# Troll Sex: Youth, Old Age, and the Erotic in Old Norse-Icelandic Narratives of the Supernatural

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I investigate representations of adolescent and elderly sexuality from throughout the medieval Icelandic saga corpus. To access expressions regarding these liminal sexualities, I pay particular attention to depictions of supernatural phenomena. Because of their distance from everyday reality, such depictions can be used to express uninhibited commentaries about uncomfortable subjects. They can therefore provide us with expanded, nuanced, or alternative perspectives on the sexual ideologies indicated in naturalistic episodes and non-literary sources.

Chapter One examines portrayals of male adolescent sexuality. I analyse supernatural 'riding' episodes from *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, which depict the violent sexual domination of women by young men as beneficial to masculine adult supremacy. I then analyse portrayals of trysts with troll-women in four sagas, which offer diverse commentaries on the impact of pre-marital sexual experimentation on male maturation.

Chapter Two investigates depictions of female adolescent sexuality. I examine the ghostly sexual assault of a teenage girl in *Heiðarvíga saga*, an attack that is partly blamed on her nascent erotic volatility. I then consider a maiden-king episode from *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, which conversely defends young women's active engagement in the marital and sexual spheres.

Chapter Three examines representations of elderly male sexuality. I analyse *senex amans* episodes in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, which lament the loss of male socio-sexual power during senescence. However, the following examination of rapacious revenants indicates that, though this decline is regrettable, resisting it could be considered even more problematic.

Chapter Four considers elderly female sexuality, which is almost exclusively denigrated throughout the corpus. Consistent with this trend, the *Fróðárundur* of *Eyrbyggja saga* are interpreted as symbolic criticisms of the sexuality of the menopausal Þórgunna. However, the ubiquity of this trend is then contested, with reference to the beneficial eroticism of ancient, supernatural foster-mothers.

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# Abbreviations

## Primary Sources

The standard editions of primary source texts, such as *Íslenzk fornrit* and *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, are cited in my footnotes using only abbreviated titles and page numbers. Full citations are listed alphabetically by abbreviated title in the bibliography.

For example:

**Footnotes:**
*Egils saga*, 34.

**Bibliography:**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Egils saga* | Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Íslenzk fornrit (Original Series), Vol. 2 (Reykjavík, 1933). |

Supplementary editions of primary sources, usually referred to for introductory or editorial matter, are always cited in full, according to the *New Oxford Style Manual*, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 2016).

## Secondary Sources and Dictionaries

The following sources are abbreviated as follows due to their frequent citation:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Cleasby-Vigfússon* | Cleasby, Richard, Guðbrandur Vigfússon, and William A. Craigie, eds., *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1957). |
| *MSAE* | Pulsiano, Phillip, Kirsten Wolf, Paul Acker, and Donald Fry, eds., *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York, 1993). |
| *WONL* | Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York, 2013). |
| *WONS* | Jochens, Jenny, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, 1995). |

## General Introduction

In this thesis, I analyse medieval Icelandic literary representations of erotic desires and activities, with a view to speculating on the contemporaneous sexual ideologies they might reveal. In particular, I focus on how such portrayals differ depending on the intersectional identities of the characters in question. First, I attend to distinctions occasioned by biological sex, which, as a foundational component of the gender system as a whole, is the identifier most inextricably connected to sexuality.[1] Second, I consider the impact of age on sexual identity. As Crystal Kirgiss states, the recent introduction of age to the study of intersectionality has unique implications. While most identifiers are — and were to an even greater extent in medieval Iceland — comparatively fixed nodes on a multidimensional set of axes, age is one of ubiquitous and inescapable flux.[2] All cognisant audience members would have been aware of this transience, knowing periods of relative disability and disenfranchisement to lurk in their pasts and/or futures, which makes this identifier an especially likely source of interest and anxiety. This thesis concentrates on two age-based transitions: from childhood to adulthood and from adulthood to old age. Since these are particularly seismic and therefore potentially troubling shifts, especially with regard to changes in sexual desire and ability, I marshal evidence from not only naturalistic but also supernatural literary episodes. Following an established scholarly trend, I maintain that the distance of supernatural subjects from everyday reality permits their literary use to embody and explore disturbing concepts.

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[1] Carl Phelpstead, 'The Sexual Ideology of *Hrólfs saga kraka*', *Scandinavian Studies* 75/1 (2003), 3. Unless otherwise noted, I use the term 'sexuality' to refer to individuals' connections to sexual acts and urges more broadly, rather than its other prominent definition regarding the identity of the object of attraction.

[2] Crystal Kirgiss, 'Literary Constructions of Adolescence in Select Medieval Texts: (An Experiment in Aetacriticism)', Ph.D. Dissertation, West Lafayette, Purdue University, 2013. Fluidity in other categories, especially the impact of both biological sex and age on gender, will be discussed below.

Based on my analyses, I conclude that adolescence and old age were commonly associated with sexual ascension and decline, respectively. However, the extent to which these expectations are portrayed to differ depending on characters' biological sexes, as well as how either adherence to or contravention of these expectations can be depicted both positively and negatively in some cases, indicates the complex nature of medieval Icelandic mentalities surrounding sex, age, and sexuality.

Jenny Jochens and others have repeatedly asserted that Old Norse-Icelandic literature is reticent when it comes to sexuality.[3] More recently, though she admits the greater presence of sex in the legendary sagas — which can indeed be exceptionally vulgar — Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir concurs that some genres 'repress' this topic.[4] She specifically identifies the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders), which have traditionally been thought to focus on male platonic interactions.[5] However, such assertions require nuancing. As Thomas Bredsdorff contends, even with respect to the apparently masculinist *Íslendingasögur*, libidinous urges as narrative triggers 'are not exceptional; rather, they are the rule'.[6] When fulfilling such narrative roles, sexual urges and even intercourse are sometimes described clearly and crudely.[7] Moreover, as Jenny Jochens and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir themselves intimate, the apparent reticence of certain texts or genres does not preclude their indirect expression of sexual concerns, which may be accessed via appropriate methodologies. For example, Jochens devotes

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[3] Jenny Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality: Men, Women, and Beasts', in Vern Bullough, ed., *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York, 1995), 369–71; *WONS*, 76; Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Servitude and Sexuality in Medieval Iceland', in Gísli Pálsson, ed., *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (Middlesex, 1992), 302; William Miller, 'Beating Up on Women and Old Men and Other Enormities: A Social Historical Inquiry into Literary Sources', *Mercer Literary Review* 39/3 (1988), 763.
[4] For ribaldry in legendary materials, see especially *Bósa saga*, 476–92.
[5] *WONL*, 69.
[6] Thomas Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love: The Philosophy of the Icelandic Family Sagas*, tr. John Tucker (Copenhagen, 2001), 8.
[7] See *Bjarnar saga*, 123, 206; *Eyrbyggja saga*, 77–8, 108–9; *Hallfreðar saga*, 180–6; and *Njáls saga*, 24, 29, 49.

substantial attention to Old Norse-Icelandic euphemism, an effort recently expanded by Lucy Anne Keens.[8] Jóhanna Katrín employs another methodology. Although it is her explicit assertion that the use of supernatural episodes to express sexual norms is most prevalent in the legendary materials, she elsewhere champions the analysis of such depictions to access unorthodox or unsettling notions in all genres.[9] This methodology, employed by several other Old Norse-Icelandic scholars, is an underlying premise of my dissertation.[10]

Throughout this thesis, I employ the term 'supernatural' to refer to phenomena that were distant or even entirely absent from the lived experiences of medieval Icelanders *and* whose existence — due partially to this distance, but also to their defiance of the observable precepts of everyday life (that rain is made of water, or that humans have limited size, speed, and strength, for instance) — might have been questionable. Indeed, although the term 'supernatural' is a modern and perhaps imperfect descriptor, some medieval Icelanders certainly recognised a category of phenomena like this, whose existence they questioned or discounted along similar lines.[11] Furthermore, even for individuals who might have believed in things like trolls or magic, I assert that such entities would still have been distant from everyday reality. If we start from the (relatively safe) assumption that these things do not, in fact, exist, they must only have

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[8] *WONS*, 68–76; Jenny Jochens, 'The Illicit Love Visit: An Archaeology of Old Norse Sexuality', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1/3 (1991), 357–92. See also Lucy Anne Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature: Theorising Representations of Sex and the Sexual Body in the Sagas of the Icelanders', Ph.D. Dissertation, London, University College London, 2016.

[9] *WONL*, 69; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the *Íslendingasögur*', *Scandinavian Studies* 81/4 (2009), 421–33.

[10] See, for example, Ármann Jakobsson, *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North* (Brooklyn, 2017), 17–22, 51–2, and Kirsi Kanerva, 'The Role of the Dead in Medieval Iceland: A Case Study of *Eyrbyggja Saga*', *Collegium Medievale* 24 (2011), 23–5.

[11] See n. 33 below. For a discussion of this and other possible descriptors, see Ármann Jakobsson, '*Bergbúa þáttr*: The Story of a Paranormal Encounter', in Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen, eds., *Supernatural Encounters in Old Norse Literature and Tradition* (Turnhout, 2018), 15–16.

inhabited the mysterious, ill-defined margins of the realities of even those who believed in them, since sustained or detailed observation of such entities in the waking world would have been rare, if not impossible. People might have caught a glimpse of something in the distance or darkness — a ghost, giant, or some other troll — but closer scrutiny could never have borne this out. Even in the case of more anthropomorphic supernatural entities — such as witches or cunning folk, for whose existence there could have been empirical proof at various points throughout the medieval period and beyond — the functioning of their magic could never genuinely have been observed taking place. Even when it appeared to be efficacious, its workings would remain somewhat uncanny, difficult to define or verify, for those witnessing and perhaps even those practising it. As opposed to the 'supernatural', what I call 'naturalistic' refers to phenomena that *did* have demonstrable existence to the audiences of medieval sagas, and whose attributes did not defy the everyday precepts or expectations of that society.[12]

Saga depictions of the supernatural were generally overlooked or even dismissed as frivolous until the late twentieth century. This is especially true in scholarship on the *Íslendingasögur*, which were traditionally hailed as serious texts, into which the incursion of supernatural tropes was a late and degenerate trend.[13] Indeed, the prevalence of the supernatural in *Íslendingasögur* that are only extant from after the thirteenth century has even been employed as a criterion for dating. Relatively naturalistic

[12] According to this definition, the 'supernatural' in medieval Iceland might also have included unverifiable, faraway entities — the elephants or camels of the romance sagas, for example — which are indeed sometimes used in similarly symbolic manners to the trolls examined in this dissertation; see *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs*, 47–8; *Ectors saga*, 94. This definition arguably also includes especially fanciful instances of Christian magic and miracle; see *Njáls saga*, 267–8. However, presumably due to their sacred and authorised status, such subjects are rarely if ever used to explore sexual topics and are, therefore, beyond the scope of this dissertation.
[13] Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen, 'The Supernatural in Old Norse Literature and Research: An Introduction', in Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen, eds., *Supernatural Encounters in Old Norse Literature and Tradition* (Turnhout, 2018), 1–3; Miriam Mayburd, 'The Paranormal', in Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson, eds., *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (New York, 2017), 265.

examples were esteemed as paradigmatic, thirteenth-century specimens, whose earlier manuscripts were lost. Conversely, *Íslendingasögur* featuring more supernatural elements were labelled as 'post-classical', allegedly influenced by later, more fanciful genres: the *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas) and *riddarasögur* (romance sagas).[14] Along with several other scholars, Ármann Jakobsson identifies the 'elephant in the room': sagas of all genres, including the earliest examples of *Íslendingasögur* and the even more stringently naturalistic *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas), *do* include sustained and significant depictions of the supernatural.[15] Moreover, as Miriam Mayburd notes, the same supernatural tropes that have 'vexed' generations of scholars are also the ones that have most 'fascinated general audiences'.[16] Since this thesis is primarily concerned with how medieval Icelandic *sögumenn* and audiences, rather than modern scholars, might have invested the sagas with symbolic meaning, Mayburd's statement should strike us as an imperative.[17] If these are the saga components most memorable and potentially impactful to modern readers — a supposition that, considering their prevalence, might extend to medieval audiences — we must interrogate their significance all the more earnestly.

As Else Mundal notes, supernatural tropes might simply have contributed to the sagas' entertainment value. Indeed, though this distinction will be problematised below,

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[14] Sävborg and Bek-Pedersen, 'The Supernatural', 2–3.
[15] Ármann Jakobsson, *Troll Inside*, 74. See also Else Mundal, 'The Treatment of the Supernatural and the Fantastic in Different Saga Genres', in John McKinnell et al., eds., *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: The Preprint Papers of The Thirteenth International Saga Conference*, 2 vols. (Durham and York, 2006), 2.723. The *samtíðarsögur* primarily limit the supernatural to dreams, but do include some uncanny environmental omens and waking interactions with trolls; see *Íslendinga saga*, 251, 403, 418–28, 510–12, 519–22, and *Smákaflar og brot*, 284.
[16] Mayburd, 'The Paranormal', 265.
[17] I employ the term *sögumaðr/sögumenn* as an inclusive designation for the producers of sagas: authors, redactors, compilers, scribes, etc. This term's gendered connotations in both Icelandic and English present few issues, since they serve as a constant reminder of the presumably, though not exclusively, male authorship of these texts. See n. 88 below.

she links the greater frequency of the supernatural in the *fornaldarsögur* with their less serious or didactic nature.[18] William Sayers goes further, arguing that supernatural depictions in the *Íslendingasögur* have greater conceptual meaning than those in the legendary materials, where they bear 'no ideological charge'.[19] Whether greater or lesser, what might this 'charge' have been? If scholars admit that they sometimes represent more than frivolous entertainment, what did saga depictions of the supernatural mean to contemporary composers and audiences, and what might they tell modern scholars? Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen offer one answer, proclaiming a connection between some supernatural depictions and 'real belief'.[20] As corroborated throughout the literary and legal corpora, late medieval Icelanders seem often to have associated certain supernatural entities — especially revenants, witches, and other trolls — with the pagan past.[21] Hence, Sävborg and Bek-Pedersen contend that depictions of such figures might reveal genuine echoes of pre-Christian religion.[22] Mayburd notes an additional possible connection between supernatural episodes and 'real belief'. She reminds us, as noted above, that some late medieval Icelanders might actually have believed in supernatural entities.[23] This certainly includes miracles — supernatural events associated with Christian forces — but might also have included phenomena associated with paganism, as well those with less clear-cut religious connections.[24] However, though such half-

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[18] Mundal, 'Treatment of the Supernatural', 723–4. See also Lotte Motz, *The Beauty and the Hag: Female Figures of Germanic Faith and Myth* (Vienna, 1993), 68, and Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary Fiction in Medieval Iceland* (Reykjavík, 1971), 20–1.
[19] William Sayers, 'The Alien and Alienated as Unquiet Dead in the Sagas of the Icelanders', in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis, 1996), 256.
[20] Sävborg and Bek-Pedersen, 'The Supernatural', 4.
[21] See Ármann Jakobsson, *Troll Inside*, 39, and Jan Ragnar Hagland, 'The Troll and Old Norwegian-Icelandic Law', in Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen, eds., *Supernatural Encounters in Old Norse Literature and Tradition* (Turnhout, 2018), 181–2.
[22] Sävborg and Bek-Pedersen, 'The Supernatural', 4.
[23] Mayburd, 'The Paranormal', 266–7.
[24] Judy Quinn, 'From Orality to Literacy in Medieval Iceland', in Margaret Clunies Ross, ed., *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (Cambridge, 2000), 38.

remembered or contemporaneous beliefs might explain the origins and even basic features of supernatural tropes as they appear in the sagas, such acknowledgement does not preclude their interpretation as literary motifs.

The idea that some supernatural tropes in sagas reflect genuine aspects of pre-Christian religion, despite their composition more than two centuries after conversion, is impossible either to discount or verify. However, even if this hypothesis turned out to be accurate, it is probable that Icelanders of the thirteenth century and later had little firm knowledge of, and surely no belief in, the religion of their pagan forebears. Some might have maintained plausible belief in a range of folkloric phenomena or superstitions, and many of their texts evince a strong interest in paganism, but they were certainly not pagans themselves.[25] Without such a conceptual foothold, it is likely that many *sögumenn* embellished or even invented wholesale the phenomena and rituals they depicted, including with literary-symbolic effects in mind. This is an especially probable scenario for episodes featuring implausibly precise details.[26] When supernatural episodes are overtly associated with heathendom — as in the case of the ceremony from *Völsa þáttr*, analysed below — they surely demonstrate late medieval sentiments about pre-Christian culture. However, Christian audiences seem just as likely to have constructed literary-symbolic interpretations of such depictions, alongside or even regardless of their belief in the historical existence of the beliefs and practices in question.[27] As Jóhanna Katrín suggests, this reasoning permits the analysis of such portrayals as literary motifs,

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[25] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Women's Weapons', 417; Ármann Jakobsson, *Troll Inside*, xii, 167.
[26] Prime examples of such conspicuous detail are the depiction of Þorbjǫrg lítilvǫlva, as well as the reconstructive efforts in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*. See *Eiríks saga rauða*, 410–13, and *Gylfaginning*, passim.
[27] On the transition from myth to symbolic literature, see Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington, IN, 1964), 77, 110. In the Old Norse-Icelandic context specifically, see Martin Arnold, '"Hvat er tröll nema þat?": The Cultural History of the Troll', in Tom Shippey, ed., *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous* (Turnhout, 2005), 111.

compelling us to consider how they were employed by *sögumenn* and interpreted by contemporary audiences.[28] In the case of *Völsa þáttr*, for example, I will consider what it is about this lewd ritual that makes it an effective literary conceit for denigrating rustic heathens, regardless of its admittedly conceivable origins in pre-Christian custom.

Concerning the possibility that belief in supernatural entities might have been coterminous with late medieval saga composition and reception, Mayburd suggests that this might have precluded symbolic interpretations. More fundamentally, she questions whether premodern audiences would have constructed symbolic interpretations at all, regardless of such belief.[29] On the latter concern, Ármann Jakobsson gestures to the *Physiologus*, attested in two Icelandic manuscripts, whose moralising mode demonstrates familiarity with symbolic logic.[30] The *Physiologus* catalogues both fantastical and naturalistic fauna, including boars, goats, and owls. Hence, David Williams suggests that such texts also indicate their audiences' capacity for symbolic interpretations, even when their belief in the figurative vehicles in question is beyond doubt.[31] To these arguments, I would add reference to the far more prevalently attested saga trope of dream interpretation, in which both supernatural and naturalistic subjects are explicitly symbolic of entities or events in the waking world.[32] Finally, more fundamentally problematising Mayburd's concerns, numerous narratorial apologies indicate that genuine belief in a range of supernatural entities — including 'risa[r]' (giants), 'fjölkynngi' (magic), or humans of implausible size and strength — was far from ubiquitous in late medieval

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[28] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Women's Weapons', 417–22. See also *WONL*, 49–58.
[29] Mayburd, 'The Paranormal', 266–7.
[30] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Enter the Dragon: Legendary Saga Courage and the Birth of the Hero', in Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay, eds., *Making History: Essays on the fornaldarsögur* (London, 2010), 34.
[31] David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Exeter, 1997), 11–12.
[32] See *Gunnlaugs saga*, 52–5; *Laxdœla saga*, 88–91; and *Víga-Glúms saga*, 71–2.

Iceland.[33] Less overt than these apologies, but similarly indicative of the incredulity of some medieval Icelanders, Heather O'Donoghue identifies instances in which saga narrators conspicuously distance themselves from accounts of supernatural goings-on.[34] Clearly for some, though not necessarily all, *sögumenn* and audiences, such things were not real. For these individuals, supernatural depictions could not have been reports of actual or even hypothetically plausible events. They must have been considered 'made up', and could therefore have been invented, deployed, and/or interpreted to express purely symbolic meanings.

Following numerous scholars of medieval and even broader literary traditions, my own conviction is that depictions of the supernatural can be interpreted symbolically to reveal the perspectives and ideologies of their composers and audiences, especially regarding unsettling subjects. Though pre-dated by numerous similar interpretations, including in specific reference to the sagas, this methodology has been advanced most influentially by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen as 'monster theory'.[35] Cohen's primary assertion is that supernatural monsters in art symbolise the contravention of their originating society's values. Owing to their unenviable loathsomeness, these figures serve to criticise the deviance they embody, thereby demarcating the boundaries of appropriate behaviour.[36] However, as Cohen further notes, this symbolic mechanism also creates a 'safe realm' to contemplate such contravention, and not necessarily in a manner limited to fear or disgust. Due to their distance from reality, composers and audiences might use

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[33] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 151; *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, 359–60. See also *Brandkrossa þáttr*, 186, and *Sigurðar saga þögla*, 95–6.

