she asks to see his *stúfa*, this could be a flirtation. However, like the first girl, and the second girl in the AM 577 4to variant, she recoils and tells him his stump is unwelcome after he tells her to touch it. As I have argued, this is a very negative response, and does not suggest eagerness to have sexual intercourse. Her response when he asks her what his *stúfa* is like is puzzling: *'Pundaraskafti föður míns ok sé brotin aftan af því kringlan'* "My father's steel shaft but with the disk broken off". This could be evidence of a much deeper trauma—comparing Bósi's penis to something of her father's could suggest sexual trauma from her father—or it may be that she is clueless about sex in general, and completely misunderstands Bósi's *doubles entendres* and attempts at seduction, leading her to make this awkward and incongruous comment. If she does understand his euphemisms, she may even be trying to deter Bósi. Keens calls this moment an 'unflattering parallel for Bósi, reaching an anti-climax with mention of her father during this moment of intimacy', and suggests that 'her continued naivety suggests that the double entendres used by Bósi have been lost on her' (2016, 71). Indeed, Bósi appears offended and calls her *tilfyndin* 'fault-finding', now resorting to offering her a gold ring. She certainly views this as transactional, immediately asking what he wants in return, and he responds:

'Ek vil sponsa traus þína,' sagði hann.

'Ekki veit ek, hvernig þat er,' segir hún.

'I want to stop up your spout,' he said.

'I don't know what that is,' says she.

Again, she shows a lack of comprehension. At this point, it is very difficult to read this as reciprocally flirtatious: now at the point of the start of intercourse, she is still saying that she does not know what he means, even though he is in her bed and has used some fairly transparent euphemisms, and told her to grab between his legs. He tells her to lie down, which she does, but unlike the first girl, who verbally asked him to proceed, and the second girl, who was verbally and physically responsive to his seduction,

this third *bóndadóttir* never gives verbal consent and appears completely ignorant. After the penetration, she lets out an exclamation, as it appears that Bósi has been too forceful, and there is some rather bizarre anatomical description: he *leggr síðan neðan í kviðinn á henni, svá at allt gekk upp undir bringspölu* ‘then puts himself down into her womb, so that he went all the way up underneath her ribcage’ upon which she physically jolts — *Hún brá við hart* ‘She jolted hard at this’ — and exclaims: ‘*Þú hleyptir inn sponsinu um augat, karlmaðr*’ ‘“You’re bursting the stopper up to my eyes, man!”’ (315–16). It is very likely that this sequence is intended to be funny: the hyperbolic language, the misunderstanding of euphemism and the use of exclamation all follow the *fabliau* tradition, which was certainly a comic one. All three sex scenes in *Bósa saga* have been read as ultimately humorous, ‘a bawdy and playful version of physicality rather than anything sensual and erotically charged’ (Keens 2016, 73). But the undertones of this third scene in particular are of coercion, lack of consent and sexual discomfort. After she expresses her discomfort, Bósi, as he previously did in the second *bóndadóttir* scene, chases his own pleasure: ‘*Ek skal ná því ór aftur*’ ‘“I’ll get it back out after”’ (316). The *bóndadóttir* responds that the experience is *svá dátt sem ek hefði drukkit ferskan mjöð* ‘as overwhelming as if I had drunk fresh mead,’ and adds ‘*ok haf þú sem vakrast í auganu þvegilinn*’ ‘“and keep your eyes alert on the mop!”’ (Guðni Jónsson 1954a, 316).

This is a particularly important crux in deciding whether or not this scene represents sexual pleasure. The exclamation can be translated in two very different ways. First, it could be taken as a request for him to keep having sex with her. Hermann and Edwards, for instance, translate it as ‘Keep the mop stirring in the flue’, seemingly interpreting the *bóndadóttir*’s words as a euphemism (1985, 223). Hardman translates similarly: ‘Keep the mop lively in the pail’ (2011). These translations are probably influenced by the preponderance of *fabliau*-esque euphemisms used by Bósi and the first and second *bóndadóttir*. If the third *bóndadóttir* asks Bósi to keep going, this does imply some level of encouragement or enjoyment, although it does not remove the cloud of coercion over the whole encounter. After all, the first *bóndadóttir* was similarly reluctant originally, but the saga writer transforms this reluctance into sexual pleasure. Much as in the case of the first *bóndadóttir*, this may be a sudden shift from unwillingness to enthusiasm.