[34] Heather O'Donoghue, *Narrative in the Icelandic Sagas: Meanings of Time in Old Norse Literature* (London, forthcoming). See *Eyrbyggja saga*, 170, and *Njáls saga*, 46.

[35] See Kathryn Hume, 'From Saga to Romance: The Uses of Monsters in Old Norse Literature', *Studies in Philology* 77/1 (1980), 3–15.

[36] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis, 1996), 5–16.

monsters to fantasise about deviance, including sexual taboos.[37] Jóhanna Katrín identifies a prime example in the sagas. She suggests that troll-women's claws simultaneously present the fear of *and* unspeakable desire for the female penetration of the male body.[38] A final component of Cohen's theory is that monstrous depictions do not merely condemn miscreants that are decisive Others — ethnic, sexual, or otherwise — to their composers and audiences. They also imply the potential for the deviance they symbolise to emerge within the context of their production and reception.[39] Margrit Shildrick expands this concept. She asserts that, by virtue of their inescapable humanity, monsters that are specifically anthropomorphic provoke audiences to consider their own hypothetical deviance.[40] Following Cohen and Shildrick, the analyses below examine supernatural entities who embody — or interact with other characters who embody — recognisably human gendered and age-based identifiers. In so doing, I seek to reconstruct medieval Icelandic sexual ideologies pertaining to these specific demographics.

A few instructive examples demonstrate the interpretative mechanisms at work in my analyses, as well as indicating the potential of such episodes to expose specifically unsettling notions. The female libido seems to have been a disturbing subject to the audiences of Old Norse-Icelandic literature.[41] Though not entirely absent from naturalistic sources, scholars are correct to note that the ramifications of female sexual appetites are given exceptionally clear and exaggerated airing in monstrous depictions, most obviously in the portrayals of hypersexual, scantily clad, and sharp-clawed troll-

[37] Cohen, 'Monster Culture', 17.
[38] *WONL*, 63.
[39] Cohen, 'Monster Culture', 12, 19.
[40] Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London, 2002), 29.
[41] See Jochens, 'Illicit Love Visit', 378.

women.[42] Fascinatingly, though, if we search for naturalistic portrayals of the female libido with the additional filter of age, we are confronted by two significant absences. There almost no naturalistic examples of female libidinousness either before adolescence or after menopause. This might indicate either that such sexualities were seldom considered in medieval Iceland, or that they were too unsettling to write about openly. Corroborating the latter possibility, such portrayals *are* more abundant in supernatural episodes, with almost every single sexually active, pre-pubescent or post-menopausal female distanced by supernatural attributes. These include the cavorting troll-girls mentioned in Chapter Two, as well as the many elderly witches and other troll-women in Chapter Four. These portrayals tend to present the sexual activeness of such trollish females — and, by extension, of the human girls and old women they represent — in negative terms: clearly interesting, perhaps even disconcertingly alluring, but ultimately condemned by virtue of their irredeemable monstrosity. However, my approach is not so prescriptive. Several of the supernatural figures studied below are indeed abhorrent monsters, interpretations of whom might follow the lines of reasoning outlined by Cohen. These also include the 'evening riders' of Chapter One and the 'rapacious revenants' of Chapter Three. However, in the *Fróðárundur* (Wonders at Fróðá) analysed Chapter Four, the supernatural occurrences that surround the post-menopausal Þórgunna are much more ambivalent: they single Þórgunna out as peculiar and her sexuality untenable, but do not necessarily characterise her as malevolent. In other cases, including the 'temporary troll lovers' of Chapter One and the 'fondling foster-mothers' of Chapter Four, supernatural entities can be unequivocally benevolent. Hence, while some supernatural figures do function via mechanisms akin to Cohen's monster theory, others seem to be

[42] See *WONL*, 11, and Helga Kress, 'Taming the Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature', in Sarah Anderson and Karen Swenson, eds., *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (New York, 2002), 84–9.

supernaturally distanced only so that other characters may interact with them in a manner that would otherwise be questionable or even monstrous.

As the title of this thesis suggests, I am concerned not only with the supernatural in general, but with the troll and trollish in particular. There are prevalent misconceptions surrounding these terms, which demand clarification. As Ármann Jakobsson has repeatedly demonstrated, the *troll* (later *tröll*) of Old Norse-Icelandic literature is inherently nebulous. Following Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, Ármann criticises the taxonomising efforts of scholars who exclusively identify saga trolls as a 'race' of misshapen, mountain-dwelling hominids.[43] He asserts that such notions stem from modern biological, taxonomic, and folkloric traditions, and that medieval Icelandic trolls were seldom conceptualised according to anything like Linnean speciation. However, as Ármann himself admits, it is undeniable that premodern Icelanders did sometimes categorise trolls in comparable terms. In *Bárðar saga*, the narrator delineates between 'risa[r]' (giants) and 'tröll' (trolls), describing them as two physiologically and temperamentally distinct 'ky[n]' (families, types) of large, anthropomorphic, yet distinctly non-human beings.[44] Ármann identifies this as unique and not generalisable.[45] However, other examples corroborate a schema in which trolls are considered a distinct 'race' or 'species', separate from humanity, whose traits could be inherited by their offspring. There are multiple depictions of troll families and even parallel civilisations, populated by anthropomorphic yet distinctly non-human beings, who share similar

[43] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Horror in the Medieval North: The Troll', in Kevin Corstorphine and Laura Kremmel, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature* (Basingstoke, 2018), 33; Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, 'Nasty, Brutish, and Large: Cultural Difference and Otherness in the Figuration if the Trollwomen of the *Fornaldarsögur*', *Scandinavian Studies* 73/2 (2001), 109. For a recent example of such assertions, see Magnús Fjalldal, 'Beowulf and the Old Norse Two-Troll Analogues', *Neophilologus* 97/3 (2013), 545.
[44] *Bárðar saga*, 101.
[45] Ármann Jakobsson, *Troll Inside*, 34–5.

physiological abnormalities and behaviours.[46] Such trolls are identifiable by both physical traits — often hugeness and ugliness — and customs — often immodest dress, man-eating, and throat-biting.[47] Clearly, the word *troll*/*tröll* could refer to a genealogically or biologically distinct group, akin to and sometimes even synonymous with *flögð*, *risar*, and *jötnar* (ogres and giants of various types).[48]

However, as Ármann and others note, *troll/tröll* is also employed to denote a much wider range of supernatural beings: anthropomorphic witches and revenants, uncanny animals, and even ordinary humans whose deeds are inexplicable via naturalistic logic.[49] Martin Arnold suggests that such instances are metaphorical, comparing such figures to 'actual troll[s]', which seemingly refers to a speciated or otherwise distinct conception of such creatures.[50] However, as Ármann argues, *troll/tröll* is used even more prolifically to describe this array of beings than the misshapen, mountain-dwelling type, which might indicate that the latter held no monopoly on the literal meaning of the term.[51] Ármann contends that one compelling solution lies in the use of *troll*-derived vocabulary to describe magic and sorcery, as in *trolldómr* and *trollskapr*.[52] This usage might suggest that entities could be considered trolls insofar as they are practised in, imbued with, or otherwise linked to supernatural forces. Ármann

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[46] See *Egils saga einhenda*, 181; *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, 270–3; *Gunnars saga keldugnúpsfífls*, 359–61; and *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, 359–64.
[47] On large size and deformity, see *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 355, and *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, 360. On sexual immodesty, anthropophagy, and throat-biting, see *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, 272; *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 331; *Sörla saga sterka*, 226; and *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, 363.
[48] See *Egils saga einhenda*, 173–85; *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 96–101; and *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, 359–64, respectively. See also Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: *Bárðar saga* and its Giants', *Medieval Scandinavia* 15 (2005), 1–2. The term *flagð* seems to carry a gendered connotation, being used often – though not exclusively – to refer to female entities.
[49] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Horror in the Medieval North', 35–6; John Lindow, *Trolls: An Unnatural History* (London, 2014), 24–8; Lorenzo Lozzi Gallo, 'The Giantess as Foster-Mother in Old Norse Literature', *Scandinavian Studies* 78/1 (2006), 3, and Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated', 244.
[50] Arnold, 'Hvat er tröll', 128.
[51] Ármann Jakobsson, *Troll Inside*, 27.
[52] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Horror in the Medieval North', 37; Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímr the Witch: The Meanings of *Troll* and *Ergi* in Medieval Iceland', *Saga-Book* 32 (2008), 49. See also *Gísla saga*, 46–7, and *Vatnsdæla saga*, 70.

thus proposes a definition of the late medieval saga *troll*/*tröll* as nothing more specific than an 'evil, magical creature'.[53]

Indeed, though often seemingly informed by something resembling a speciated understanding, numerous instances in which non-human creatures are described as trolls might actually (or also) function according to this second definition. A prime example of this potentially twofold logic is found in *Örvar-Odds saga*. Oddr's nemesis Ögmundr is explicitly non-human and is called, among other things, 'it mesta tröll' (the greatest troll).[54] The saga clearly states that some of his inhuman nature — and perhaps trollishness — results from his supernatural lineage, being the son of a heathen-worshipping king and a waterfall-dwelling 'gýg[r]' (ogress).[55] However, he is also said to have been 'trylldu' (trolled) as a boy, an ambiguous process whereby his inhumanity is augmented by magic, rather than by lineage.[56] Such examples would seem to indicate trollishness to be not — or not only — an innate, biological identity, but also the extent to which something is imbued or otherwise associated with supernatural forces.

Ármann's definition does proclaim one definitive component: the word troll must be pejorative.[57] This feature is generally upheld throughout the corpus. *Troll*/*tröll* is often used like an expletive, and accusations of trollishness are usually hurled by one's enemies.[58] This feature is especially clear in the 'temporary troll lover' episode from *Ketils saga hængs*, analysed below. This text implies several supernatural characters to be related by virtue of their shared physiognomy: they have uncannily large faces. However, while some of these individuals are uncomplicatedly labelled *tröll*, their

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[53] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Trollish Acts', 55.
[54] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 351.
[55] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 345–6.
[56] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 346. See also Ármann Jakobsson, *Troll Inside*, 32–3.
[57] Ármann Jakobsson, *Troll Inside*, 19; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Identifying the Ogre: The Legendary Saga Giants', in Agneta Ney et al., eds., *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og Virkelighed* (Copenhagen, 2009), 193.
[58] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Trollish Acts', 50. See *Eyrbyggja saga*, 169, and *Heiðarvíga saga*, 302–3.

identification as such is muddied in the case of Hrafnhildr, the protagonist's paramour. Ketill's unsympathetic father twice refers to this wide-faced woman as 'tröl[l]', while neither the son, nor even the narrator when focalising Ketill's observations, does so.[59] Though he identifies her antagonistic compatriots as 'fl[ö]gð' (ogres) and 'tröllkon[ur]' (troll-women), he does not distinguish between Hrafnhildr and ordinary 'konur' (women), presumably due to his romantic allegiance.[60] This conclusion of relativity already demonstrates the potential for benevolent entities to be considered trolls. This label depends as much on the perspective of the identifier than the malevolence of the identified.[61]

Moreover, there are instances in which *troll*/*tröll* is used as a more neutral descriptor for the uncanny. Such seems to be the case in *Bárðar saga*, a text that not only defines trolls as a genealogical or speciated *kyn*, but also consistently defends the courage and compassion of its troll-descended characters. This saga also specifies precisely why Helga Bárðardóttir, who floats to Greenland on an ice floe, is called *tröll*: 'Helga var kvenna vænst. Hon þótti ok með undarligu móti þar hafa komit, ok fyrir þat var hon tröll kölluð af sumum mönnum' (Helga was the most beautiful woman. She also seemed to have arrived there in a wondrous [i.e., a wonder, a marvel] fashion, and for that she was called a troll by some people).[62] This passage seems to suggest the capacity for *troll*/*tröll* to refer to entities by sole virtue of their supernatural nature. Helga is certainly a strange, even suspicious Other, but she has not proven herself malevolent, nor is she necessarily considered so by those calling her a troll. Helgi Ingjaldsson from *Gísla saga* is another instructive example. Helgi is a literary representation of an individual with acute mental

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[59] *Ketils saga hængs*, 255–6.
[60] *Ketils saga hængs*, 259–60, 252.
[61] See also Ármann Jakobsson, 'Horror in the Medieval North', 37–8.
[62] *Bárðar saga*, 115.

and/or physical disabilities, and is compared to a 'troll' due to his large size.[63] Those around him recognise Helgi's exceptionalities as atypical, but their responses seem limited to sympathy or ridicule; surely none sees Helgi as an evil figure.[64] Finally, there are additional instances in which narrators or even trolls themselves use this word in a positive light. Ármann himself admits that a misshapen, supernatural queen in *Egils saga einhenda* is 'quite proud of her trollish ancestry', though he suggests this to be satirical.[65] Throughout that saga, all members of this woman's otherworldly society, including her equally benevolent companion, Skröggr 'lögmaðr tröllana' (the law-man of the trolls), are described using this term.[66] Hence, my own interpretation is somewhat more inclusive. Throughout this dissertation, 'troll' will be used simply to refer to entities and occurrences that are somehow supernatural: always uncanny and usually, though not exclusively, malevolent Others.

In terms of generic scope, I cast as broad a net as possible. This approach reflects my conviction that the value of certain texts to reveal medieval Icelandic mentalities — traditionally the *Íslendingasögur*, *samtíðarsögur*, and laws — should not be prioritised over that of others — the apparently more frivolous *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*.[67] Owing to their more distanced settings, the latter genres admittedly pertain less directly to Icelandic customs, although even they sometimes expose their cultural origins by locating distinctly Icelandic subjects in faraway times and places, or by inadvertently misrepresenting non-Icelandic ones.[68] However, regardless of their settings, scholars

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[63] *Gísla saga*, 79.
[64] *Gísla saga*, 83.
[65] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Trollish Acts', 51.
[66] *Egils saga einhenda*, 175–85.
[67] For such traditional views, recall ns. 18–19 above. For a similar position to my own, see *WONL* 6–8.
[68] On a castle in Tartaría that resembles an Icelandic farm, see Alaric Hall et al., eds. and trs., '*Sigrgarðs saga frækna*: A Normalised Text, Translation, and Introduction', *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 21 (2012–13), 91. See also what seem to be Icelandic misconceptions of

assert the value of all texts composed in medieval Iceland to convey the ideologies of that society: they all 'sho[w] the norms the audience expected'.[69] Sagas with distanced settings might feature more fanciful phenomena and exaggerated behaviours, but, as products of the same cultural context, their portrayals of what constitutes laudable and deviant behaviour should be relatively consistent with the rest of the corpus. William Layher even suggests that the *fornaldarsöur* and *riddarasögur* might offer *more* direct access to such norms. Their distance from everyday reality might have permitted their expression of otherwise unsettling contemplations.[70] His logic is reminiscent of Cohen's monster theory and, indeed, when it comes to depictions of the supernatural across the saga corpus, Layher's and Cohen's arguments coalesce. If we presume them to have been considered supernatural, all depictions of trollish characters and phenomena are estranged from reality. Hence, troll stories from all sagas have the similarly enhanced potential to convey the mentalities of their composers and audiences. My readings will therefore draw from any texts featuring trolls, including *fornaldarsögur*, *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur* (kings' sagas), *riddarasögur*, and *samtíðarsögur*.

As Cohen further notes, the symbolic potential of supernatural entities is practically infinite, with their meanings dependant on the moment against which they are contemplated. Depending on when it is read, *Dracula* might pertain just as well to the AIDS crisis as it does to the parasitic Victorian aristocracy.[71] Hence, in order to prevent my analyses from becoming unserviceably speculative and untethered, I will also root

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dromedaries and even wolves, which were prevalent in literature of medieval Icelanders but not their fauna; *Göngu Hrólfs saga*, 361.

[69] Karras, 'Servitude and Sexuality', 290. See also Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense, 2002), 12, and Stephen Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca, 1991), 127.

[70] William Layher, 'Caught Between Worlds: Gendering the Maiden Warrior in Old Norse', Sara Poor and Jana Schulman, eds., *Women and Medieval Epic* (New York, 2007), 185–91. On the disarming potential of 'alternative worlds' in literature, see also Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York, 2000), 184.

[71] Cohen, 'Monster Culture', 5–6.

them in the broader context of medieval Icelandic gendered, age-based, and sexual ideologies. I will establish this context at the outset of each chapter though inclusive surveys of references to the intersectional identities in question. These surveys draw from naturalistic saga episodes, non-literary sources, and the speculations of other scholars.

If this thesis purports to examine the mentalities of medieval Icelanders, it is important to establish to which temporal and social contexts its speculations refer. First, with respect to the time period, it might initially seem dubious to interpret this range of genres together based on traditional understandings of their relative dating. As noted above, the 'golden age' of *Íslendingasaga* production is conventionally recognised as the thirteenth century, the same period associated with the *samtíðarsögur* and many *konungasögur* and *biskupasögur* (bishops' sagas).[72] Conversely, the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur* have been thought to rise to prominence in subsequent centuries, when they supposedly influenced the 'post-classical' *Íslendingasögur*.[73] Based on this understanding, the pre-fourteenth-century context is the one most consistently cited in relation to the former genres, especially the *Íslendingasögur*.[74] However, there is little evidence to support such a model. As Ármann Jakobsson notes, there are only four *Íslendingasögur* attested from the thirteenth century. While others might admittedly have been composed considerably earlier than their first attestations, including as part of an indeterminable oral tradition during or even before the thirteenth century, it is possible that many examples of that genre are fourteenth- or even fifteenth-century creations.[75]

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[72] Else Mundal, 'The Dating of the Oldest Sagas about Early Icelanders', in *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions* (Copenhagen, 2013), 35.
[73] See n. 14 above.
[74] See, for example, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Becoming Old, Ageism, and Taking Care of the Elderly in Iceland c.900–1300', in Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed., *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden, 2008), 228–9; and Chris Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood in Early Icelandic Society', in Sally Crawford and Gillian Shepherd, eds., *Children, Childhood, and Society* (Oxford, 2007), 45.
[75] Ármann Jakobsson, *Troll Inside*, 39, 185, n. 57.

Moreover, as Else Mundal argues, each new copy of a saga might have undergone 'major changes both concerning style and content'.[76] Hence, even if some of these texts have older origins, our first attestations of them are not necessarily reliable representations of earlier, non-extant versions. Therefore, the *Íslendinagsögur* can only assuredly be said to pertain to thirteenth-, fourteenth-, and fifteenth-century norms, depending on the text in question.

Problematising the model from the other direction, scholars have also suggested that the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarsögur* might have enjoyed substantial popularity prior to the fourteenth century. The origins of the latter are fixed to no earlier than the 1220s, when continental romance material was first translated into Norse, while the former might have even older roots than the *Íslendinagsögur*.[77] Judy Quinn notes that *fornaldarsögur* might have existed in written form at least as early as the thirteenth century, and that they seem to have been popular as oral narratives at least as early as the twelfth, before the supposed 'saga golden age'.[78] Though *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarsögur* are only attested in manuscripts from around 1300 and later, and though it is also true that they seem only to have enjoyed greater popularity than the *Íslendingasögur* after the late fourteenth century, the probability of a substantial period of overlap between all saga genres cannot be overlooked.[79] As such, the broad cultural contexts to which the conclusions of this thesis pertain are thirteenth-, fourteenth-, and fifteenth-century Iceland. I also concede that some of these sagas' embedded commentaries might stem from indiscernibly older periods and/or have continued to reflect or influence

[76] Mundal, 'Dating of the Oldest', 31.
[77] Mundal, 'Dating of the Oldest', 35–6.
[78] Quinn, 'From Orality to Literacy', 45–6. The twelfth- and thirteenth-century existence of such narratives is described in the *samtíðarsögur*; see *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, 27, and *Sturlu þáttr*, 232–3.
[79] Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Earliest Legendary Saga Manuscripts', in Annette Lassen et al., eds., *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development* (Reykjavík, 2012), 21–9.

Icelandic norms during their lengthy periods of re-copying and reception, which in some cases continue throughout the early modern period and beyond.[80]

The relative dating of saga genres is clearly a slippery endeavour, something that Chris Callow also notes of individual texts.[81] Particularly when sagas are first attested in manuscripts from around the same period, it is impossible beyond highly speculative assertions — based on questionable criteria such as style, shared motifs, or supernatural frivolity — to discern the order in which they were composed.[82] Hence, throughout this dissertation, I will refrain from arguing that differences between sagas reflect social changes around particular dates or events.[83] Chiefly with reference to their first attestation dates, though also with cautious reference to their hypothesised composition dates, I will simply note that individual sagas suggest the contemporaneous existence of the mentalities they indicate among their composers and audiences. Nevertheless, the manuscript record makes it practically irrefutable that some texts — such as *Eyrbyggja saga*, first attested in the thirteenth century — pre-date others by substantial margins — such as *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, first attested in the sixteenth.[84] In such cases, I will localise the commentaries they convey within the approximate period indicated by their manuscript attestations. However, I will not refrain from comparing their expressions of

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[80] See Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Expanding Horizons: Recent Trends in Old Norse-Icelandic Manuscript Studies', *New Medieval Literatures* 14 (2012), 204, and Matthew Driscoll, '*Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*: The Stories that Wouldn't Die', in Ármann Jakobsson et al., eds., *Fornaldarsagornas Struktur och Ideologi: Handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 2001* (Uppsala, 2001), 257–67.
[81] Chris Callow, 'Dating and Origins', in Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson, eds., *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (New York, 2017), 15.
[82] On such criteria, see Mundal, 'Dating the Oldest', 41–52, and n. 14 above.
[83] Callow, 'Dating and Origins', 21. For an example of scholars interpreting sagas to indicate changes around important dates, often 1262–4, despite the prohibitively scant manuscript record from this period, see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Gender, Humour, and Power in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature', in Anna Foka and Jonas Liliequist, eds., *Laughter, Humour, and the (Un)Making of Gender: Historical and Cultural Perspectives* (New York, 2015), 218–23.
[84] Bernadine McCreesh, '*Eyrbyggja saga*', in *MSAE*, 174–5; Judith Jesch, '*Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*', in *MSAE*, 322–3.

norms and values. First, it is plausible that such sagas refer to the same questions surrounding sex, age, and sexuality across broad temporal gaps, in which case their similar or contrasting expressions are noteworthy. Second, considering its unknowable pre-manuscript history, the younger of any two such texts might be older than its first attestation, conceivably reducing the temporal gap between them. Finally, the textual afterlife of the older of the two makes it possible that, once both texts had been composed, they were consumed and perhaps directly compared by the same audiences.

The demographic context for my conclusions must also be established: exactly whose mentalities do I purport to reconstruct? To begin with, just as all genres seem to have greater shared interest in the supernatural and greater temporal overlap than has been traditionally assumed, they also seem to have had the same composers, redactors, and audiences. There are admittedly codices that indicate the medieval recognition of generic boundaries postulated by scholars: most notably, *Möðruvallabók* contains only *Íslendingasögur*.[85] However, most codices contain texts from a variety of genres.[86] As Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards proclaim, the supposedly serious genres were not the preserve of the elites while the fanciful ones were primarily intended for plebeian entertainment.[87] Sagas of all genres seem to have been of interest to, and might perhaps expose the mentalities of, the same Icelanders.

But which Icelanders? The individuals to whom the sagas' embedded mentalities most assuredly belong are those who wrote and edited them: the *sögumenn*. Scholars concur that these would have been almost exclusively male, either clerics or clerically

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[85] Stefán Karlsson, '*Möðruvallabók*', in *MSAE*, 426–7.

[86] Especially diverse codices include AM 544 4to (*Hauksbók*) and AM 580 4to/Holm. Perg. 7 4to. See Ármann Jakobsson, 'Earliest Legendary Saga', 21–2; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'From Heroic Legend to 'Medieval Screwball Comedy'? The Origins, Development and Interpretation of the Maiden-King Narrative', in Annette Lassen et al., eds., *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development* (Reykjavík, 2012), 236; and Marianne Kalinke, *Bridal Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland* (Ithaca, 1990), 6–7.

[87] Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary Fiction*, 24–5.

trained secular magnates.[88] Hence, the sagas might reveal the subjective and presumably biased perspectives of such composers about a broad range of demographic groups. When they depict adult men, these perspectives might be based on a mixture of authentic personal experience and fantastical self-aggrandisation. But when they depict the other demographics with which this thesis is concerned — juvenile, adolescent, and exceptionally elderly males, as well as females of all ages — they might reveal only fallible, elite male perspectives on the lived realities, motivations, and mentalities of such figures. However, such depictions might not always be limited to fantasising, demonising, or otherwise misleading stereotypes. Though such misrepresentation is possible — and, in some cases, highly probable — Úlfar Bragason and Randi Eldevik defend the intention and even capacity of adult male *sögumenn* accurately to depict the prevailing expectations surrounding, and perhaps even the authentic experiences of, demographics other than themselves.[89] Additionally, it is also worth noting the possibility that some such Others, including women, might have been able to express their own subjectivities through saga literature. Some women were the commissioners saga manuscripts, through which they could have indirectly influenced their content.[90] It has also been speculated that, in exceptional cases such as *Laxdæla saga*, women might even have been saga composers.[91] Hence, though it is likely that many saga depictions of

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[88] See Pernille Hermann, 'Literacy', in Ármann and Sverrir Jakobsson, eds., *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (New York, 2017), 39.
[89] Úlfar Bragason, 'Sturla Þórðarson on Love', in Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin, eds., *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland* (Ithaca, 2008), 131; Randi Eldevik, 'Women's Voices in Old Norse Literature: The Case of *Trójumanna saga*', in Sarah Andersson and Karen Swenson, eds., *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (New York, 2002), 55–6. See also Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation', tr. Annette Kuhn, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7/1 (1981), 52.
[90] See Agnes Arnórsdóttir, 'Cultural Memory and Gender in Iceland from Medieval to Early Modern Times', *Scandinavian Studies* 85/3 (2013), 385, and David Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga* (Oxford, 2012), 37.
[91] Guðrún Nordal, 'Skaldic Citation and Settlement Stories as Parameters for Saga Dating', in Else Mundal, ed., *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions* (Copenhagen, 2013), 208–10; Helga

marginal groups are limited by the imperfect or biased perspectives of their primarily male composers, it is also possible that they reflect genuinely prevalent norms and expectations surrounding such individuals. This might be because of the capacity of such men to present such norms accurately, or because of the involvement of some such marginalised figures in saga production.

However, there are additional avenues by which the sagas might reflect the authentic perspectives of multiple demographic groups. First, *sögumenn* could have been influenced by their potentially diverse audiences. Especially when composed or redacted in secular homesteads and farm complexes, these texts' reading and (especially) listening audiences could have been comprised of an exceedingly broad cross section of society.[92] They might have included illiterate individuals, as well as those disenfranchised not only by their biological sex, but also by their extreme youth or senescence. Pernille Hermann notes that *sögumenn* might have created narratives with such audiences' feelings and aspirations in mind, as well as emended their redactions of pre-existing texts based on their audiences' responses after they had been read aloud.[93] Second, and arguably more importantly, any literary corpus's exposure of authentic ideologies is not limited to its expression of the authors' values at the point of composition. Employing the terminology proposed by Laurie Finke, texts are not only 'reflective' of the personal or broader cultural norms of their composers, but also 'dialogic', in that they can influence their audiences at the point of reception.[94] As she, Madeline Caviness, and other theorists outside Medieval Studies have noted, art has the power to engender and perpetuate social

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Kress, '"Mjǫk mun þér samstaft þykkja": Um sagnahefð og kvenlega reynslu í *Laxdœla sögu*', in Valborg Bentsdóttir et al., eds., *Konur skrifa til heiðurs Önnu Sigurðardóttur* (Reykjavík, 1980), 97–109.

[92] Hermann, 'Literacy', 41–2.

[93] Hermann, 'Literacy', 42.

[94] Laurie Finke, 'Sexuality in French Medieval Literature: "Séparés, on est ensemble"', in Vern Bullough and James Brundage, eds., *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York, 1996), 347, 353.

roles. There is no human identity — gendered, age-based, sexual, or otherwise — that is not mediated through conditioning, a process in which art and media can exert a strong influence.[95] Hence, whether these texts present their *sögumenn*'s genuine efforts to reflect the authentic experiences of and expectations surrounding the demographics they portray, or whether they expose these individuals' biased mischaracterisations of such groups, the sagas could have influenced the mentalities and even self-perceptions of their audience members. Such processes of internalisation are just as plausible with empowering depictions as they are with marginalising or oppressive ones.

I thus contend that the conclusions of my textual analyses present possible mentalities concerning biological sex, age, and sexuality among medieval Icelandic *sögumenn* and audiences. The perspectives and ideologies to which I gesture should not be understood to represent a consistent or comprehensive worldview. Rather, they indicate aspects of a multifaceted and sometimes contradictory range of norms and values that seem to have held traction among members of this society between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. Their potential validity is corroborated through sustained reference to conceptions presented in the naturalistic sources, as well as those hypothesised in prior scholarship. My analyses are not only grounded in the context of these broader norms, however. I also suggest that, primarily by virtue of their distance from reality, the supernatural portrayals discussed below can expand, nuance, or even fundamentally problematise these notions.

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[95] Madeline Caviness, 'Feminism, Gender studies, and Medieval Studies', *Diogenes* 57/1 (2010), 35–6. See also Felski, *Doing Time*, 181–2, and Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London, 1980), 57.

# Chapter One

## Male Youth: Evening Riders and Temporary Troll Lovers

In this chapter, I examine saga representations of male sexual development. I begin with a contextualising survey of references to male adolescence from throughout the corpus, first in general and then in the sphere of sexuality. I then present this chapter's close readings of supernatural episodes. These are the depictions of female 'riding' attacks against boys in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, as well the portrayals of young men's temporary trysts with troll-women in *Örvar-Odds saga*, *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, and *Ketils saga hængs*. These episodes emphasise the perceived importance of acquiring erotic dominance over women as a component of male maturation. They offer diverse commentaries on two avenues by which this such supremacy is depicted to be achieved: sexual violence and pre-marital sexual activities.

Philippe Ariès infamously claimed that medieval children were not considered to have a 'particular nature' distinguishing them from adults.[1] It is from such statements that arose the common misconception that children were treated as 'miniature adults' in the premodern era.[2] Barbara Hanawalt and others have criticised Ariès's hypothesis for being based more on the myth of progress than any substantial evidence.[3] However, although such rebuttals are warranted, Anna Hansen notes that Ariès's premise that modern, Western conceptions of childhood are not universal was theoretically shrewd,

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[1] Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, tr. Robert Baldick (London, 1996), 125. This was originally published in 1960.
[2] Robert Fossier, 'The Feudal Era (Eleventh–Thirteenth Century)', in André Burguière et al., eds., and Sarah Hanbury Tenison et al., trs., *A History of the Family*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1996), 416.
[3] Barbara Hanawalt, 'Medievalists and the Study of Childhood', *Speculum* 77/2 (2002), 440–2. See also Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Patriarch: Myth and Reality', in Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed., *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden, 2008), 266.

and established the terms for those responding to him.[4] Ariès prompted a burst of scholarship, which not only demonstrated that medieval children were indeed considered distinct from adults, but also examined how such distinctions varied depending on context.[5] This includes numerous studies of medieval Icelandic childhood.[6]

However, as Carolyne Larrington and others note, there have been comparatively few contributions on medieval European, and specifically Icelandic, adolescence.[7] Moreover, some recent studies have even included statements on the topic that are alarmingly reminiscent of Ariès. They assert that most people in the Middle Ages would not have recognised adolescence as a distinct period.[8] Most notably for the Icelandic context, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson suggests that the transition from childhood to adulthood was not perceived as gradual but immediate, based on the instantaneous achievement of functionality between the ages of twelve and sixteen.[9] Jón Viðar admits the prevalence of medieval learned schemata that identify adolescence as a discrete life stage. The most prominent is the pan-European *Aetates hominis* (Ages of Man) tradition, Icelandic iterations of which translate this category as 'ung[ir] m[enn]' (young people), a discrete group between 'b[örn]' (children) and 'fullaldra m[enn]' (full-grown people).[10] However,

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[4] Anna Hansen, 'Representations of Childhood in Early Icelandic Society', Ph.D. Dissertation, Sydney, University of Sydney, 2006, 24–6.
[5] Hanawalt, 'Medievalists and the Study', 441.
[6] See Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed., *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden, 2008), and Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi Tulinius, eds., *Miðaldabörn* (Reykjavík, 2005).
[7] Carolyne Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents: Male Maturation in Norse Literature', in Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed., *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden, 2008), 152. See also Ruth Mazo-Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia, 2003).
[8] On Iceland, see Yelena Yershova, 'Egill Skalla-Grímsson: A Viking Poet as a Child and an Old Man', in Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed., *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden, 2008), 287. On other medieval contexts, see Georges Minois, *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, tr. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Cambridge, 1989), 161.
[9] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Becoming Old', 229–30.
[10] *Alfræði íslenzk*, 3.98. See also J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986), 16–21.

he is certain that the un- and under-educated majority would have resorted to a simplistic binary: useless childhood and useful adulthood.

While I accept that less formulaic boundaries between life-stages likely predominated among the general populace, these were not necessarily so unsophisticated. Shulamith Shahar speculates that the average person's assessment was indeed less numerically precise than *Aetates hominis*, relying instead on pragmatic criteria, including the functionality touted by Jón Viðar.[11] However, both she and Larrington emphasise that there would have been numerous spheres in which to demonstrate this functionality, with development presumably occurring at different times and rates in each. These include the cognitive, social, and — most significant for my purposes — sexual.[12] Moreover, there are also sources that indicate perceptions of the gradual attainment of adult functionality within single spheres. According to *Grágás* — the composite, sometimes contradictory account of laws from the Icelandic Commonwealth — males could participate in certain lawsuits as supporting prosecutors at the age of twelve, but only as principals at sixteen.[13] Likewise, *Jónsbók* — the primary Icelandic law-code from the 1280s, throughout the later Middle Ages, and beyond — implies that children could function as manual labourers before the age of sixteen, but did not count as full, adult workers before that threshold.[14]

Admittedly, since they hardly constitute popular literature, law-codes might be just as limited as learned schemata as sources for general norms. However, I derive the vast majority of my evidence from the sagas, which — as mentioned in the General Introduction above — are more likely to have reflected or dialogically influenced the

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[11] Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: 'Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain*', tr. Yael Lotan (London, 1997), 29–31.
[12] Shahar, *Growing Old*, 12; Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents', 153.
[13] *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 167–9.
[14] *Jónsbók*, 150.

mentalities of a broad spectrum of the population. The sagas also sometimes indicate phases rather than single moments of male adolescent development. These include descriptions of a training period for clerics between twelve and twenty-five, and one for knights between twelve and seventeen.[15] Indeed, as the following survey indicates, the period of maturation from childhood to adulthood was considered not only to be protracted and contingent on development in various spheres, but also to correspond to a specific, chronological age range.

Our access to medieval Icelandic perceptions of adolescence is obscured by two prevalent literary tropes, the first being the child prodigy. In certain genres, including the *Íslendingasögur*, a boy’s status as *bráðgǫrr/bráðgörr* (precocious), *snimma/snemma mikill* (prematurely large), or — at the very least — *manvænn* or *efniligr* (promising) seems a prerequisite for mentioning his childhood at all.[16] The precocious deeds of such figures are often enumerated: they demonstrate legislative, linguistic, martial, and moral prowess throughout their childhoods, including some extremely implausible examples under the ages of three.[17] Most scholars concur that these are fictive literary devices, foreshadowing such characters’ astonishing adulthoods.[18] As Judith Jesch notes, this proleptic function is especially clear when one child demonstrates precocity at precisely the same age at which other children are excluded from similar activities.[19] However, the

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[15] *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, 124–33; *Ectors saga*, 84–5.

[16] Hansen, ‘Representations of Childhood’, 124. See *Fóstrbræðra saga*, 123; *Hallfreðar saga,* 141; *Egils saga*, 211; and *Eiríks saga rauða*, 209.

[17] *Egils saga*, 81–101; *Íslendinga saga*, 283; and *Vápnfirðinga saga*, 23–6. For especially ludicrous examples, see *Flóamanna saga*, 291; *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, 123–124; and *Þorsteins saga tjaldstæðings*, 425–6

[18] Callow, ‘Transitions to Adulthood’, 52; Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Troublesome Children in the Sagas of Icelanders’, *Saga-Book* 27 (2003), 13–15. On similar interpretations in other medieval contexts, see Danièle Alexandre-Bidon and Didier Lett, *Children in the Middle Ages: Fifth–Fifteenth Centuries*, tr. Jody Gladding (Notre Dame, IN, 1999), 43–4.

[19] Judith Jesch, ‘“Youth on the Prow”: Three Young Kings in the Late Viking Age’, in P.J.P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy*,* eds., *Youth in the Middle Ages* (York, 2004), 124. Jesch cites *Laxdœla saga*, 191–3, but see also *Hálfs saga Hálfsrekka*, 168–9, and *Heiðarvíga saga*, 246–9.

high frequency of such prodigies make it difficult to determine at what ages such feats stop being prodigious and start reflecting genuine expectations.

Despite the likelihood that such depictions, especially the most implausible amongst them, were considered unrealistic — or, indeed, supernatural — they may yet provide insight into contemporaneous conceptions of male adolescence. First, they indicate the kinds of activities we should examine as markers of maturation, including autonomous journeys or acts of martial or legislative prowess. Second, they generate informative negative space: if the ages at which they perform their feats were considered exceptional, they imply that such developments were expected to occur later. In the trope highlighted by Jesch, for example, prodigies are contrasted with youths of identical ages, who seem to serve as benchmarks of mediocrity. These expressly unexceptional youths might thus reflect more accurate expectations for their ages. In these cases, they imply that individuals of nine, twelve, and even eighteen years were not considered mature enough for combat.[20] Third, some descriptions of prodigies are further valuable in substantiating that adolescence did not, as Jón Viðar suggests, occur expectedly or instantaneously between twelve and sixteen, after which point individuals would have been considered indistinguishable from adults. Bolli Bollason is an instructive example: ‘hann var þá tólf vetra gamall, en fulkominn var hann at afli ok hyggju, svá at þeir váru margir, er eigi biðu meira þroska, þó alrosknir væri’ (he was twelve years old then, but he was fully developed in strength and mind, such that there were many who never attained greater maturity, though they were grown up).[21] This excerpt makes plain that Bolli’s adult brains and brawn are exceptional. Such attainment was not expected at the age of twelve and, if it were achieved, the prodigy in question would not be

[20] See n. 19 above.
[21] *Laxdæla saga*, 176.

uncomplicatedly treated as an adult; the disjunction between his youthful age and adult ability would remain noteworthy. Moreover, though he already possesses these explicit indicators of maturity, this excerpt's final clause implies that Bolli is not yet 'alrosk[inn]', an interpretation supported by his later description as a beardless youth.[22] Unlike those who are inferior even at the peak of their maturation, Bolli still has time to grow. This indicates that development toward adulthood was considered a protracted process, not finalised the moment boys attained their first markers of functionality.

The second prevalent and potentially problematic trope is that of the *kolbítr* (coal-biter), an exceptionally idle child so-called because of his metaphorical — and sometimes literal — proximity to the fireside. These children are often also precocious, large and strong for their age, but their indolence precludes the actualisation of this potential. Some kind of crisis and/or the goading of their parents usually shakes them from their torpor, and they rise to attain markers of maturity and, more often than not, the lead roles of their sagas.[23] Ármann Jakobsson suggests that *kolbítar* are not proleptic in the same manner as the prodigies above, but this does not seem accurate.[24] First, their latent strength directly foreshadows their later prowess. Second, the fact that they are too lazy to take advantage of their physiological prowess ironically foreshadows their later initiative: it is seemingly the absolute worst candidates for heroic status who end up attaining it.