The third *bóndadóttir*’s analogy with the drinking of fresh mead could also be an expression of enjoyment; she calls the experience of being penetrated by Bósi *dátt*, for which the translation ‘overwhelming’ covers contrasting semantic meanings: either the positive ‘pleasant, familiar’ or

the negative ‘numbing, unpleasant’.² In the more positive meaning the sentiment is obvious: she is enjoying the sex. Taken to mean ‘numbing’, ‘unpleasant’ or ‘startling’, *dátt* could be read far more negatively, however, and the mead would have connotations of intoxication. This is certainly a possible reading, as the *bóndadóttir* soon becomes nauseous, as if from drinking too much. *Dátt* is also used of the second *bóndadóttir* when *Bósi* appears to move things too quickly for her. In that instance too, it could be read as positive or negative. The ‘mead’ comparison can thus be interpreted in two ways. In any case, unlike that of the first *bóndadóttir*, whose switch from reluctance to pleasure does not then revert to discomfort, the third *bóndadóttir*’s sexual experience with *Bósi* ends with nausea: *Hann sparir nú ekki af, þar til at hana velgdi alla, svá at henni lá við at klígja, ok það hann þá at hætta* ‘He spares nothing now, until she was completely nauseous, so that she came over all sickly, and asked him then to stop’ (316). This follows the *bóndadóttir*’s request: *haf þú sem vakrast í auganu þvegilinn*’.

This encourages a translation of the reference to the mop that differs from those of Hermann and Edwards, and Hardman. I have translated it as ‘Keep your eye alert on the mop!’ as an expression of her nausea: she is literally telling *Bósi* to keep an eye on a nearby mop in case she vomits. Alternatively it could feasibly mean ‘keep the mop alert in the eye’, with the mop being a phallic euphemism and the eye a euphemism for the vagina, which facilitates a dual interpretation: the girl may be asking *Bósi* to keep an eye on the mop because she is nauseous, whereas *Bósi* could be misinterpreting her words as a euphemism asking him to speed up. It is also possible that he does understand her request to keep an eye on the mop but ignores her, instead choosing to *spar[a] nú ekki*. This makes the girl

² Fritzner gives the contrasting senses *ubehagelig, ufordragelig* ‘unpleasant; unbearable’ and *kjær, behagelig* ‘dear; pleasant’ (1883, 237); Cleasby and Vigfússon have it as ‘numbing’ or ‘in phrases denoting a charm or fascination exercised over another; always of uncertain and fugitive nature’ (1957, 98); and Blöndal has it as *overvældende, stærk, kraftig* ‘fast; overwhelming; strong; powerful’, *fortrolig, intim, familiar* ‘intimate; familiar’ or *ondt* ‘bad, wicked, painful’ (1920–22, 127); Zoëga sets it in the context of being ‘startled at a thing’; ‘pleased with a thing’ (1910, 86). Attestations in the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* reflect these ambiguous definitions, for instance it clearly denotes an extremely negative emotion when Rimsteinn is killed in *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, where his men become *dátt við fall jarlsins* ‘overwhelmed at the death of the jarl’ (Guðni Jónsson 1954d, 214). Meanwhile in *Njáls saga*, *dátt* is used to describe the peaceful terms between *Höskuldr* and *Njáll*’s households: *Ok svá var dátt með þeim öllum* ‘And so everything was well between them all’ (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 247).

feel so sick she asks him to stop — *hana velgdi alla* implies that she had been slightly nauseous before, and is now completely nauseous — which he does. Kukla has argued that a key marker of consensual sex is that ‘everyone can communicate successfully if they want to stop all or part of the activity, and any such communication will be respected’, which Bósi does (2021, 276). However, Kukla also points out that further key scaffolding for consent is ‘skills at understanding and responding to what each is communicating, and the ability to read bodily responses and adjust and fine-tune on the fly’ (287). That Bósi only stops when the *bóndadóttir* asks him to, despite her numerous attempts to tell him that she is uncomfortable, shows a grave lack of concern for his sexual partner. Translating the ‘mop’ phrase in this non-euphemistic way renders this scene very sinister indeed, and encourages a reading of the mead as unpleasantly intoxicating, and the *bóndadóttir* as experiencing great discomfort. There is no evidence of pleasure, and they do not go on to entertain themselves throughout the rest of the night, as happens with the first and second *bóndadóttir*.