The transformation of the *kolbítr* from sluggard to superstar could be a figurative expression of adolescence, with the motif's popularity indicating a pervasive interest in that transition. Indeed, this is Larrington's implicit assumption when interpreting the

[22] *Laxdæla saga*, 187.
[23] See *Áns saga bogveigis*, 404–5; *Gautreks saga*, 23–32; *Gunnars saga keldugnúpsfífls*, 344–8; *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, 368–70; *Kjalnesinga saga*, 9–19; *Króka-Refs saga*, 119–26; and *Víga-Glúms saga*, 15–16.
[24] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Troublesome Children', 16.

paradigmatic *kolbítr* Ketill hængr along these lines.[25] As such a symbol, the *kolbítr* emphasises the lack of ability and responsibility associated with childhood, cohering with scholarly consensus on the characteristics of that age group.[26] In contrast, the trope associates the transition to adulthood with exhibitions of mastery and autonomy. As potential symbols of adolescence, it is conceivable that the ages at which *kolbítar* are roused to action reflect chronological expectations surrounding maturation. Ketill performs feats of manual labour, martial prowess, and finally sexual experimentation, all between the ages of ten and twelve.[27] Others wallow much longer, only demonstrating their latent prowess at sixteen or eighteen.[28] Additionally, the fact that Ketill achieves mastery in three fields over a two-year span might also be significant. As well as indicating that adolescence involved gradual development in multiple spheres, it might suggest that certain forms of attainment were expected to precede others. However, as another exaggerated literary trope, it is also possible that *kolbítar* are just as unreliable as the prodigies above as direct sources for genuine norms.

Fortunately, there are sufficient young male characters belonging to neither of these extreme categories to put their anomalous nature into perspective. Indeed, though I noted above that almost all saga children are preternaturally large or capable, this is often merely the nominal repetition of a verbal formula. Many youths are portrayed to be incapable, though not in the exaggerated manner of the *kolbítar*, before they reach certain thresholds. Moreover, the ages at which they cross these thresholds are also fairly consistent, and so might provide a reasonable sense of the perceived chronological boundaries of adolescence.

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[25] Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents', 158–9.
[26] Hansen, 'Representations of Childhood', 93; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Troublesome Children', 6–7; Miller, 'Beating Up', 758.
[27] *Ketils saga hængs*, 245–52.
[28] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 16–30; *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar*, 397–9; *Vatnsdæla saga*, 3–11.

Nic Percivall and Chris Callow assert that the most frequent ages at which male characters demonstrate ability or autonomy are twelve, fifteen, and sixteen. Hence, both scholars hypothesise an approximate adolescent 'zone of transition' between these ages.[29] My own research supports their findings. First, episodes from throughout the corpus portray male youths approaching the age of twelve as incapable children. In texts as diverse as *Flóamanna saga*, *Völsunga saga*, and *Þórðar saga kakala*, children aged nine to ten are portrayed as too young to seek martial or legislative retribution.[30] Unlike the trope identified by Jesch above, these examples depict immature children in isolation from nearby prodigies. Since they are not included to accentuate the precocity of others, these examples seem even more likely to reflect genuine norms. Moreover, in *Völsunga saga*, the supposedly unready boy is Sinfjötli, whose very survival has already depended on his prodigious nature.[31] His identification as incapable at nine or ten thus corroborates the authenticity of such notions: adult behaviour at such ages is implausible even for the fantastical prodigies of the *fornaldarsögur*.

Second, corroborating Percivall and Callow's conclusions, the age of twelve is cited with exceptional frequency in reference to young men's first demonstrations of maturation. This includes many stipulations in *Grágás* regarding new rights and responsibilities.[32] It further includes what I count to be the highest number of initiatory events across numerous saga genres, including autonomous journeys and martial or legislative achievements.[33] A telling example is found in *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, which

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[29] Nic Percivall, 'Teenage Angst: The Structures and Boundaries of Adolescence in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland', in Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed., *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden, 2008), 135–41; Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood', 49–51. The phrase is Percivall's.
[30] *Flóamanna saga*, 245–6; *Völsunga saga*, 14; *Þórðar saga kakala*, 85.
[31] *Völsunga saga*, 12–14.
[32] *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 1.35, 1.38, 1.142, 1.153, 1.166, 1.168; *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók)*, 305.
[33] See, for example, *Adonias saga*, 119–21; *Bandamanna saga*, 295; *Bárðar saga*, 102; *Droplaugarsona saga*, 145–6; *Hervarar saga*, 231; *Laxdæla saga*, 38–9; *Vápnfirðinga saga*, 24;

portrays the age of twelve as more significant than the adoption of adult roles as a marker of maturity. After the death of his royal father, the court appoints the eight-year-old Geirviðr as king, though they are explicitly aware of the handicap of his youth. The *þáttr* then makes an uncharacteristic narratorial intervention: despite his best efforts, Geirviðr's reign begins ineffectively, 'sem líkligt var' (as was expected) on account of his age.[34] Geirviðr therefore inhabits a role of supreme authority, and certainly seems no slouch in the manner of the *kolbítar* above, yet he remains impeded by his immaturity. Once he turns twelve, however, the *þáttr* repeatedly emphasises the onset of his maturation.[35] Likewise, in *Laxdœla saga*, Guðrún waits until her sons are twelve and sixteen before whetting them to vengeance. Both she and the boys note that they were too young before this point, but that vengeance has become something of an expectation at their current ages.[36]

The younger of Guðrún's sons is Bolli Bollason, who was also noted above to be a paradigmatic prodigy. Hence, like Sinfjötli, his apparent unreadiness before this point confirms that the achievement of adult feats was considered extremely implausible under the age of twelve. However, Bolli's precocity might also problematise his status as an example of genuine norms surrounding the age of twelve. As Callow notes, this age might not have been considered 'typical' for the adoption of adult roles among the general population, but rather to smack of the prodigious exceptionality discussed above.[37] Indeed, though martial activity has apparently become an expectation for Bolli, the same is not true for other twelve-year-old males, including the boy-king Geirviðr.

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*Vatnsdœla saga*, 110–13; *Þáttr af Ragnars sonum*, 162; *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, 14; *Þorsteins þáttr úxafóts*, 356; and *Þórðar saga hreðu*, 164.

[34] *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, 462. On this *þáttr*'s uncharacteristically judgemental narrator, see Ralph O'Connor, 'Astronomy and Dream Visions in Late Medieval Iceland: *Stjörnu-Odda draumr* and the Emergence of Norse Legendary Fiction', *JEGP* 111/4 (2012), 481–3.

[35] *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, 463–4.

[36] *Laxdœla saga*, 179–80.

[37] Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood', 50.

Though he proves them wrong, his courtiers initially doubt his ability to solve their bandit problem, 'fyrir sakir æsku [hans]' (on account of his youth).[38] However, considering the sheer number of references to attainment at this age in the literary and non-literary materials, it seems reasonable to suggest that twelve was considered a minimum threshold for adolescent identification. It was not necessarily an age at which signs of maturity were expected, but one at which they would not be considered implausible. In cases like Bolli's, as well as numerous others who are described with consummate capacities at this specific age, I suggest that their precocity was interpreted thusly: at twelve, the onset of adolescence, they demonstrate levels of maturity more reasonably expected at its conclusion.[39]

Saga youths continue to be depicted engaging in initiatory activities or 'rites of passage' throughout their early and mid-teenage years and, as Percivall and Callow suggest, with particular frequency at fifteen and sixteen.[40] Some examples follow the pattern of waiting for vengeance found in *Laxdœla saga*, instructively implying immaturity before and maturity after this deed. Bolli's older brother Þorleikr is sixteen when whetted, having also been considered 'of ung[r]' (too young) before this point.[41] Likewise, Þórðr Atlason is nine when his father is murdered, but he waits until fifteen before seeking vengeance.[42] Sixteen is also the second significant milestone in the law-codes, after which *Grágás* stipulates that young men are capable of comprehensive legal activity, as well as the inheritance, ownership, and management of property.[43]

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[38] *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, 465.
[39] See also *Bárðar saga*, 141–2; *Egils saga*, 101; and *Harðar saga*, 32.
[40] For thirteen, see *Egils saga*, 103, and *Hálfs saga Hálfsrekka*, 168. For fourteen, see *Eyrbyggja saga*, 22. For fifteen, see *Bandamanna saga*, 296; *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 130; *Harðar saga*, 32–5; *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, 101; *Íslendinga saga*, 304, 311; and *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs*, 9–11. For sixteen, see *Finnboga saga*, 270–2; *Flóamanna saga*, 258; and *Íslendinga saga*, 347.
[41] *Laxdœla saga*, 180.
[42] *Flóamanna saga*, 245–7.
[43] *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 1.17, 1.129, 1.161, 1.167–9, 1.223, 1.225–6, 1.230, 2.7, 2.29, 2.48, 2.76. See also *Jónsbók*, 114, 122, 150, 294, 342.

However, as Percivall also notes, such initiatory events sometimes only occur in characters' later teens, up to and around the age of twenty.[44] Considering their more realistic nature, it is significant that such instances are especially common in the *samtíðarsögur*.[45] Likewise, it seems further instructive that in *Jónsbók* — the later and more cohesive account of medieval Icelandic law — sixteen and twenty, not twelve and sixteen, are the most commonly specified thresholds of male maturation.[46] Some literary examples in this bracket also follow the vengeance model found in *Laxdœla saga*: Gísl Illugason waits from six until seventeen, and Hrafn Guðrúnarson from fifteen until eighteen, before exacting revenge.[47] Finally, not only do saga characters continue to perform rites of passage until the age of twenty and beyond, but also their successes and failures are often still expressed in relation to expectations of immaturity.[48] For example, Ármann Jakobsson argues that the catastrophic bungling of a raid in *Íslendinga saga* was interpreted in light of the mid to late teenage identities of its leaders. Even as these raiders are later executed, one at eighteen and another in his early twenties, the saga emphasises their pitiable youth, problematising interpretations of their adult culpability.[49]

Such examples demonstrate the flexibility and longevity of medieval Icelandic adolescence, the perceived boundaries of which seem to have been around the ages of twelve and twenty. During this period, characters might attempt to demonstrate maturity in various spheres. However, sometimes even irrespective of their success in these

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[44] Percivall, 'Teenage Angst', 136–7.
[45] See *Íslendinga saga*, 237–8, 301, 373, 402; *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, 116; *Þorgils saga skarða*, 106; and *Þórðar saga kakala*, 51.
[46] *Jónsbók*, 86, 136. *Grágás* also cites twenty as a threshold, though with far less frequency than twelve or sixteen; *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 1.223, 1.226.
[47] *Gísls þáttr Illugasonar*, 331, 340; *Hrafns þáttr Guðrúnarsonar*, 321–2. For other initiatory events between seventeen and twenty, see *Flóamanna saga*, 233–4; *Gunnlaugs saga*, 62–4; *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar inn fyrri*, 255–6; *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 51; and *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallsonar*, 299–302.
[48] See *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, 304–5; 320; *Laxdœla saga*, 204–5; and *Ǫlkofra þáttr*, 86, 93.
[49] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Snorri and his Death: Youth, Violence, and Autobiography in Medieval Iceland', *Scandinavian Studies* 75/3 (2003), 321–37. See *Íslendinga saga*, 325–9.

endeavours, they are still not uncomplicatedly expected or judged to be adults. The difference in age at which characters first demonstrate maturity was presumably interpreted to result from innumerable, non-chronological factors of functionality or circumstance. Indeed, the law-codes sometimes specify the flexibility of their numerical thresholds based on individual capability. In addition to being sixteen, *Jónsbók* notes prerequisites such as sufficient 'kunnast[a]' (knowledge), as well as the ability to ride a horse and even drink alcohol, for various adult activities.[50] In the *samtíðarsögur*, Percivall further notes that the presence of a formidable male parent or guardian can delay the handover of responsibility to youths, though with no discernible dishonour to the latter.[51] Incidentally, this age-bracket corresponds to the trajectories of many *kolbítar*, substantiating their potential as symbols of adolescence. Furthermore, contrary to Jón Viðar's speculations, this bracket also corresponds to the boundaries of 'adolescentia' in some of the most prevalent *Aetates hominis* schemata of the Middle Ages.[52]

As Percivall and Callow further assert, Icelandic conceptions of male adolescence were profoundly gendered.[53] Consistent with Judith Butler's notion that masculinity is constructed in opposition to Others, especially women, the sagas frequently couch male maturation as a divergence from the feminine.[54] However, it must first be acknowledged that, to a certain extent, the biological sex of an infant seems always to have mattered, corresponding to gendered expectations long before adolescence. This is shown in *Grágás*, which takes the imperative that baptisms be performed by males to extremes. In the absence of men, women could supervise the execution of this sacrament by a seven-

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[50] *Jónsbók*, 128, 130, 308.
[51] Percivall, 'Teenage Angst', 139.
[52] Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 37–9, 197–8.
[53] Percivall, 'Teenage Angst', 131; Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood', 45.
[54] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), 26–7.

year-old boy, or even lay the hand of a male baby on the baptismal candidate.[55] Similarly gendered notions are also expressed in saga depictions of children. In *Svarfdæla saga*, a female child cries when slapped, while her younger brother — perhaps again implausibly precociously — does not.[56] Likewise, in *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, boys of nine and ten are portrayed to be already hyper-vigilant against the shame of *ergi* (socio-sexual perversion), which governs the activities many adult male saga characters.[57] These episodes suggest that fortitude and bravado, indicative of the domineering spirit that characterises laudable adult masculinity, were framed positively even when expressed in childhood.[58] Altogether, these examples demonstrate that male children and even infants were not perceived as ungendered. They were always at least proto-men, a gender identity that enfranchised them in comparison not only to girls of their own age, but also to older and even adult females.

Nevertheless, male children are also consistently associated with women, which confounds their identification as fully or uncomplicatedly masculine. As Hansen notes, they often inhabit the female-coded space of the kitchen, of which the hearth-sitting of the *kolbítar* serves as an exaggerated example.[59] Indeed, *kolbítar* demonstrate associations between childhood and femininity in other ways also. Larrington recognises that they often have strong maternal attachments and, when they are finally spurred into action, it is sometimes via goading sequences that compare their childhood indolence

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[55] *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 2.215; *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók)*, 5.
[56] *Svarfdæla saga*, 155.
[57] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 325. For men, *ergi* constituted a range of traits and behaviours that were considered perverse, including cowardice and femininity, as well as more clearly sexual deviance, including (especially passive) homosexuality. See Gareth Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders* (Oxford, 2019), 18–19; Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Speculum* 68/2 (1993), 373; and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, tr. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense, 1983), 11.
[58] See also Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 51, and Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents' 155.
[59] Hansen, 'Representations of Childhood', 85–90.

directly to that of girls or daughters.[60] Furthermore, children are frequently categorised together with women by virtue of their shared incapacity and vulnerability. According to *Egils saga*, adult females and children of either sex do not count towards the number of able individuals in an attacking force, and should also be spared when on the defending side.[61] This exemption is respected even when boys' proto-masculine status is recognised. The possibility that a male infant might grow up to avenge an attack is noted in *Guðmundar saga dýra*, but his life is spared nonetheless.[62] His current immaturity precludes his identification as an appropriate target for violence.

As will be discussed further in Chapter Three, women and children share this domestic localisation and perceived vulnerability with old men. Along with a few others, these disenfranchised demographics make up what Carol Clover dubs the 'rainbow coalition', a group distinguished from the adult male population by their perceived inability.[63] Much of Clover's extension of Laqueur's 'one sex model' to the Old Norse-Icelandic context has been convincingly problematised.[64] Most significantly, as demonstrated in the baptism examples above or the frequency of slanders accusing male children of daughterly behaviour, it is clear that medieval Icelanders recognised two sexes with corresponding gendered expectations, even if the monolithic, masculine-connoted concept of *hvatleikr* seems to have influenced the gender identity of both.[65] However, Clover's 'rainbow coalition' remains a useful category, preventing scholars from overlooking the aura of femininity that surrounds the disenfranchised in medieval

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[60] Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents', 160–1. For their maternal attachment, see *Grettis saga*, 36, and *Ketils saga hængs*, 245. For gendered goading sequences, see *Göngu Hrólfs saga*, 369, and *Kroka-Refs saga*, 123–4.
[61] *Egils saga*, 52, 66. See also *Hálfs saga Hálfsrekka*, 169, and *Íslendinga saga*, 366.
[62] *Guðmundar saga dýra*, 199.
[63] Clover, 'Regardless of Sex', 381–5.
[64] See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, 1990).
[65] See also Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 12–14.

Icelandic literature. Though male children are not portrayed as literal females, their domesticity and vulnerability are certainly conceptually aligned with the feminine. Through this lens, the adolescent transition from male childhood to adulthood can be construed as a movement away from the feminine and towards the masculine.[66] As symbols of adolescent maturation, the *kolbítar* further substantiate this interpretation. Upon being accused of daughterly indolence in their childhood, they rise up not only to attain markers of general maturity, but also, simultaneously, to become men by dispelling these allegations of femininity.

The *kolbítar* Króka-Refr and Göngu-Hrólfr dispel these gendered allegations by killing a man and winning a kingdom, respectively.[67] They thus demonstrate superiority over other men, which scholars have long defended as an important component of sovereign masculinity, including in the Old Norse-Icelandic context.[68] However, confirming that this transition involved disproving one's equivalence with the feminine as much as proving one's accession to the masculine, there are also episodes in which young men signal their exit from the 'rainbow coalition' via the conquest of women. Gareth Evans and Carolyne Larrington gesture toward such logic in *Grettis saga*, in which the young protagonist's animosity toward the mare Kengála can be explained by her sex.[69] They hypothesise that Grettir's anger stems from the shame of having to follow — and tacitly submit to — a female entity.[70] However, this interpretation should be expanded to recognise that his eventual mutilation of this horse is a physical expression of his domination of the female, through which Grettir repudiates his categorisation

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[66] On this mechanism in other medieval contexts, see Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 11.
[67] *Kroka-Refs saga*, 125; *Göngu Hrólfs saga*, 369.
[68] See especially Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 50; Clover, 'Regardless of Sex', 364–80; Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 52–3. For an exaggerated example, consider the trope in which *berserkir* demand admissions of inferiority from lords and their retainers; see *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 37–8; *Svarfdœla saga*, 143–4; and *Víga-Glúms saga*, 17–19.
[69] See *Grettis saga*, 39–40.
[70] Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 113–5; Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents', 157.

alongside or beneath her in the 'rainbow coalition': he proves himself the mare's superior.

A further instructive example can be found in what initially seems an incongruous episode from *Finnboga saga*. Contrary to Gareth Evans's assessment, Finnbogi *is* like Grettir in his 'need to dominate others' and, contrary to that of Martin Arnold, Finnbogi's feats of initiatory domination do not 'invariably involv[e] trolls'.[71] During his anonymous childhood, the foundling Finnbogi performs numerous deeds that betray his chieftainly lineage. One of the most significant is his simultaneous combat with four 'griðkonur' (servant women), in which he 'felldi þær allar ok lék þær illa' (toppled them all and treated them badly).[72] Ármann Jakobsson misinterprets this episode, claiming that Finnbogi's brawling makes him 'unpopular' and obfuscates the detection of his high birth, which is 'finally' recognised by Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði.[73] However, the rest of the household actually enjoy Finnbogi's rambunctious display, and Þorgeirr recognises Finnbogi's heritage not in spite of his misogynistic violence, but because of it. Upon witnessing this mixed sex brawl, Þorgeirr notes, 'ek hefi engan höfðingjason sét jafnan þér fyrir allra hluta sakir' (I have seen no chieftain's son who is equal to you in all respects).[74] The incongruity here — presumably underlying Ármann's misreading — is that females are supposed to be inappropriate targets for martial violence. Men cannot justifiably attack women unless, as William Miller points out, they are first Othered, often as trolls.[75] However, the explicitly admirable nature of Finnbogi's violence can be explained by his youth. During Þorgeirr's interrogation of the boy, it is revealed that Finnbogi is twelve, the significance of which is clear from the discussion above.[76]

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[71] Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 120, n. 61; Arnold, 'Hvat er tröll', 130.
[72] *Finnboga saga*, 260.
[73] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Troublesome Children', 19–20.
[74] *Finnboga saga*, 260–1.
[75] Miller, 'Beating Up', 761–765.
[76] *Finnboga saga*, 260.

Though his aggression toward these women would be shameful if he were older, at this liminal age he might have been considered their peer. His wrestling can thus be interpreted as a more appropriate, distinctly gendered rite of passage. It shows Finnbogi's formerly unproven superiority to women and thus demonstrates his departure from the feminine-connoted 'rainbow coalition'.