Bósi’s last sexual conquest ends in discomfort and awkwardness. According to Pálsson’s and Hardman’s translations of the ‘mop’ phrase, it is possible that she experiences some pleasure; even so, her experience is not the repeated sexual pleasure effusively expressed in the encounters with the first and second *bóndadóttir*. Translating the ‘mop’ phrase as a plea for Bósi to keep an eye on the bucket which he either ignores or misinterprets, especially in the context of her repeated expressions of discomfort, makes it difficult to read this scene as anything other than completely non-consensual. She still goes on to give Bósi information and even helps him in carrying out his next quest, but this *bóndadóttir* is markedly different from the first and second in that she and Bósi do not have a lengthy, pleasurable sexual encounter. She responds to his flirtations with hesitancy, to his euphemisms with cluelessness, and to his sexual advances with nausea. Of the three sex scenes this is the most coercive and the most unpleasant.

Interweaving adventure-quests

Each of the encounters with the *bóndadóttir* is an integral part of the narrative of the saga. Therefore, we must consider the scenes not just in isolation but in the context of the saga as a whole: ‘the nightly activities contain metaphorical language which invites us to look for a possible function of the scenes, which contributes to the appreciation of the saga author’s literary skills’ (von Wezel 2006, 1038). The saga writer appears deliberately to describe different degrees of sexual enjoyment in these scenes, and each prefaces a part of Bósi and Herraúðr’s adventure which includes

significant violence towards women. Each *bóndadóttir* provides Bósi with information pertaining to his quest, and thus the sexual encounters, which as a sequence of three abide by the folkloric *Gesetz der Dreizahl*, are part of the very backbone of the saga's structure.

Naumann, who seems to take the scenes in *Bósa saga* as mutually enjoyable and refers to Bósi as a 'sexual athlete', does note the misogynistic violence of the interweaving adventure scenes and proposes that this functions as a contrast with the *bóndadótr* scenes: 'the triple kidnapping [sic] of the princess contrasts with the sexual scenes with the farmer's daughter' (1993, 54). However, given my reading of the *bóndadóttir* scenes as sexually violent, the interweaving of more violence against women after each one generates a reading of the saga as intermingling, rather than alternating, sex and violence. This is not a case of violence-free sex scenes interwoven with violence for contrast; rather the three sex scenes and the quests that follow them form overlapping tales of violence and sexual violence with themes of lust, rescue and marriage.

The first *bóndadóttir* describes how Hleiðr has been kidnapped by a priestess who wants to groom her into her replacement. Bósi and Herraúðr must defeat this priestess to attain the object of their quest, the *gammsegg* 'vulture's egg', and in doing so they also find and free Hleiðr. This adventure scene details combat between Herraúðr and the priestess, who is clearly monstrous to a degree, since *tvævetra kvígu þarf hún í mál* 'She eats a two-year old cow for every meal' and *í fjörbrotum hennar varð landskjálfti mikill* 'at her death-struggle there was a great earthquake' (Guðni Jónsson 1954a, 300; 302). This death-struggle features a tussle described in sexual terms (301–02):

Kerlingu varð hált í gammsblóðinu, ok fell hún á bak aftir, ok váru þá sviptingar miklar með þeim, svá at ýmsi váru undir. Bósi raknaði þá við ok greip höfuð griðungsins ok rak á nasir gýginni. Herraúðr sleit þá af henni höndina í axlarliðinum.

The woman slipped in the vulture's blood, and after that fell on her back, and the struggle between them was great, and they took turns being underneath. Bósi came up and gripped the head of the bull and hit the giantess on the nose. Then Herraúðr tore off her arm at the shoulder.

This attention to the switching of positions seems to foreshadow the next sex scene: *ok var bóndadóttir ýmist ofan á eða undir* 'the farmer's daughter was sometimes on top and sometimes beneath' (309), and thus the violence of the fight is undercut with sexual connotations. In turn, when this positioning is echoed in the second *bóndadóttir* scene, the saga writer invites us to recall the fight with the *gýgr* 'ogress', and thus the sex scene mimics

combat. Bósi and Herrauðr then find the beautiful Hleiðr tied to a chair by her hair, in tears. She has been kidnapped by the now-dead ogress who intended her as her heiress, and Herrauðr immediately says: ‘*Góð mundi þú vera þeim manni . . . er þik frelsaði heðan*’ “‘you would surely be good to the man who released you from here’” (303). At first, she says *þat mundi engi gert geta* ‘that she could not do that’, but quickly changes her mind (302). She says, ‘*Engan veit ek svá leiðan mennskan man . . . at ek mundi eigi heldr vilja eiga en at vera blótuð hér í hofina*’ “‘I do not know of so loathsome a man that I would not rather marry him than be sacrificed here in the temple’”, which is a rather lukewarm response, but Herrauðr quickly insists again that he deserves a reward — ‘*ek þykkjumst sæmda*’ “‘I require a reward’”—for freeing her, further adding that he does not intend to ask her family for permission, even though she tries to insist on this (303). It is only after she gives a firm ‘yes’ to marriage that he and Bósi set her free. She sticks to this resolve even after her brother insists that Siggeirr marry her instead, as *hún var treg til þess ok kvað þat makligt, at sá nyti sín, er hana frelsaði ór tröllahöndum* ‘she was downcast at this and said that it was fitting that she marry the one who had freed her from the hand of the troll’ (306). She subsequently appears to feel indebted to Herrauðr. Naumann contrasts Herrauðr’s proposal with Bósi’s to the princess Edda (1978, 46), stating that

Aufschlußreich sind der **Werbungssprache** der beiden ungleichen Schwurbrüder. Wenn Herrauðr die im Heidentempel Gefangene von ihren Fesseln löst, seine Herkunft nennt und in höfischer Weise ihre Gunst erbittet, so lockt Bósi in der szenischen Doppelung die Auserwählte durch List in ein Nußwäldchen und ist durchaus willens, sexuellen Zwang auszuüben.

The courtship speeches of the two dissimilar sworn brothers are revealing. When Herrauðr **unties** the prisoner in the pagan temple from her chains, names his origin and courteously requests her favours, Bósi in the scenic doubling lures the chosen one into a **grove of nuts** with a ruse and is quite willing to exercise sexual coercion.

It is clear, however, that Herrauðr’s proposal is not as courteous as Naumann would have it. Only when compared to Bósi’s use of brute force does Herrauðr’s approach seem courtly. The information from the first *bóndadóttir* thus leads to the sexualised killing of the *gygr* and the freeing of Hleiðr with the coercive offer of marriage from Herrauðr.

The second *bóndadóttir* tells Bósi how to free Hleiðr, now unwillingly betrothed to Siggeirr, on her wedding day. The *bóndadóttir* makes it clear that Hleiðr is against her marriage to Siggeirr — ‘*ok er þat þó á móti hennar vilja*’ “‘and it is however against her will’” — and is even concerned about the fact that Hleiðr and Siggeirr’s marital bed will be particularly well-guarded (310):

Sæng stendr á miðju hallargólfi, ok er þar fimm palla upp at ganga. Þar skal liggja brúðrin ok brúðguminn, en hirðin öll skal vaka um kringum, ok má þeim því ekki á óvart koma.

A bed stands in the middle of the hall's floor, with five steps leading up to it. There the bride and bridegroom shall lie, and all the retainers shall keep watch around them, so that they will not be taken by surprise.

The precise information she provides enables Bósi to prevent the undesired marriage and implied marital rape of Hleiðr by Siggeirr so that she can marry Herraúðr instead.

Finally, the third *bóndadóttir* agrees to lure the wealthy Princess Edda to the woods so that Bósi can marry her. Bósi gives Edda a choice: ‘*at fara með mér viljug eða geri ek skyndibrúðlaup til þín hér í skóginum*’ ‘“come with me willingly or I will perform an improvised wedding to you here in the woods”’ (317). This could certainly be read as an implied threat of a forced marriage and marital rape. Saunders has labelled rape as one of the recurrent themes associated with the forest setting in romance (1993, 132–33); the secluded, dangerous setting of isolation in the woods and the imposed ultimatum upon Edda either to go willingly or be forced generate strong undertones of sexual threat. After hanging her protector, Skálkr the eunuch, Bósi kidnaps Edda (317):

Síðan setti Bósi konungsdóttur á handlegg sér ok bar hana til skips, ok létu frá landi ok fóru þar til, er þeir fundu Smíð. Konungsdóttir barst lítt af, en þegar Smíðr hafði orð við hana, tók af henni allan óhug, ok sigldu heim í Gautland.

Then Bósi set the princess on his arm and carried her to the ship, and they set sail and found Smíðr. The princess was downcast at this, but then Smíðr spoke with her and all her sad thoughts left her and they sailed home to Gautland.