As just noted, male characters can conquer troll-women without reproach at any time in their lives, though Arnold is correct in identifying such subjugations as common tropes for demonstrating youthful maturation. In an episode from *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra* that will be analysed below, one such skirmish provides emic terminology to discuss the concept of proving adult masculinity via the domination of women. While struggling to subdue the troll-woman Brana, Hálfdan's maturation is called into question in profoundly gendered terms. Despite him being sixteen, Brana says he is 'þó enn eigi kvensterkr' (yet still not woman-strong).[77] Like Finnbogi, however, Hálfdan eventually defeats this female, simultaneously demonstrating his maturity and masculinity by virtue of being *kvensterkr*: as strong as, and thereby finally strong enough to challenge and dominate, a woman. The adjective *kvensterkr* (woman-strong) and the noun *kvensterkleikr* (woman-strength) will henceforth be employed as bywords to indicate this concept. They denote the point at which a formerly juvenile male equals and then surpasses the strength of a female, thereby demonstrating his transition out of the female-connoted 'rainbow coalition'.[78]

Finnbogi and Hálfdan's tussles with women also contain vaguely erotic undercurrents. In *Finnboga saga*, this is taken beyond the general suggestiveness of

[77] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 334.
[78] It is important to note that the noun *kvensterkleikr* (woman-strength) does not appear in the corpus, but has been artificially derived from *kvensterkr* (woman-strong) and *sterkleikr* (strength), which do. I employ this term only to avoid the grammatical awkwardness of relying only on the emic adjective *kvensterkr* in my own prose.

mixed sex wrestling via the repeated use of the terms 'l[eika]' (to play) and 'leik[r]' (game), common euphemisms for sexual intercourse.[79] The more blatant sexuality of the *Hálfdanar saga* fight will be explored below. It is thus possible that, when such characters demonstrate that they have surpassed *kvensterkleikr*, interpretations of their superiority might not have been limited to the physical or social spheres, but also have implied sexual domination. The extension of adolescent *kvensterkleikr* into the erotic sphere will be explored in the first close reading below. Before addressing that issue, however, it is important to contextualise the sexual dimension of male maturation further.

Sexuality is an essential aspect of both popular and learned references to male adolescence throughout medieval Europe. Sources indicate expectations of increased libido, as well as either sensationalising or moralising fixations on the power of this force.[80] This emphasis on erotic development is also clear in medieval Iceland. Male children are associated with sexual inability, as intimated in the repeated use of 'sveinn' (boy) as a pejorative between adult sexual rivals in *Bjarnar saga.*[81] However, once males reach young adulthood, erotic prowess seems both an expectation and point of pride, as implied in Grettir's verse before his infamous rape of the *griðkona*. Though well past adolescence, Grettir connects his self-proclaimed 'ung[r]' (young) status with his impressive erection.[82] The progression from male childhood to adulthood therefore seems to have been associated with the development and — as Grettir soon takes to extremes — demonstration of sexual potency and dominance.

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[79] *Finnboga saga*, 260. See *Bósa saga*, 477; *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 356; and *Örvar-Odds saga*, 340.
[80] Deborah Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c. 1300-1500* (Manchester, 2006), 97–8; Fiona Harris Stoertz, 'Sex and the Medieval Adolescent', in Konrad Eisenbichler, ed., *The Premodern Teenager* (Toronto, 2002), 225–39; Michael Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age: The Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought, 1250-1350*, (Lanham, MD, 1989), 121–42.
[81] *Bjarnar saga*, 142–3, 201–2. See also Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 66, and *WONL*, 66.
[82] *Grettis saga*, 241.

Although the law codes are often explicit on matters of chronological age, scholars note that they are unusually reticent on the age at which males were considered appropriate sexual or marriageable figures.[83] Beyond the repetition of the Canon Law minimum marriage age of fourteen in *Kristinréttur Árna Þorlákssonar*, as well as an indirect implication in *Grágás* that a youth might be sixteen before receiving a bride-price from his guardian, these observations are correct.[84] However, this omission in the laws can be overcome by examining the literary sources. To begin with, considering the extreme prevalence of prodigies in sagas, it is highly significant that they depict no precocity whatsoever in the erotic sphere. Indeed, sexuality is one realm in which a boy, though prodigious in other respects, might exempt himself on account of immaturity.[85] *Víglundar saga* does describe a blossoming romance between Víglundr and Ketilríðr as children. However, this is primarily used to foreshadow their later intimacy, and the saga makes it clear that their union must remain hypothetical until they have matured. When the ten-year-old Víglundr attempts to pledge his love, Ketilríðr rebuffs him primarily due to his immaturity: his feelings might change before he is 'fulltíða' (full-grown).[86] The youngest examples of unproblematised sexual activity all occur within the 'zone of transition'. This includes the otherwise ludicrously precocious Egill and the ironically prodigious *kolbítr* Grettir, both of whose first experiences of flirtation and fondling occur at the age of fourteen.[87] Similarly, it is only once Sigrgarðr Valdimarsson turns twelve that women find him irresistible.[88] From the absence of pre-pubescent sexual precocity or desirability to foreshadow future greatness, we might glean that medieval Icelanders

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[83] Percivall, 'Teenage Angst', 143; Callow, 'Transitions', 45; *WONS*, 22.
[84] *Kristinréttur Árna Þorlákssonar*, 169; *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 1.221.
[85] *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, 313.
[86] *Víglundar saga*, 76.
[87] *Egils saga*, 121; *Grettis saga*, 51–2. See also *Fljótsdæla saga*, 397, 401; *Ketils saga hængs*, 252; and *Gunnlaugs saga*, 58–60.
[88] *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands*, 113–4.

were unsettled by the notion of male infantile sexuality.[89] On this point, Hansen argues that betrothals or marriages in childhood — which have also been demonstrated to be rarer and more controversial throughout medieval Europe than is commonly presumed — do not seem to have occurred in medieval Iceland.[90] There is one depiction of a mysterious woman seeking to win a five-year-old boy as a match for her daughter.[91] However, the timescale of her plan never explicated, and the woman's negatively connoted trollishness might also imply the inappropriateness of her intentions.

According to Percivall's survey of the *samtíðarsögur*, the youngest age at which a male character weds is fifteen and the average male marriage age is around twenty-four, findings that are generally upheld throughout the corpus.[92] Outside the *samtíðarsögur*, the three youngest grooms are twelve and thirteen; however, these are all somewhat trollish, and are found in the relatively fantastical *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar* and *Bárðar saga*.[93] All three are positively portrayed characters and/or protagonists, though, which suggests that their young marriages did not appal medieval audiences, even if they do not reflect common practice. In the main, regardless of the naturalism of the genre in question, it is common for men's first marriages to occur between their mid-teens and mid-twenties.[94] One notable example comes from *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, which might be instructive on age-based development in a similar manner to the trope of young men waiting before taking vengeance, noted above. Hrólfr is counselled to marry at the

[89] See also Ármann Jakobsson, 'Troublesome Children', 9.
[90] Hansen, 'Representations of Childhood', 61. See also Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven, 2001), 327–36.
[91] *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs*, 6.
[92] Percivall, 'Teeange Angst', 144–6. See also Philadelphia Ricketts, *High-Ranking Widows in Medieval Iceland and Yorkshire: Property, Power, Marriage, and Identity in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Boston, 2010), 138–9.
[93] *Bárðar saga*, 103; *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar*, 54–9.
[94] *Egils saga*, 49–50; *Finnboga saga*, 285–6; *Flóamanna saga*, 246–8, 252–61; *Harðar saga*, 32–45; *Laxdœla saga*, 53–66, 205–7; *Sigurðar saga turnara* 232; and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, 188–93.

age of fifteen, but he waits until eighteen before any attempt to do so.[95] This might imply a hypothetical lower limit of fifteen, as well as perhaps characterising eighteen as a more appropriate age for young men to seek brides. If these examples indicate common male marriage ages in medieval Iceland, especially if they hold true for the householding classes, they are relatively young by broader European standards.[96]

As elsewhere in Europe, Icelandic texts also characterise marriage as a pinnacle of male socio-sexual development.[97] King Gautrekr is conscious that his unmarried status is his chief flaw, and Ingimundr Þorsteinsson is counselled by Haraldr hárfagri that a wife will complete his otherwise unparalleled greatness.[98] Conversely, when *kolbítar* fail to express interest in courtship, they can face the same kind of parental abuse as if they had shown deficiency in the spheres of legislative or martial vengeance.[99] When the ages at which characters receiving such advice are specified, they also often fall within the range indicated by Percivall, between their mid-teens and mid-twenties.[100]

I suggested above that developments in different spheres might have been expected to follow a specific sequence, of which the finalisation of socio-sexual maturation in marriage is a prime example. In *Bjarnar saga*, Bjǫrn makes an oath of betrothal intended to last three years so that he can go abroad and better himself, something he states that he might not do once married.[101] This and many similar episodes indicate that formal romantic commitments like marriage — with connotations of settling

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[95] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 58–60.
[96] Henri Bresc, 'Europe: Town and Country (Thirteenth–Fifteenth Century)', in André Burguière et al., eds., and Sarah Hanbury Tenison et al., trs., *A History of the Family*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1996), 447–8.
[97] In the medieval Icelandic context, see Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents', 153, and Percivall, 'Teenage Angst', 143–6. In the broader European context, see Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, tr. Chaya Galai (London, 1990), 28.
[98] *Gautreks saga*, 29; *Vatnsdœla saga*, 33.
[99] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 17.
[100] *Jarlmanns saga*, 5–7; *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands*, 187; *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, 5–6.
[101] *Bjarnar saga*, 113–9.

down and establishing a household — were considered among the final markers of male maturation, explicitly preceded by the liberty to experiment, mature, and win renown in other spheres: often travelling, fighting, and trading.[102] However, as is clear from other examples of this three-year betrothal motif, this period of errant bachelorism was not imagined to be limited to platonic exploits. Both Kjartan Óláfsson and Hrútr Herjólfsson use this time for implicitly sexual dalliance with aristocratic women in Norway.[103] On the one hand, this motif might simply imply their irresistibility to high-status, foreign women, doubtless an appealing concept to Icelandic audiences.[104] On the other hand, it might indicate the notion — whether exciting or troubling to contemporary audiences — that male, pre-marital adolescence was an opportunity for informal sexual activity.

When considering medieval interpretations of such motifs, it is important to establish the contemporary ideological context surrounding pre- and extra-marital sexuality. To begin with, Jenny Jochens and Ruth Mazo Karras assert the sexual availability of female slaves and, following the decline of slavery during the twelfth century, servants throughout the medieval period.[105] As *Grágás* and the *samtíðarsögur* suggest, this sexual availability seems also to have applied to vagrant women and other dependants.[106] Such figures might have provided the opportunity for men to engage in informal sexual activity with little to no reproach, as shown in Grettir's rape of the *griðkona*. Grettir's act is not stated to be laudable, but neither does it seem to reduce the

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[102] *Egils saga*, 96; *Gunnlaugs saga*, 65–8; *Kormáks saga*, 203; *Njáls saga*, 41.
[103] *Laxdœla saga*, 126–8; *Njáls saga*, 11–21.
[104] See William Sayers, 'Power, Magic, and Sex: Queen Gunnhildr and the Icelanders', *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 8 (1995), 67.
[105] *WONS*, 33–5; Karras, 'Servitude and Sexuality', 290–1, 301. See also *Íslendinga saga*, 242, and *Þorgils saga skarða*, 122. On similar concepts in other European contexts, see Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Because the Other is a Poor Woman She Shall be Called His Wench: Gender, Sexuality, and Social Status in Late Medieval England', in Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack, eds., *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 2003), 216, and Bresc, 'Europe: Town and Country', 451.
[106] *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 2.48–9; *Sturlu saga*, 65, 69.

householder's respect for him.[107] Female members of these lower orders could have provided similar opportunities to adolescent boys seeking sexual experimentation, as perhaps insinuated in Finnbogi's wrestling sequence.

Moreover, the *samtíðarsögur* describe a thirteenth-century Icelandic society in which a large proportion of the male population — including married men — had *frillur* (mistresses) from other householding families.[108] Such depictions are so common, and are expressed so matter-of-factly, that Jochens suggests they represent a genuine and prevalent custom of concubinage.[109] These behaviours even seem to have been institutionalised to the extent that lower-status families purposefully installed their daughters as the *frillur* of elite males.[110] This culture of entrenched concubinage allowed adolescent men to engage in informal sexual activity and even father children before marriage, a pattern of behaviour provided for by legal stipulations and repeatedly depicted in the *samtíðarsögur*.[111] Percivall speculates that this might have been considered a period of rehearsal eroticism — socio-sexual preparation for the actualisation of their manhood in marriage — a notion found elsewhere in Europe.[112] Such pre-marital activities with women from householding families were especially viable in Iceland because, at least around the thirteenth century, neither the illegitimacy of children nor the virginal status of women seem to have been barriers to their future

[107] *Grettis saga*, 239–41.
[108] Percivall, 'Teenage Angst', 144–5; *WONS*, 31.
[109] *WONS*, 31–9.
[110] Ricketts, *High-Ranking Widows*, 164; Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Women and Sexual Politics', in Stefan Brink and Neil Price, eds., *The Viking World* (New York, 2008), 42–3. For a rare expression of such motivation, see *Svarfdæla saga*, 165.
[111] Ricketts, *High-Ranking Widows*, 137–8; Percivall, 'Teenage Angst', 144; *WONS*, 83. See *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 2.28; *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, 118–23; and *Sturlu saga*, 64–6, 72–3.
[112] Percivall, 'Teenage Angst', 145. See also Bresc, 'Europe: Town and Country', 451–6, and W. M. Aird, 'Frustrated Masculinity: The Relationship between William the Conqueror and his Eldest Son', in D. Hadley, ed., *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London, 1999), 44.

inheritance or marriage prospects.[113] Unsurprisingly, though, clerical authorities were opposed to such behaviours, and Auður Magnúsdóttir suggests that they might even have made some progress toward curbing them by the mid-thirteenth century.[114] However, both she and Percivall highlight an episode from *Íslendinga saga*, which implies the persistence of *pre*-marital affairs even after *extra*-marital mistresses had apparently become less acceptable.[115] Here, Sturla Sighvatsson's mother quietly ushers out his pre-marital *frilla* before the twenty-four-year-old returns with his new bride. Sturla had enjoyed a sexual relationship with this woman — Vigdís Gíslsdóttir — for at least five years, and the pair also had a daughter.[116]

The prevalence of such behaviours following the thirteenth century is less clear. Jenny Jochens and, more recently, Agnes Arnórsdóttir have demonstrated that pre- and extra-marital activities remained prevalent throughout the fourteenth and even fifteenth centuries.[117] However, both Auður Magnúsdóttir and Henric Bagerius suggest that, though such behaviours might have persisted as surreptitious deviances, the acceptability and certainly the institutionalised aspects of concubinage diminished by the fourteenth century. They suggest this to be a reaction to changes in the loci of power, which shifted from ties between Icelandic chieftains and their supporters to those with the crown.[118] In

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[113] Ricketts, *High-Ranking Widows*, 116–7, 164; Percivall, 'Teenage Angst', 145; Jenny Jochens, 'The Church and Sexuality in Medieval Iceland', *Journal of Medieval History* 6/4 (1980), 384.
[114] Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Kingship, Women, and Politics in *Morkinskinna*', Kim Esmark et al., eds., *Disputing Strategies in Medieval Scandinavia* (Leiden, 2013), 89. See, for example, two late twelfth-century admonishments from the Archbishop of Niðaróss; *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, 1.221, 1.262–3.
[115] Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Kingship, Women, and Politics', 89, 105; Percivall, 'Teenage Angst', 144–5.
[116] *Íslendinga saga*, 262, 300.
[117] *WONS*, 31–41, and Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity: The Christianization of Marriage in Medieval Iceland 1200-1600* (Aarhus, 2010), 120–1, 137–9, 157, 177–9.
[118] Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Kingship, Women, and Politics', 84, and Henric Bagerius, 'Romance and Violence: Aristocratic Sexuality in Late Medieval Iceland', *Mirator* 14 (2013), 83–5. See also Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Frillar och fruar. Politik och samlevnad på Island 1120-1400', Ph.D. Dissertation, Gothenburg, University of Gothenburg, 2001, 219–23.

this context, the word *frilla* took on pejorative connotations and female virginity became an increasingly important criterion for marriage.[119] Such changes would suggest that both pre- and extra-marital sex were not as broadly acceptable as they had been during the thirteenth century.

Moreover, throughout this time, including while concubinage was more assuredly entrenched, the literary treatment of such activities beyond the *samtíðarsögur* suggests that they were disdained by many *sögumenn*. Jochens and Bagerius gesture to the relative paucity of extra-marital affairs in the *Íslendingasögur* and *riddarasögur*, respectively.[120] Jochens suggests that this reveals the desire of *sögumenn* to 'whitewash' the sagas with distanced settings, in a manner that they could not — but apparently wished to — with the contemporaneous *samtíðarsögur*, a hypothesis recently repeated by Auður Magnúsdóttir.[121] Jochens further notes that, when such activities do appear in symbolic forms in these more distanced sources, they are condemned. She points to the 'illicit love visit' trope, in which young males loiter suggestively around their neighbours' kinswomen, but withhold formal marriage proposals. Jochens argues that the chagrin of these women's *giptingarmenn* (legal administrators), in addition to the often fatal punishments of the young men, imply the opposition of *sögumenn* to this pre-marital flirtation, and to the pre-martial sex it might represent.[122] Such censure is also implicit in Kjartan and Hrútr's dalliances with noblewomen. Kjartan's callous behaviour saddens Princess Ingibjörg when they part and even more forcefully wounds Guðrún, the fiancée he left behind. His infidelity also precipitates his feud with Bolli, causing his death and

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[119] Bagerius, 'Romance and Violence', 83; Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity*, 280–4; *WONL*, 124. See also *Jónsbók*, 94–6.
[120] *WONS*, 33–6; Bagerius, 'Romance and Violence', 85.
[121] Jochens, 'Illicit Love Visit', 361–4; Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Kingship, Women, and Politics', 86–7.
[122] Jochens, 'Illicit Love Visit', 365–74.

driving the remainder of *Laxdæla saga*.[123] Hrútr is somewhat more complicated. His departure also upsets his noble lover, Gunnhildr, leading her to curse his future happiness with his fiancée, Unnr.[124] As William Sayers suggests, this discord also triggers some of *Njáls saga*'s central feuds.[125] However, Gunnhildr is something of a recurring antagonist in the corpus, and Hrútr also overcomes her curse after divorcing his first wife, going on to become a socio-sexual prodigy.[126] Consequently, Heather O'Donoghue asserts that is difficult to interpret his behaviour in a wholly negative light.[127] As I will note in the second set of close readings below, this ambivalence might be explicable in light of Gunnhildr's trollishness.

Before advancing to this chapter's close textual analyses, two conclusions from this survey should be highlighted. First, owing to the gendered conceptions of male adolescence, young men seem to have been expected to adopt positions of dominance not just over other men, but also over women. This notion is sometimes expressed in depictions of boys physically conquering female figures, which can also imply — albeit obliquely — an element of erotic supremacy. This erotic element will be explored in the first close readings below. Second, the sagas contain many portrayals of young men's pre-marital sexual affairs, whether with foreign noblewomen or with Icelandic mistresses of their own social standing or lower. Pre- and extra-marital sex with the latter group is thought to have been a genuine thirteenth-century Icelandic custom, though its persistence in later centuries is less clear. Such activities are presented neutrally in the *samtíðarsögur*, though scholars suggest that the corpus as a whole condemns them.

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[123] *Laxdæla saga*, 126–228.
[124] *Njáls saga*, 21.
[125] Sayers, 'Power, Magic, and Sex', 66.
[126] On Gunnhildr's bad reputation, see William Miller, *Why Is Your Axe Bloody?: A Reading of 'Njáls saga'* (Oxford, 2014), 27. For Hrútr's later sexual prowess, eventually having twenty-six children with three wives, see *Laxdæla saga*, 48–9.
[127] Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2004), 27–34.

However, the second set of readings below suggests that they continued to be alluded to using supernatural symbols — and, indeed, portrayed positively thereby — throughout the late medieval period.