It is clear that Edda does not want to go with Bósi, and it is very likely that Smíðr alters her thoughts on the matter with magic — in a manner that the Óðinn of *Hávamál* would be proud of — since it was mentioned at the beginning of the saga that Smíðr had been very amenable to learning the *taufr* ‘sorcery’, *galdr* ‘magic’ and *sleita* ‘trickery’ which Bósi himself had not wanted to learn (285). Vésteinn Ólason describes Bósi as ‘a sexual adventurer’ ‘endowed with a wild temperament’ and, when discussing the scene in which Bósi kills the princess’s slave and woos her, says that his ‘vulgarity is superficial; he has in him the makings of a nobleman’ (1994, 117; 116). Vésteinn does not mention the princess’s reluctance, and ‘vulgarity’ is an understatement in referring to Bósi’s actions, which include murder and sexual coercion. As Bósi does go on to marry Edda and in doing so gains all the power of her heritage — becoming not just a nobleman but king of Bjarmaland — Vésteinn’s assessment is perhaps understandable. But the violence used to attain this role is hard to dismiss as ‘superficial vulgarity’.

Conclusion

The three *bóndadætr* scenes are instances of sexual violence in the Old Norse corpus that have generally been overlooked. Although the second scene remains unambiguously consensual, its variant in AM 577 4to is as suggestive of coercion as the first and third scenes. It is impossible to know whether this variant represents a deliberate change on the part of the scribe to fit more closely the pattern of the first and third scenes, but it is certainly remarkable that in this manuscript all three scenes are coercive. In the other manuscripts, the scenes depict varying amounts of coercion and enjoyment of the sex. Given the repeated setting of the scene as part of the *Gesetz der Dreizahl*, the variation in the levels of consent and sexual enjoyment certainly seem deliberate. When juxtaposed with the quest scenes, the ‘much-kidnapped Hleiðr’ (Grant and Hui, 2020, 82) plot and the deeply coercive scene with Princess Edda in the walnut grove, *Bósa saga* seems not to be, as so many scholars have read it, a rollicking sexual adventure, but an exceedingly sexually violent saga in which violent sex scenes beget sexually violent adventures.

The *fabliau*-like sex scenes in this saga are no doubt intended to be humorous, as the *fabliaux* themselves were designed to be. Given the sexual detail, it is also possible that they were intended to be titillating; although Norris Lacy suggests that the *fabliaux* ‘exciting prurient interest’ is ‘foreign to the purpose of *fabliaux*’ (1993, 14, n. 13), Phillips and Reay propose that here Lacy ‘overdoes caution’ (2011, 170). In the case of *Bósa saga*, the eradication of the sex scenes in the principal manuscripts as well as in subsequent variants and editions does suggest an aversion to sexual content, possibly out of fear of the prurience of these scenes or a disdain for the bawdy humour. But underneath these layers of humour and sexual prurience is a disturbing depiction of sexual coercion and sexual violence, with two (or three, in the version of AM 577 4to) young, naïve girls being forced and possibly bribed into having sex with Bósi, whose main goals are his own sexual satisfaction and the key information provided by the girls to enable him to continue on his own quest, which ultimately enables him to marry the Princess Edda against her will and inherit her father’s kingdom. *Bósa saga* is thus not just the most sexually explicit, but also one of the most sexually violent sagas in the Old Norse corpus.

Less clear is the motivation behind these three scenes and their three different depictions of pleasure and coercion in sex. While there is, elsewhere in the corpus, concern for victims of sexual assault, such as in Hjalmar’s *vikingalög* in *Örvar-Odds saga*, here the attitude to these different women’s seductions or assaults is far murkier. Given the strong emphasis on *fabliau*-

esque humour, it is certainly possible to read rape here as a ‘game’, with lower-class women the butt of rape jokes in what we would now consider extremely poor taste. After all, Bósi, who ends up king of Bjarmaland with a coerced queen, has the last laugh. Or perhaps Bósi’s ruthlessness in his sexual escapades highlights an anxiety around high-status men and their perceived right to use lower-status women to satiate their lust, whether the women are initially willing, initially unwilling, or unwilling throughout. This triptych of seduction and violence in *Bósa saga* certainly showcases a delineation of gradations of consent, coercion and forced pleasure, whether the audience was supposed to laugh with Bósi or recoil with the farm girls, and this opens up this saga, and the rest of the Old Norse corpus, to scrutiny within wider discussions of medieval perceptions about and depictions of sexual violence.

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