**Evening Riders…**

This chapter's first close readings examine depictions of attacks by supernatural, female 'riders'. The dangers posed by such women — variously called *kveldriður* (evening-riders), *myrkriður* (darkness-riders), *trollriður* (troll-riders), or *túnriður* (settlement-riders) — are expressed several times in the corpus, though usually ambiguously.[128] I focus on the two most detailed accounts, found in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, both of which offer commentaries relating to their characters' gendered, age-based, and sexual identities. In addition to the frequently noted pertinence of the former episode to female senescence, both of the male victims are on the cusp of adolescent maturation. These riding attacks can therefore be construed as gendered rites of passage, akin to Finnbogi's tussle with the *griðkonur*. When these boys are attacked, they are challenged to surpass *kvensterkleikr*, through which they might accede to masculine adulthood. Moreover, owing to the profound sexual valences of the riding trope, these attacks more conclusively indicate the erotic connotations of that accession. As symbols of sexual assault or male rape, they expose an ideology of masculine erotic supremacy, according to which young men are challenged to dominate women not only socially or physically, but also sexually. These episodes suggest that an adolescent

[128] *Jóns saga baptista*, 914; *Ketils saga hængs*, 260; *Hárbarðsljóð*, 392; *Gulaþingslǫg*, 308, 326; *Hávamál*, 353. As will be discussed further in Chapter Three, male figures can also be the perpetrators of supernatural ridings, and can even be implied to be 'trollrið[ur]' or 'gandr[iður]'; *Eyrbyggja saga*, 93; *Njáls saga*, 321.

male's successful demonstration of erotic violence can contribute to his adult supremacy, while his failure to do so can consign him to insignificance.[129]

The first riding episode under examination here is from *Eyrbyggja saga*, one of the few *Íslendingasögur* attested in a thirteenth-century manuscript.[130] This text's composition is conventionally dated to the mid-thirteenth century.[131] Regarding its possible shared reception alongside the later *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, it is also pertinent that *Eyrbyggja saga* was copied prolifically throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.[132] This saga's riding attack is triggered by complications arising from a love triangle between a young man named Gunnlaugr and two widows named Geirríðr and Katla, each old enough to have adolescent or adult sons of their own. Geirríðr teaches Gunnlaugr magic lessons that last late into the evening. The potentially sexual nature of this tutelage will be discussed in Chapter Four, but for now it suffices to note that it is suspected by Katla. This second widow, also versed in magic, is jealous of Gunnlaugr's interactions with Geirríðr. The boy must pass Katla's residence on his way home and she often invites him to overnight there, but he invariably declines. After one such nocturnal refusal, Gunnlaugr is 'ridden' by an anonymous assailant. Geirríðr is the initial suspect, but the saga ultimately confirms that Katla was to blame. She is executed and none of the three enters the saga again.[133]

When discussing this episode's pertinence to sex and age, scholars primarily focus on Katla, whose senescence makes her an iteration of the *anus amans* (lecherous old woman) trope. When Gunnlaugr's youth is mentioned in the scholarship, it is usually

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[129] This section builds on my Master's thesis and numerous subsequent conference papers; see Matthew Roby, 'Excess and *Ergi*: Exploring the Sexual Valences of Supernatural Episodes in the *Íslendingasögur*', M.St. Dissertation, Oxford, University of Oxford, 2015, 14–19.
[130] Forrest Scott, ed., *Eyrbyggja saga: The Vellum Tradition* (Copenhagen, 2003), 1*.
[131] McCreesh, '*Eyrbyggja saga*', 174.
[132] Scott, ed., *Eyrbyggja saga*, 130–131*.
[133] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 27–54.

in relative terms: this older woman has a penchant for young men.[134] Only Ármann Jakobsson has shown focused interest in Gunnlaugr's youth, referring to him as 'vulnerable' and 'strangely passive' in conjunction with his status as a 'teenager' or 'youngster'.[135] However, this point demands further attention, both to confirm Gunnlaugr's youth and to analyse its significance. To begin with, aspects of his initial descriptions characterise Gunnlaugr as not only juvenile but also commensurately insignificant. He is first introduced in a list of offspring: 'Synir þeira Þorbjarnar váru þeir Ketill kappi ok Gunnlaugr ok Hallsteinn. Þorbjǫrn var mikill fyrir sér ok ósvífr við sér minni menn' (Þorbjǫrn and his wife's sons were Ketill the champion and Gunnlaugr and Hallsteinn. Þorbjǫrn was overbearing and lorded it over lesser men).[136] This excerpt interposes the boy between his two brothers, one of whom also has a covetable epithet. Such an introduction hardly singles Gunnlaugr out as noteworthy. The excerpt also interposes all three brothers between details about their father. The saga's swift return to the traits of the latter after introducing his sons signals that he remains an active adult and the centre of narrative focus, even though Gunnlaugr is the victim of the attack that immediately ensues. Once Gunnlaugr *is* granted a more detailed description, his attributes corroborate his juvenility: 'Gunnlaugr, sonr Þorbjarnar digra, var námgjarn' (Gunnlaugr, Þorbjǫrn digri's son, was eager to learn).[137] The term 'námgjarn' characterises Gunnlaugr's abilities in prospective terms: rather than being wise, a prior

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[134] Forrest Scott, 'The Woman Who Knows: Female Characters of *Eyrbyggja saga*', in Sarah Anderson and Karen Swenson, eds., *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (New York, 2002), 231; Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality', 378; Jenny Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze: The Absence of the Female Body in Old Norse', in Joyce Salisbury, ed., *Sex in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1991), 24.
[135] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Two Wise Women and Their Young Apprentice: A Miscarried Magic Class', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 122 (2007), 49.
[136] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 27.
[137] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 28.

accomplishment, he is eager for wisdom, an unfulfilled potentiality. This descriptor is also associated with children elsewhere in the corpus.[138]

The sphere in which Gunnlaugr quenches this thirst for knowledge further smacks of juvenility. As Hansen and Jochens note, magical tutelage is usually depicted taking place during childhood or adolescence.[139] Several broadly admirable male protagonists, including Bárðr Snæfellsáss and Þorleifr jarlsskáld, receive such instruction during periods of fosterage before the age of eighteen, while none is portrayed learning it in adulthood.[140] Furthermore, a witch in *Örvar-Odds saga* has a specifically juvenile entourage, comprised of 'fimmtán sveina[r] ok fimmtán meyjar' (fifteen boys and fifteen maidens), who assist in her rituals.[141] This prevalent association between youth and sorcery might relate to the gendered nature of the latter, which is indicated in *Bósa saga*. Here, as in the examples above, magical tutelage is offered to two juvenile males by their foster-mother. While the elder brother is amenable, Bósi refuses, saying that he only wants to be remembered for 'karlmennsk[a]' (manliness).[142] Bósi's words demonstrate that sorcery was imagined to be contrary to masculinity, a concept borne out in sources from Iceland and throughout medieval Europe, where witches are often either women or perverse men.[143] The latter notion is expressed cogently in *Ynglinga saga*, which states

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[138] *Egils saga*, 268; *Þorláks saga*, 48. See also Ármann Jakobsson, 'Two Wise Women', 51.
[139] Hansen, 'Representations of Children', 110; Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia, 1996), 124; Jenny Jochens, 'Old Norse Magic and Gender: *Þáttr Þorvalds ens víðfǫrla*', *Scandinavian Studies* 63/3 (1991), 308.
[140] *Bárðar saga*, 103; *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds*, 216; *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, 349. Þorleifr receives further magical instruction from his biological father, though the saga specifies that this concludes before he turns nineteen.
[141] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 286–7.
[142] *Bósa saga*, 467.
[143] Attempts to quantify the sexes of saga witches have yielded inconsistent results; see Stephen Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2011), 191; Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 119–23; Gísli Pálsson, 'The Name of the Witch: Sagas, Sorcery, and Social Context', in R. Samson, ed., *Social Approaches to Viking Studies* (Glasgow, 1991), 160; and Jochens, 'Old Norse Magic', 307. However, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir is correct in asserting that female magic is portrayed in more individual sagas and often in greater detail; *WONL*, 47. On broader European trends, see Richard Kieckhefer, 'Erotic Magic in Medieval Europe', in Joyce Salisbury, ed., *Sex in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1991), 30.

that magic is tainted with 'svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmǫnnum skammlaust við at fara' (such great perversity that it is not thought that males can perform it without shame).[144] Whether or not this pertains to the genuine eroticism of pre-Christian magic — as scholars have variously suggested, the passive penetration by spirits or the use of masturbatory wands to achieve ecstatic epiphanies — it suffices to note that sorcery was imagined to be feminine and/or perverse by Icelanders of the thirteenth century and later.[145] This same section of *Ynglinga saga* also states Óðinn's mastery of magic, leading Ármann Jakobsson to assert, based on the god's patriarchal position, that he is the only male to do so with (relative) impunity.[146]

However, Ármann's interpretation does not explain the unproblematised childhood tutelage of the aforementioned protagonists in this sphere. Neither does it account for the capacity of a troupe of female *and* male children to provide magical aid to a sorceress, aid which is elsewhere sought exclusively from women.[147] In the specific case of *Eyrbyggja saga*, Ármann does contemplate whether Gunnlaugr's interest in magic taints him with *ergi*, concluding only that 'it is very hard to tell'.[148] This confusion is reminiscent of that surrounding Finnbogi's episode with the *griðkonur*, in which a juvenile male partakes in activities that would normally accrue dishonour. I suggested that this was explicable in light of Finnbogi's youth, a factor that could also be relevant here. It could be the proto-gendered state of pre-adult — perhaps specifically pre-pubescent or pre-sexual — males that permits their unproblematised participation in this

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[144] *Ynglinga saga*, 19. On *ergi*, recall n. 57 above.
[145] See Clive Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*, 2 vols. (Helsinki, 2009), 1.149, 1.164. On the possible eroticism of pre-Christian magic, see Leszek Gardela, 'Into Viking Minds: Reinterpreting the Staffs of Sorcery and Unravelling Seiðr', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 4 (2008), 58, and Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, 2 vols. (Odense, 1994–1998), 1.209.
[146] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Trollish Acts', 58. Óðinn is impugned in *Lokasenna*; see Ármann Jakobsson, 'Two Wise Women', 50, and *Lokasenna*, 413.
[147] *Eiríks saga rauða*, 207–8.
[148] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Two Wise Women', 53.

conventionally shameful sphere. This might be related to their conceptual proximity to women, which could have been interpreted to benefit and/or sanction their participation in such feminised activities. Bósi's refusal of magical tutelage dovetails with such concepts: his childhood aversion to this feminised practice represents his precocious development of what is later demonstrated to be extreme — and highly sexualised — hypermasculinity.[149] Conversely, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Gunnlaugr's willing magical tuition characterises him not merely as young, but also as having yet to develop the socio-sexual manliness that would preclude such activities. In a nebulously gendered and/or sexual sense, he remains a child.

Nevertheless, as Ármann also notes, Gunnlaugr does display some mature characteristics. These include his autonomy in selecting a tutor and his wilfulness in rejecting these widows' offers of hospitality.[150] His sexual desirability to one, if not both, of these women also corroborates his position on the cusp of manhood. Based on the conclusions presented above, this irresistibility characterises him as an adolescent, at least twelve years old. Indeed, though the saga does not specify his age, Gunnlaugr's embodiment of this amalgam of juvenile and adult traits provides an approximate sense of contemporary interpretations of his age-based identity. He was likely construed to be within the adolescent 'zone of transition', between twelve and sixteen, perhaps slightly older. This liminality might have primed audiences to expect his imminent accession to male adulthood via a rite of passage.

The ensuing riding attack provides a prime, though ultimately botched, opportunity for such initiation. The sexuality of this assault is foreshadowed in Katla's desire for the boy, implied in a conversation some days prior:

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[149] Hatred of magic might function similarly elsewhere: see *Vatnsdæla saga*, 29; *Kormáks saga*, 233, 285; and *Örvar-Odds saga*, 287–9.
[150] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Two Wise Women', 49.

> [Katla] spurði, hvárt hann ætlar þá enn í Mávahlíð — 'ok klappa um kerlingar nárann?' Gunnlaugr kvað eigi sitt ørendi — 'en svá at eins ertu ung, Katla, at eigi þarftu at bregða Geirríði elli.' Katla svarar… 'engi þykkir yðr nú kona nema Geirríðr ein, en fleiri konur kunnu sér enn nǫkkut en hon ein.'
>
> (Katla asked whether he still intends to go to Mávahlíð then — 'and stroke around the crone's groin?' Gunnlaugr said that was not his errand — 'but you are hardly so young, Katla, that you should mock Geirríðr for old age.' Katla replies… 'you don't think there is any other woman except Geirríðr alone, but more women than her alone yet know something.')[151]

As will be discussed in Chapter Four, this excerpt indicates that both widows are old enough for their sexual desirability to be questionable. For now, though, its primary significance is to establish Katla's libidinous motivations. As Forrest Scott asserts, when Katla accuses Gunnlaugr of erotic contact with Geirríðr and hints that she herself 'know[s] something' — polysemously suggesting her mastery of both sorcery *and* sexuality — it is actually her jealousy rather than disgust that looms largest.[152] Keens further notes the 'dysphemistic' nature of Katla's phrase about 'the crone's groin', which she argues indicates the perception of elderly genitalia as repulsive.[153] However, the tone of Katla's taunt is also significant to her characterisation. Its emphasis on the physicality of sexual contact — limited to body parts touching one another — might reveal the nature of this widow's desire: it is libidinous rather than amorous. The expression of her lust via this snide insult also implies the hostile nature of Katla's sexual jealousy, congruous with an erotic interpretation of her subsequent attack.

On the night of the riding, Gunnlaugr again refuses Katla's hospitality while returning home from one of Geirríðr's lessons. Significantly, Katla is already 'í rekkju sína' (in her bed) when she instructs her son Oddr to extend this invitation.[154] This detail

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[151] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 28.
[152] Scott, 'Woman Who Knows', 232.
[153] Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature', 49.
[154] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 29.

substantiates the sexual nature of her interest in the boy, as well as that of all prior invitations to overnight with her. It insinuates Katla's desire to provide hospitality to him specifically during the hours of — perhaps even from within the location primarily associated with — sleep and sexual intercourse. Moreover, since Katla is guilty of the attack that occurs later that night, this detail might imply that she performs her assault remotely from this sexually connoted space, a possibility that will be discussed below. Conversely, if she were interpreted to carry out this attack in person, it would confirm that she has already inhabited such a space, as well as sought Gunnlaugr's company from there, immediately before preying on him.

Gunnlaugr never makes it home that night. The assault itself is not described, but its nature can be gleaned from its aftermath: 'er Þorbjǫrn sá út, fann hann Gunnlaug, son sinn, fyrir durum; lá hann þar ok var vitlauss… hann var allr blóðrisa um herðarnar, en hlaupit holdit af beinunum… flutti þat Oddr Kǫtluson, at Geirríðr mun hafa riðit honum' (when Þorbjǫrn looked out, he found Gunnlaugr, his son, before the door; he lay there out of his wits… he was completely bloody around the shoulders, and the flesh was ripped off his bones… Oddr Kǫtluson reported that Geirríðr must have ridden him).[155] During the subsequent legal struggle, this attack is again described as a 'riding': Geirríðr is accused of being a 'kveldriða' (evening-rider).[156] However, as mentioned above, it is Katla who ultimately confesses.[157] Even if interpreted along purely platonic lines, the results of this tussle are significant to Gunnlaugr's adolescent status. Based on his liminal age, his combat with this woman could have been interpreted as a rite of passage, a similar opportunity to surpass *kvensterkleikr* to that so capably seized by Finnbogi.

[155] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 29.
[156] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 29.
[157] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 54.

However, as Gunnlaugr's injuries attest, he is unable to dominate his female foe. He thus reveals himself to be unready for the gendered accession to sovereign masculinity.

However, it seems unlikely that medieval responses were limited to the platonic sphere. Considering Katla's amply demonstrated erotic motivations, audiences likely construed this riding as a symbol of sexual assault or male rape. Despite the frequency of scholarly identifications of the sexuality of the episode as a whole, few have expanded this interpretation to the attack itself, and none in sufficient detail. Gísli Pálsson and, more recently, Ásdís Egilsdóttir and Catharina Raudvere all recognise Katla's villainy as erotically charged. However, they restrict their interpretations of her attack to vague circumlocutions, calling it the 'misfortune of Gunnlaugr', and the results of 'Katla's witchcraft' and 'sin kunskap' (her knowledge/magic), respectively.[158] It is difficult to ascertain whether these scholars recognise the sexual valences of this act. However, even if they do, their allusiveness is unhelpful to the proper analysis of this episode's sexual ramifications. Furthermore, even those who more assuredly recognise the erotic nature of the riding tend to express it cursorily or timidly, enclosing the modern English term 'riding' in suggestive quotation marks without further analysis.[159] The clearest sexual interpretations have been proposed by Ármann Jakobsson and Martin Arnold, who, in addition to their allusive employment or 'scare quotation' of the word 'ride', explicitly identify her as a 'succubus'.[160] Arnold notes that the riding attack is 'particularly erotic

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[158] Gísli Pálsson, 'Name of the Witch', 160–3; Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 'Masculinity and/or Peace? On *Eyrbyggja saga*'s *Máhlíðingamál*', in Ármann Jakobsson et al., eds., *Fræðinœmi: Greinar gefnar út í tilefni sjötugsafmælis Ásdísar Egilsdóttur* (Reykjavík, 2016), 109; Catharina Raudvere, *Kunskap och insikt i norrön tradition: mytologi, ritualer och trolldomsanklagelser* (Lund 2003), 94.

[159] Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature', 49; *WONS*, 75; Katherine Morris, *Sorceress or Witch? The Image of Gender in Medieval Iceland and Northern Europe* (New York, 1991), 152.

[160] Ármann Jakobsson, *Troll Inside*, 103; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Trollish Acts', 42; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Two Wise Women', 47–9. As will be noted again below, Ármann's references to *succubi*/*incubi* are somewhat ambiguous, since he elsewhere defines them with reference to solely physical, rather than specifically sexual predation; see Ármann Jakobsson, 'Vampires and

and injurious' and 'seem[s] to have the specific meaning of being ridden, as by a succubus, but may have the broader sense of being possessed'.[161] However, even these scholars implicitly rely on the robustness of modern idioms to substantiate their arguments, specifically the meaning of 'ride' as 'fuck' in modern English. This flouts the directive of Lucy Anne Keens and others that scholars must disregard personal linguistic conditioning when examining historical sexual idioms and, instead, rely solely on contemporaneous examples to verify their suggestiveness.[162] I seek to redress this oversight here by examining the euphemistic potential of riding in the Old Norse-Icelandic context.

The trope of a supernatural riding might have had numerous meanings to medieval audiences. With specific reference to Katla, Inger Boberg intimates its equestrian nature, the most basic meaning of the verb *ríða*, with this widow apparently trampling Gunnlaugr on horseback.[163] It is certainly true that the ridings of *kveldriða*-type beings can refer to their straddling of horses and other animals — most commonly wolves and sea-mammals — or objects — such as staffs — from which position they might travel long distances or attack unmounted victims.[164] However, when describing

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Watchmen: Categorizing the Mediaeval Icelandic Undead', *JEGP* 110/3 (2011), 289, 299. However, regardless of his potential over-application of such terms here and elsewhere, it seems clear that Ármann has recognised Katla's riding as a sexual attack: he calls her 'a forbidden figure of lust' who wants to 'ride [Gunnlaugr] until he is close to death'; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Two Wise Women', 53. However, Ármann has walked back this implicitly sexual reading in more recent work, specifying that the sexual riding of the *succubus* is *not* the meaning intended in *Eyrbyggja saga*; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Yfirnáttúrlegar ríðingar: Tilberinn, maran og vitsugan', *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 70/1 (2009), 116–7.

[161] Martin Arnold, 'Hvat er tröll', 129–30.

[162] Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature', 18–19. See also Glenn Davis, 'The Exeter Book Riddles and the Place of Sexual Idiom in Old English Literature', in Nicola McDonald, ed., *Medieval Obscenities* (York, 2013), 42–3.

[163] Inger Boberg, ed., *Motif Index of Early Icelandic Literature* (Copenhagen, 1966), 141.

[164] Clive Tolley, *Shamanism*, 2.132, 2.143; John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge, 2005), 152; Neil Price, *The Viking* Way*: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala, 2002), 120; Morris, *Sorceress or Witch*, 152. For examples, see *Friðþjófs saga*, 258; *Gylfaginning*, 49; *Fóstbræðra saga*, 243; and *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns*, 398.

cavalry-style charges or tramplings, Old Norse-Icelandic texts tend not to use the same terminology found in the case of Katla and Gunnlaugr. They more commonly use *troða* (tread) and *sporna* (spurn, kick), or, if they do use the verb *ríða*, it appears in a prepositional phrase: they 'ríð[a] á' (ride at/over) their victims.[165] The construction found in *Eyrbyggja saga* does not imply the relationship between a mounted attacker and his/her victim, but rather that between a mounted figure and his/her mount, as in its most common usage: 'Ek ríð hesti' (I ride a horse).[166] If Katla was interpreted to ride Gunnlaugr in this manner — with her legs astride him, moving rhythmically and, indeed, vigorously enough to inflict the wounds described above — the resulting image would be unmistakeably sexual.

References from elsewhere in the corpus demonstrate the comfort of medieval Icelandic audiences with the extension from equestrian to sexual riding. First, in a general sense, horses are the animals most commonly used in figurative references to sexuality, including in taunts using mares to imply shameful passivity, as well as in boasts equating stallions with sexual prowess.[167] Second, with specific reference to the verb *ríða*, the flytings in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *Völsunga saga* contain insults that rely on the imagery of riding one's enemies as beasts of burden to imply domination: 'hafa ek þér… riðit / svangri und sǫðli' (I have… ridden you / hungry under [my] saddle) and 'Hvárt mantu þat, er þú vart merrin… ok reið ek þér?' (Do you remember when you were a mare… and I rode you?).[168] Considering the sexual tenor of these flytings, it seems likely that these references to equestrian-style riding were understood as euphemisms for sexual assault. The rider is figured as the dominant phallic aggressor,

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[165] *Hamðismál*, 407; *Völsunga saga*, 88; *Njáls saga*, 134, 136.
[166] *Njáls saga*, 321.
[167] Alison Finlay, 'Monstrous Allegations: An Exchange of *ýki* in *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*', *Alvíssmál* 10 (2001), 25–7; Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality', 369. See *Kormáks saga*, 277–8; *Ǫlkofra þáttr*, 91; and *Runeinnskrifter fra Bryggen*, B628.
[168] *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, 255; *Völsunga saga*, 22.

while his steed plays the subjugated, implicitly penetrated role. One of Bögu-Bósi's infamous sex scenes decisively corroborates the erotic significance of this verb. Here, the *sögumaðr* constructs an extended equine metaphor, in which Bósi's penis penetrating a woman's vagina is figured as a horse drinking at a spring. However, following their coitus, she declares that 'hún aldri hafa riðit hæggengara fola en þessum' (she has never ridden a steadier foal than this).[169] These examples indicate that the use of the verb *ríða* to mean 'fuck', a valence so ubiquitous in modern Icelandic that equestrianism must be distinguished via circumlocutions like 'fara ríðandi', was also present in Old Norse-Icelandic. Indeed, Keens has already made this point in reference to *Bósa saga*, though — ignoring her own edict — she does not employ it to substantiate her interpretation of Katla's sexual riding.[170] I would only extend Keens's argument to suggest that this line from *Bósa saga* might represent an accidental slippage of metaphorical logic: from penis as horse's head and vagina as spring, to penis (or Bósi) as beast of burden and woman as rider. Hence, it is tempting to identify the former as a creative conceit and the latter as more familiar ground for the *sögumaðr*, implying its greater prevalence as a euphemism.

Supernatural ridings had further meanings that could have influenced medieval interpretations of Katla's attack. First, they do not always involve the physical presence of the riders, instead portraying these figures sending out some ethereal aspect of themselves while they remain asleep or in a trance.[171] This could have facilitated interpretations of Katla riding Gunnlaugr remotely from her (sexually connoted) bed.[172] Furthermore, supernatural ridings can also entail magical transformations, in which the

[169] *Bósa saga*, 486.
[170] Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature', 70, 49.
[171] Price, *Viking Way*, 121. For example, see *Fóstbræðra saga*, 243, and *Jóns saga baptista*, 914.
[172] See Philip Lavender, 'Whatever Happened to *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*? Origin, Transmission and Reception of a *Fornaldarsaga*', Ph.D. Dissertation, Copenhagen, University of Copenhagen, 2014, 146–7.

rider — whether physically or in ethereal form — assumes an animal's shape.[173] In Katla's case, it is further possible that audiences imagined a bestial transformation not of the riding woman, but of the ridden boy. In the legal struggles following the attack, Katla transforms her son Oddr into a variety of objects and animals to prevent his capture.[174] Hence, it is possible that interpretations of her riding attack were retrospectively influenced to imagine Gunnlaugr transformed into a literal beast of burden, such as a horse, and Katla violently riding him. However, whether audiences interpreted such a transformation, or whether they interpreted Katla as attacking Gunnlaugr in a physical or ethereal form, it seems quite likely that this riding attack could have been linguistically and logistically construed as a symbolic male rape. Gunnlaugr's wounds emphasise the violent nature of her attack, with his bloody shoulders in particular implying Katla's penetrative grip on the boy as she throttled him. In keeping with a sexual reading of the riding, these wounds might have been imagined to have been inflicted as she straddled him from behind, or as she leapt on top of him from the front. Central to this interpretation is that Katla seizes the active, dominant, and physically superior position in this exchange, which is a profound reversal of the expected, gendered power dynamics in sexual interactions.[175] This additional layer of meaning transforms Gunnlaugr's martial rite of passage into a sexual one: a challenge to wrest erotic domination away from his rapist, but one that he ultimately fails.

Katla's attack has a profound impact on Gunnlaugr, including in specific relation to his accession to male adulthood. On a basic level, his wounds confine him to bed for a

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[173] Tolley, *Shamanism*, 2.143; Price, *Viking Way*, 120. For example, see *Kormáks saga*, 265–6.
[174] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 51–3.
[175] According to the Old Norse-Icelandic linguistic evidence, men were supposed to be physically active and dominant during sex, an expectation corroborated in the broader medieval context by the church's prohibition against non-missionary sex. See *WONS*, 70, 74, and Bagerius, 'Romance and Violence', 89.

time.[176] His budding autonomy, far from coming to fruition, is thus physically impeded. The prosecution of his case — a possible opportunity for Gunnlaugr to demonstrate maturity — is then taken up by his father, Þorbjǫrn digri, and supported by Snorri goði.[177] Audiences might have assumed that Gunnlaugr's absence at his own trial is caused by his injuries. However, the saga specifies that he is only incapacitated 'allan vetrinn' (all winter), while the court proceedings occur the following spring.[178] Hence, Þorbjǫrn's adoption of the plaintiff role has greater implications. It re-emphasises Gunnlaugr's status as a minor, implying his need for proxy representation and characterising Þorbjǫrn — Gunnlaugr's legal administrator — as the primary grievant in this case. Of course, depending on the audience's assumptions of his precise age, Gunnlaugr might never have been expected to play a significant role in these proceedings. In addition to the age-based legal restrictions noted in *Grágás* and *Jónsbók*, *Eyrbyggja saga* itself states that males under sixteen are sub-optimal candidates for legislative activity.[179] Moreover, even if Gunnlaugr was interpreted to be over sixteen, and therefore a hypothetically capable prosecutor, the continued competence of his father might justify his inaction, in the terms outlined by Percivall above.[180]

However, other features of this episode emphasise Gunnlaugr's delayed accession to masculine adulthood, especially the roles of Snorri goði and Geirríðr as foils. Ármann Jakobsson describes Gunnlaugr as 'the nephew of the wise and famous chieftain, Snorri goði', which misrepresents their respective ages.[181] Snorri is indeed brother-in-law to Þorbjǫrn digri. However, Þorbjǫrn is considerably older than Snorri, with his three

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[176] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 29.
[177] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 29–30.
[178] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 29.
[179] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 104.
[180] See n. 51 above.
[181] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Two Wise Women', 45.

children — including Gunnlaugr — actually fathered during a previous marriage.[182] In fact, Snorri has most recently been specified to be fourteen, and it is unlikely that he was considered more than a few years older during these proceedings: he is neither wise nor famous yet.[183] Snorri and Gunnlaugr's similar ages — both within the adolescent 'zone of transition' — make their respective roles in this prosecution reminiscent of the trope identified by Judith Jesch, in which one youth's exceptional precocity is highlighted by contrast to another, who serves as a benchmark of mediocrity.[184] Moreover, since the defendant in this case, Geirríðr, is a woman, she too is represented by a proxy: her brother Arnkell.[185] This detail emphasises the gendered connotations of Gunnlaugr's deficiency: his greater conceptual proximity to an old widow than to his own prodigious peer highlights his failure to depart the feminised 'rainbow coalition'.

When Gunnlaugr's legal disenfranchisement is interpreted in light of his failed rite of passage, the saga's sexual commentary comes to the fore. Considering the likelihood that Katla's riding was interpreted as a sexual assault that Gunnlaugr was powerless to overcome, the episode suggests the importance of a young man's demonstration of sexual domination over women — a particularly erotic form of the *kvensterkleikr* demonstrated by Finnbogi — to his maturation. Since Gunnlaugr cannot prove his ability to subjugate this woman, not only physically but also symbolically sexually, he remains relegated to ambiguously feminised youth. His unremarkable nature following this botched rite of passage is confirmed in his exclusion from the remainder of the saga. While Snorri becomes a formidable chieftain, Gunnlaugr is never mentioned again.

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[182] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 27.
[183] *Eyrbyggja saga*, xxxiv, 22.
[184] See n. 19 above.
[185] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 30.

Such an ideology, implying at least on an imaginative level that the violent sexual domination of women is a laudable component of masculine maturation, is corroborated by another exceptionally detailed riding episode from *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*. As Philip Lavender notes, this saga has received little prior attention, partially due to its textual history.[186] *Illuga saga* is first attested in a sixteenth-century manuscript — AM 123 8vo — and so could be of very late or even post-medieval composition.[187] However, there is a ballad tradition about Illugi Gríðarfóstri found throughout continental and insular Scandinavia, one Danish example of which is attested no later than 1570.[188] Philip Lavender and Davíð Erlingsson note that the saga and ballads might derive from common source material.[189] The wide generic and geographical spread of this material by the sixteenth century might suggest the existence of what Lavender calls 'proto-Illugi narratives' in Iceland and/or continental Scandinavia at a considerably earlier point. However, Davíð actually favours a second hypothesis: *Illuga saga* might derive from the ballads themselves, an assumption that offers less support for the earlier existence of such narratives in Iceland.[190] Moreover, the riding episode does not feature in the ballads, leading Davíð to suggest that it is a later addition by the saga composer.[191] Hence, it might not necessarily pre-date AM 123 8vo at all. In fact, this episode does not even appear in that manuscript in its currently defective state, though Lavender assures us that it was originally present, now lost in a lacuna.[192]

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[186] Philip Lavender, '"Flagð undir fögru skinni": The Tricky Transmission of Trollwives in *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*', in Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen, eds., *Supernatural Encounters in Old Norse Literature and Tradition* (Turnhout, 2018), 329–40.
[187] Lavender, 'Flagð undir fögru skinni', 240; Jesch, '*Illuga saga*', 322.
[188] Lavender, 'Whatever Happened', 12.
[189] Philip Lavender, ed. and tr., *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra: The Saga of Illugi Gríður's Foster-Son* (London, 2015), xiii; Davíð Erlingsson, 'Illuga saga og Illuga dans', *Gripla* 1 (1975), 41.
[190] Davíð Erlingsson, 'Illuga saga', 41; Lavender, ed., *Illuga saga*, xiii–xiv.
[191] Davíð Erlingsson, 'Illuga saga', 11.
[192] Lavender, 'Whatever Happened', 113.

Regardless of its potentially late pedigree, Lavender demands the recognition of *Illuga saga*'s 'medieval origins', since it draws from 'traditions with their origins extending much further back'.[193] Lavender points to the truth-telling challenge, also found in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*.[194] For my purposes, however, it is more significant that *Illuga saga* describes an attack by a 'kvöldriða', since the composition and interpretation of this episode might have been informed by, and have gone on to inform responses to, similar depictions in earlier sources, including the *kveldriða* in *Eyrbyggja saga*.[195] The riding in *Illuga saga* is more clearly suggestive, and also pertains more explicitly to Illugi's maturation. These features support the notion that *sögumenn* and audiences at least as early as the sixteenth century recognised the eroticism and initiatory potential of the supernatural riding trope, perhaps along similar lines to those proposed above. Furthermore, though *Illuga saga* obviously cannot have influenced interpretations of *Eyrbyggja saga* before its own composition, the two episodes could have been compared by late medieval or early modern audiences after this point. Their explorations of age-based and sexual issues might have substantiated and interacted with one another, constructing what appears to be a consistent commentary on the value of erotic dominance to male adolescent development. Finally, irrespective of such shared reception, it is significant that the two episodes offer a similar perspective on the importance of aggressive sexuality to male adolescent supremacy. This might indicate the existence of such ideologies among *sögumenn* and audiences throughout the late Middle Ages.

To begin with, *Illuga saga*'s relevance to adolescence is more overt than that of *Eyrbyggja saga*, both in the initial characterisation of its protagonist as juvenile and in

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[193] Lavender, ed. and tr., *Illuga saga*, xi–xii.
[194] Lavender, ed. and tr., *Illuga saga*, xii. See *Gesta Danorum*, 245.
[195] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 353.

the direct impact of the riding on this status. Illugi's immaturity is stated explicitly by his mother, Hildr, when his foster-brother requests that the pair embark on their first raid: 'Hún segir son sinn ungan vera ok eigi í hernað fara mega. "Er hann ok ekki reyndr"' (She says that her son is young and may not go raiding. 'And he is untested').[196] The notion that Illugi inhabits the adolescent 'zone of transition', rather than being unready for raiding due to his more literal infancy or childhood, is substantiated in numerous respects. First, Illugi's foster-brother Sigurðr has already been deemed mature enough for this expedition by his father, the king.[197] Though neither their individual nor relative ages are specified, it seems likely based on their relationship — as 'leiksveina[r]' (boyhood playmates) and now 'stallbræð[ur]' (sworn brothers) — that these youths were interpreted to be of alike age.[198] Depictions of similar relationships from throughout the corpus also indicate the comparable ages and maturity levels of such foster-brothers.[199] Moreover, Illugi is also described as marginally superior to Sigurðr, being the only one capable of defeating the prince in games.[200] This presumably compelled audiences to construe him as the more 'reyndr' (tested/experienced), if not necessarily the elder, of the two. Second, other characters *do* judge Illugi to be sufficiently mature for this seaborne rite of passage. This includes Sigurðr, as his request to Hildr demonstrates, as well as the king himself. Though King Hringr attempts to exclude Illugi due to his wrongful mistrust of the boy, the fact that he raises the subject of Illugi's attendance without prompting implies his tacit assumption that the boy is a plausible candidate.[201] The notion that Illugi is considered mature by some but not by others affirms his liminal status: he is on the cusp of, but has not yet conclusively demonstrated, adolescent maturation.

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[196] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 352.
[197] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 352.
[198] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 351–2.
[199] *Bósa* saga, 467; *Laxdæla saga*, 75–7; *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, 203.
[200] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 351.
[201] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 352.

Hildr's statement that Illugi is 'untested' proves ominous. She immediately devises a plan to test her son's maturity, involving Sunnlöð, her 'ambátt' (slave-woman). This woman's introduction foreshadows the nature of this trial not only as a riding attack, but also as ambiguously erotic: 'Hún var fjölkunnug ok in mesta kvöldriða. Hún hafði margan mann illa leikit' (She was widely knowledgeable [i.e. magical] and the greatest evening rider. She had treated many people badly).[202] This short passage contains at least two common sexual euphemisms, the mutual proximity of which increases the likelihood of their suggestive interpretation.[203] The potentially erotic connotations of 'kvöldriða' outlined above, which might already have implied her to be a sexual rider of men, bolster the euphemistic potential of the next sentence. The verb 'leik[a]' can mean 'to deal with' and 'to play', but also 'to have sex', and its grammatical object here is 'margan mann'.[204] Though *maðr* can refer to a person of either sex, when it is not qualified as female or gender-neutral by context or an adjoining term, it is — to use Butler's phrase — 'always-already-masculine'.[205] Hence, this passage could indicate that Sunnlöð is something of a *femme fatale*, having sexually 'played' or even literally 'fucked' many men in a wicked way. If this detail was interpreted to qualify her status as a 'kvöldriða', it might corroborate the notion that she has ridden many such men in the manner I suggested of Katla.

Sunnlöð's status as a sexual predator is soon confirmed. Hildr sends Illugi on a fool's errand, on which he is ambushed: 'Þá var myrkt af nótt… var hlaupit á bak honum svá hart, at hælarnir kómu framan á bringuna. Þetta kvikendi hafði vönd í hendi, ok barði Illuga með. Hér var komin Sunnlöð' (It was the dark of the night then… something leapt

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[202] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 353.
[203] A third possible euphemism is the adjective *kunnigr* (knowledgeable), appearing in terms like *fjölkunnigr* and *margkunnigr* (diversely or abundantly knowledgeable), which platonically describes magical ability, but could also imply sexual expertise; see n. 152 above.
[204] On the euphemistic nature of this verb, including in this self-same saga, see n. 79 above.
[205] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25. See also *Cleasby-Vigfússon*, 407.

onto his back so hard, that its heels came around to the front of his chest. That creature had a wand in hand, and struck Illugi with it. Sunnlöð had come).[206] Corroborating her identification as a *kvöldriða*, Illugi later describes this attack as a riding: 'hún reið mér' (she rode me).[207] Lavender has already noted this episode's 'unmistakeable' eroticism.[208] However, its specific details warrant closer attention, both to elucidate the sexual commentary presented in *Illuga saga* itself and — as a text drawing from earlier traditions — to speculate on the *sögumaðr*'s construal and re-presentation of this trope. To begin with, as was also the case with Katla, the attack occurs at night, in which context a tussle between individuals of the opposite sex might solicit erotic interpretations. Next, the respective positions of these foes are highly suggestive. Sunnlöð approaches her victim from behind and leaps bodily onto him. Her legs encircle Illugi, explicitly meeting at his chest. As Lavender notes, this shares none of the logistical mystery of the *Eyrbyggja saga* attack: it is an unambiguous depiction of interpersonal riding.[209] This demonstrates how at least some Icelanders around the sixteenth century, and possibly before, visualised the attack of a *kveldriða*. Its exceptionally clear description precludes interpretations of Sunnlöð's remote attack from another location, her riding of another animal or object over Illugi, or her transformation of either herself or the boy into bestial form. It also precludes interpretations of the woman's literal penetrative male rape, since she mounts him from behind rather than the front. However, it far from diminishes symbolically sexual readings. Sunnlöð rides Illugi in an equestrian manner, straddling the boy as she would a beast of burden, either in a piggy-back or with Illugi on all-fours. On a platonic level, both their relative physical positions and the conceptual relationship between horse and rider imply a power dynamic

[206] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 353.
[207] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 353.
[208] Lavender, ed., *Illuga saga*, xvii.
[209] Lavender, 'Whatever Happened', 146–7.

in which Sunnlöð is dominant, a status that her whipping implies to be enforced with violence. Furthermore, as noted above, such interpersonal, equestrian-style riding has an unmistakeable logistical semblance to sexual riding — corroborated by their shared, repetitive rocking motions and the close contact with the rider's inner thighs — as well as a demonstrable linguistic suggestiveness in the Old Norse-Icelandic context. If audiences attended to the sexual meaning of this event, the combination of its violent nature and the woman's dominant position would surely have led them to interpret Sunnlöð's riding not merely as a symbolic sex act, but a sexual assault.

However, unlike that of the unfortunate Gunnlaugr, Illugi's riding is only an attempted rape. This young man wrests dominance from his female assailant in highly significant terms: 'Hann keyrir flagðit niðr við steininn svá hart, at hryggrinn brotnar, ok lét hún svá líf sitt' (He drives the ogre down against the stone so hard that her back breaks, and thus she lost her life).[210] In addition to noting the general sexual symbolism of male-female wrestling, John McKinnell recognises the particular significance of forcing opponents onto their backs. With reference to *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar*, in which a prostrate troll-woman euphemistically invites her foe to violate her, McKinnell argues that this is a position of not only martial but also symbolically sexual submission.[211] The prevalence of this connotation is substantiated elsewhere in the corpus.[212] According to this logic, Illugi's method of dispatching Sunnlöð — apparently propelling himself backwards or downwards against a stone in a manner that emphasises that Sunnlöð ends up on her back — insinuates his acquisition of erotic dominance over the woman. Though his body is in a literally reversed position to that during penetrative intercourse,

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[210] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 353.
[211] John McKinnell, 'The Fantasy Giantess: Brana in *Hálfdanar saga Brönufostra*', in Agneta Ney et al., eds., *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og Virkelighed* (Copenhagen, 2009), 209; McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 178. See *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar*, 50.
[212] *Njáls saga*, 116; *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 331. See also Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*', *Viator* 38/1 (2007), 193.

Illugi's manoeuvre thrusts the lower portion of his torso into the open legs of his assailant. He thus reciprocates some of the sexually connoted initiative she demonstrated by flinging her splayed limbs at him in the first place. Considering the highly suggestive nature of her attack, this would imply that Illugi has turned the tables in a specifically erotic manner: he begins in a position of sexual passivity and submission, but ultimately attains one of activeness and dominance, as befits a sovereign, adult male.

Other valences of the verb used to describe this action — *keyra* (to drive) — contribute to its sexual significance. *Keyra* can imply penetration, as in the driving of pitons into stone or, more pertinently, the insertion of a dildo into a woman's vagina.[213] If audiences attended to such meanings, this verb might have contributed to the erotic significance of Illugi's victory, suggesting that it constitutes his symbolic penetration of the woman. More compellingly, the primary meaning of *keyra* is to ride a horse aggressively.[214] The episode's established equestrian imagery increases the likelihood that audiences recognised this valence, and also augments its significance. From the outset, Sunnlöð inhabits the dominant role of rider and Illugi that of her passive steed, who is even said to carry the woman a long way before reaching the stone.[215] However, Illugi's position as the grammatical subject of *keyra* reverses these roles, figuring him as the ultimate rider of Sunnlöð in both the equestrian and symbolically sexual terms of this attack.

This shift from sexually connoted passiveness to domination explicitly impacts Illugi's maturation. As in the case of Finnbogi, whose defeat of the *griðkonur* betrays his chieftainly heritage to Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði, it is Illugi's suggestive conquest of this woman that qualifies him as mature enough to go raiding in his mother's eyes.[216] Hence,

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[213] *Grettis saga*, 214; *Völsa þáttr*, 58.
[214] *Njáls saga*, 97.
[215] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 353.
[216] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 353.

this episode presents a similar incongruity to that which I argue wrongfooted Ármann Jakobsson in relation to *Finnboga saga*: Illugi uses the conquest of a woman — a conventionally inappropriate victim — to bolster his budding masculine capital. Here, the incongruity ensnares Philip Lavender, as demonstrated in his contradictory analyses of the episode. To begin with, he suggests that Illugi's victory demonstrates his readiness for warfare more than his prior accomplishments. The latter were against 'young men who are his peers', whom Lavender bizarrely intimates to be less worthy opponents than this slave-woman.[217] Elsewhere, however, he notes that Illugi's sullenness upon returning home might arise from the 'ignominy' of having fought — and initially been submissive to — a female.[218]

As above, I propose that Illugi's admirable conquest of this female can be understood with reference to his age. Of course, Sunnlöð is trollish, explicitly supernatural and dehumanised by the use of terms like 'kvikendi' (creature) and 'flagð' (ogre). Hence, her defeat by a man of any age might be partially justified via her supernatural Otherness, according to the terms presented by Arnold and Miller above.[219] However, it is also important to note that Illugi is explicitly 'ung[r]' and 'ekki reyndr' before this fight, age-based disenfranchisements that ambiguously align him with the juvenile, the elderly, and — most importantly — the feminine. Therefore, at the time of the attack, Sunnlöð is perhaps a reasonable opponent for Illugi by virtue of their shared placement within the 'rainbow coalition'. Illugi may thus use his victory against this otherwise shameful opponent to demonstrate that he has surpassed *kvensterkleikr*, proving that he is no longer her peer after all and facilitating his accession to masculine sovereignty. As I argued to be implicit in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the fact that this concept is

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[217] Lavender, *Illuga saga*, xvii–xviii.
[218] Lavender, 'Whatever Happened', 147.
[219] See ns. 71 and 75 above.

expressed in a distinctly sexual manner expands the commentary presented in *Finnboga saga*. Illugi's symbolic sexual abuse of Sunnlöð suggests that young men could prove their adult maturity by demonstrating not only their physical or social superiority to women, but also their capacity for violent, sexual domination.

The victims in these riding episodes are both adolescents. The failure of Gunnlaugr and success of Illugi in dominating their symbolic rapists are implied to cause their consignment to insignificance and accession to masculine heroism, respectively. In each case, the dynamics of sexual aggression and domination are presented more clearly than is common in naturalistic depictions, such as that of Finnbogi and the *griðkonur*. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, the trollish nature of the rider might be said to insulate Gunnlaugr — as well as the audience — from the unsettling concept of a man being subject to the violent erotic dominance of a human woman. In *Illuga saga*, the same might be said to exonerate Illugi from the shame that might yet be accrued for his act of fatal sexual violence, had it been perpetrated against an ordinary female. However, the commentary presented through these symbolic, supernatural portrayals is clear. The violent, sexual domination of women could be imaginatively figured as contributory to male maturation.

It is conceivable that this notion reflects specific sexual ideologies or practices in medieval Icelandic society. For example, such episodes might relate to the supposedly ubiquitous availability of the female slave and — more pertinent for the contexts of these episodes' composition and reception — servant populations, whether for consensual sexual contact or even for sexual assault and rape.[220] This seems especially plausible in *Illuga saga*, in which the female victim is literally an *ambátt*.[221] Lavender intimates that Illugi's mother's sacrifice of her slave-woman for the sake of proving her son's maturity

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[220] See ns. 105–7 above.
[221] On the presumed extension of references to slaves to the servant classes following the decline of slavery, see Karras, *Slavery and Society*, 135.

might have amused medieval audiences, but her flagrant disregard for the physical and sexual wellbeing of this woman surely has more unsettling ramifications.[222] It might reflect this society's implicit classification of such figures as usable or even disposable individuals for the gratification of their male betters and, in this episode in particular, for the latter's youthful, sexual experimentation. If this link were recognised by medieval audiences, it is further possible that these episodes dialogically reinforced such notions among readers and listeners, whether male or female, of householding or servant status. More broadly, these ridings reveal the perceived importance of violent sexual domination of women in general — perhaps as an imagined capacity, if not an enacted custom — to the development of laudable adult masculinity. Such notions could have influenced the behaviours of young men in countless ways, subtle and overt. This might include men's implicit categorisation of women as entities of obligatory erotic use, abuse, and domination, as well as their adoption of stances of physical, social, and sexual authority in their interactions with women, erotic and otherwise. Based on the respective textual histories of these sagas, it is possible that they indicate the endurance of such ideologies from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century.

*Illuga saga* maintains this emphasis throughout, implying the continued importance of sexual mastery to the construction of adult masculinity. While voyaging with Sigurðr, Illugi finds himself in a situation where he must simultaneously maintain both his martial courage *and* his erection. He is confronted by the troll-women Gríðr, who offers him the sexual use of her daughter while she repeatedly threatens him with a knife. In order to succeed, Illugi must face her threats and return unfazed to his erotic bliss three times. Unbeknownst to him, Illugi's success in this sexually significant trial breaks a curse that has been placed on Gríðr, allowing her to reveal her family's royal —

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[222] Lavender, 'Whatever Happened', 147.

and entirely non-trollish — lineage. Following Gríðr's return to human shape, Sigurðr and Illugi marry mother and daughter, respectively, bringing the saga to its joyous conclusion.[223] Doubtless, such a marriage sequence could not have occurred without Gríðr's revelation. Illugi would presumably have enjoyed the carnal pleasures offered by this ostensibly troll-descended, albeit beautiful woman, before marrying a more suitable human bride. Four instructive expressions of this pattern of adolescent, pre-marital sexual experimentation with trolls, followed by more appropriate marriages, are analysed in the next close readings.

**… and Temporary Troll Lovers**

I here analyse a prevalent motif of sex with trolls, specifically as it appears in *Örvar-Odds saga*, *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra* and *Ketils saga hængs*. In each of these sagas, the adolescent protagonist leaves his human community and has a sexual relationship with a troll-woman, before abandoning her and, usually immediately, returning to marry a human bride. Though he develops a dominant sexual role during the intercourse itself, the protagonist fails to show initiative at numerous crucial points. Fascinatingly, it is members of the troll family, including the 'temporary troll lover' herself, who compensate for this volitional deficiency. They facilitate or even encourage the protagonist's sexual use and — in the former three texts — abandonment of his troll mistress, exonerating him from the potentially negative social and emotional consequences of these actions. Contrary to the majority of naturalistic depictions of pre-marital affairs, these sagas thus present such activities as acceptable and innocuous forms of initiation. However, *Ketils saga hængs* paints a significantly different picture. In its

[223] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 355–60.

portrayal of the emotional impact of pre-marital affairs on both partners, as well as its refusal to exonerate Ketill for his profligate behaviour, this saga questions the efficacy and equitability of this model as an avenue toward male sexual maturation.[224]

The composition of each of these sagas has been speculated to be late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century.[225] However, only *Örvar-Odds saga* is extant in a manuscript from this period.[226] Moreover, though this does not preclude the trope's prior existence in this or another saga, Oddr's 'temporary troll lover' episode does not appear in this version.[227] *Kjalnesinga saga* was also attested in the late fourteenth century, though in the now lost *Vatnshyrna* codex.[228] The first extant attestations of the trope in these sagas are actually all in fifteenth-century manuscripts, including two codices — AM 343 a 4to and AM 471 4to — which contain two and three of these four sagas, respectively. The inclusion of this story pattern in texts found together in these and other manuscripts increases the likelihood of their direct comparison by medieval audiences.[229] This intertextual potential is corroborated further by some highly specific details common to these iterations of the trope, most notably the fate of the offspring of these trollish trysts. This detail — that girls must stay with their troll-mothers while boys can be sent to their fathers at an appointed time — is consistent across all four sagas and is even expressed in

[224] In addition to having been presented at numerous conferences, the substance of this section also appears in Matthew Roby, 'The Licit Love Visit: Masculine Sexual Maturation and the "Temporary Troll Lover" Trope', in Gareth Evans and Jessica Hancock, eds., *Old Norse Masculinities* (Woodbridge, forthcoming).
[225] Marlene Ciklamini, '*Ketils saga hængs*', in *MSAE*, 353; Tommy Danielsson, '*Kjalnesinga saga*', in *MSAE*, 355; Peter Jorgensen, '*Hálfdanar saga Brǫnufóstra*', in *MSAE*, 260; and Riti Kroesen, '*Ǫrvar-Odds saga*', in *MSAE*, 744.
[226] Kroesen, '*Ǫrvar-Odds saga*', 744.
[227] Martin Arnold, '"Við þik sættumsk ek aldri": *Örvar-Odds saga* and the Meanings of Ögmundr Eyþjófsbani', in Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay, eds., *Making History: Essays on the fornaldarsögur* (London, 2010), 93.
[228] John McKinnell, '*Vatnshyrna*', in *MSAE*, 689.
[229] *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Ketils saga* are both part of the *Hrafnistusögur* series, and so are frequently bound together.

an unmistakable verbal formula in three.[230] I have limited my close readings to these four instances for the sake of brevity, choosing them due to this exceptional intertextual potential, which might have spurred audiences to recognise them as pertaining to, and offering diverse perspectives on, the same sexual themes. However, troll-women who willingly serve as temporary mistresses appear elsewhere in the corpus.[231]

The broader motif of sex with troll-women has been studied most influentially by John McKinnell. In *Meeting the Other*, McKinnell attempts to formulate one cogent interpretation for an overambitious range of medieval Scandinavian examples. He identifies all such episodes as iterations of an Óðinnic pattern, in which the god — or his heroic stand-in — deliberately employs sex with a supernatural woman to acquire an object or skill. Afterwards, he actively abandons her to escape the chaotic natural forces, or the irrational female psyche, that she apparently represents.[232] However, though such readings work well for certain Eddic episodes, grafting them onto all similar narratives in the corpus is problematic.[233] Features of some of the texts he identifies, including the four under scrutiny here, fundamentally contradict aspects of McKinnell's interpretation. First, there is the question of initiative: these heroes never instigate their sexual encounters with, nor even always their abandonments of, their 'temporary troll lovers'. The protagonists are therefore relatively passive, which complicates their status as determined or experienced womanisers. Second, the notion that the male 'must abandon' his supernatural lover to escape female influences is further problematic, since these protagonists afterwards — usually immediately — marry human women.[234] Therefore, in at least these four texts, the protagonist's departure cannot signify his obligatory escape

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[230] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 336; *Kjalnesinga saga*, 34; *Örvar-Odds saga*, 341.
[231] See, for example, *Grettis saga*, 200, 205, and *Valdimars saga*, 57–77. Though the sexual element is not as explicit, see also *Gunnars saga keldugnúpsfífls*, 361–3.
[232] McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 172–80.
[233] See, for example, the theft of the mead of poetry: *Skáldskaparmál*, 4–5.
[234] McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 179.

from some monolithic feminine psyche. Rather, these sagas distinguish between two different types of female partner: the first (the troll) with whom the protagonist enjoys a consensual but ultimately temporary sexual relationship, and the second (the human) who becomes his permanent bride.

Admittedly, with reference only to *Hálfdanar saga*, McKinnell does acknowledge these curious elements. Specifically, he recognises Brana's baffling self-demotion to a platonic helper role, after which she provides assistance to the hapless protagonist, including in the matter of her own replacement by his human wife. McKinnell suggests that these features result from the elision of the mythic Óðinnic narrative pattern with another: Þórr's 'helpful giantess' pattern.[235] He thus offers a stemmatic explanation for how these incongruous elements might have originally coalesced. However, he does not account for how this apparently amalgamated trope was interpreted by late medieval Icelanders. Even if McKinnell's stemmatic hypothesis is correct, such audiences might not have recognised or allowed their interpretations to be guided by these narratives' Eddic origins, instead seeking cues from the sagas themselves. In each of these texts, one particularly likely cue is the protagonist's youth. This trait might have been construed to account not only for his initial lack of initiative, but also for the actions of his 'temporary troll lover' to help him overcome it. Such an interpretation would characterise his pre-marital affair as an adolescent rite of passage. Indeed, though with little attention to his specifically sexual passivity, McKinnell has elsewhere discussed Hálfdan Brönufóstri's perpetual irresponsibility as symbolic of his adolescence.[236] In earlier scholarship, Riti

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[235] McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 192. Brana's eager self-demotion has actually intrigued scholars since the earliest interpretations of this trope; see Hilda Ellis-Davidson, 'Fostering by Giants in Old Norse Saga Literature', *Medium Ævum* 10/2 (1941), 72.
[236] McKinnell, 'Fantasy Giantess', 211–19.

Kroesen, Lotte Motz, and Hilda Ellis-Davidson have also gestured to the initiatory potential of these 'temporary troll lover' episodes.[237] I expand upon such notions here.

Before analysing their sexual encounters, I will establish the protagonists' juvenility. In *Kjalnesinga saga*, Búi is around fifteen when he meets the troll-woman Fríðr. His age is not stated, but can be gleaned from the passage of time since its last specification at twelve.[238] Moreover, although Búi has already begun a sexual relationship with his human fiancée, other details corroborate his juvenile status. This is his first overseas quest and, until his departure, he remains under the comprehensive control of his foster-mother, Esja.[239] The eponymous hero of *Hálfdanar saga* is not only specified to be sixteen but also explicitly taunted as immature when he meets the troll-woman Brana, who becomes his first sexual partner.[240] Finally, Ketill hængr is only twelve when he meets Hrafnhildr, also his first lover, with these events occurring the year after he is stated to be eleven.[241] Hence, in chronological, social, and sexual terms, all three of these protagonists are budding adolescents.[242]

Örvar-Oddr is a different case. Since scholars have overlooked and even expressly discounted his juvenility during this episode, he warrants closer attention.[243] At this point in the saga, Oddr is around thirty and has already inhabited the adult roles of sea-captain, husband, and father.[244] Nevertheless, his time among the trolls might yet represent

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[237] Riti Kroesen, 'Ambiguity in the Relationship between Heroes and Giants', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 111 (1996), 68–9; Motz, *Beauty and Hag*, 64; and Ellis-Davidson, 'Fostering by Giants', 78.
[238] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 10.
[239] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 25.
[240] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 334.
[241] *Ketils saga hængs*, 248.
[242] For prior studies interpreting these three as adolescents, see Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 'Esja's Cave: Giantesses, Sons and Mothers in *Kjalnesinga saga*', in Ármann Jakobsson, et al., eds., *Fræðinæmi: Greinar gefnar út í tilefni sjötugsafmælis Ásdísar Egilsdóttur* (Reykjavík, 2016), 126–7; McKinnell, 'Fantasy giantess', 216–17; and Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents', 158–9.
[243] Kroesen, 'Ambiguity in the Relationship', 68. See also Motz, *Beauty and Hag*, 89.
[244] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 293–318.

adolescent sexual maturation, due to his *symbolic* juvenility. From the outset of his saga, Oddr is cursed to live for three hundred years, which might have compelled audiences to jettison conventional chronological categorisations of his age.[245] Even more significant are numerous infantilising features of his supernatural sojourn. This journey is not undertaken on Oddr's own initiative. The adult self-determination he has hitherto shown is snatched away, as he is literally snatched away by a giant vulture and carried to its eyrie.[246] Since Oddr ends up trapped in this parent bird's nest, residing with its fledgling offspring and forcibly dependent on the nourishment it brings, this period is rendered as one of symbolic rebirth and infancy.

Oddr's infantilisation does not stop there, however. When Hildir rescues him from this symbolic womb, the troll mistakes Oddr for a baby and suggests that his daughter Hildigunnr — Oddr's future lover — nurse him alongside her new-born brother Goðmundr.[247] Hildigunnr also identifies Oddr this way, comparing his size (unfavourably) with Goðmundr's, laying them together in a cradle, and singing 'barngælur' (lullabies) over them.[248] Partially, this rehearses a common comedic trope, in which giants mistake heroes for children because they are relatively so small.[249] However, it also has a profound impact on the audience's interpretation of this episode. Once Oddr is placed in a cradle and treated as the equal of a one-day-old baby, it becomes difficult to see him for what he is: the generational equal of Hildir, the troll-father. Rather, he becomes more easily identifiable as equivalent to Hildir's children. Notwithstanding, it is also significant that Hildigunnr's verse about Oddr's puniness refers to his moustache: 'Tuttr litli / ok toppr fyr nefi' (Little tot / and a tuft before his

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[245] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 289. For a similar observation, see Hume, 'From Saga to Romance', 5–6.
[246] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 337–8.
[247] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 338–9.
[248] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 340.
[249] *Gylfaginning*, 39, 44; *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns*, 412. See also McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 191–2.

nose).[250] Considering the significance of facial hair as a marker of adult masculinity, this verse gives Oddr a paradoxical age-based status.[251] Since he has one foot in the childhood of a 'tuttr' and another in the adulthood demonstrated by his 'toppr', this verse enhances his potential as a transitional figure, perhaps encouraging audiences to interpret his subsequent activities as pertaining to adolescence. Oddr's symbolic infantilisation and tiny relative size do not merely invite interpretations relating to youthful maturation, however. They also establish an immediate power imbalance in the interactions, sexual and otherwise, between him and Hildigunnr. Since this symbolic tot only reaches her mid-thigh, he is implied to be the socially and physically inferior party in these exchanges.[252] This pertains to a point common to these four sagas: all the protagonists begin in positions of socio-sexual submissiveness to the trolls, including to their 'temporary troll lovers'.

Örvar-Oddr's first interactions with Hildigunnr are initiated by the troll-woman's father when he instructs her to nurse him. However, he also seems to invite the pair to have sex: 'skal hún hafa þik fyrir leiku' (she will have you as a plaything).[253] At this point, Hildir's intentions are unclear. Since he believes Oddr to be a baby, his reference to play might refer to childhood games. However, considering the prevalent use of *leika/leikr* as euphemisms for sex, including later in the same episode, audiences might have interpreted this as a dramatically ironic invitation for his daughter to have intercourse with Oddr.[254] Especially considering this troll-father's later pride rather than

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[250] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 340.
[251] See Carl Phelpstead, 'Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow: Hair Loss, the Tonsure, and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland', *Scandinavian Studies* 85/1 (2013), 9–10.
[252] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 340.
[253] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 339.
[254] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 340. See n. 79 above.

anger upon discovering that this 'play' has borne a son, Hildir's euphemistic invitation decreases the likelihood of interpretations of Oddr's active or illicit sexual scheming.[255]

Oddr is also passive in the instigation of intercourse itself. Hildigunnr thinks that he is restive in his cot and so 'lagði hún hann í sæng hjá sér ok vafðist utan at honum, ok kom þá svá, at Oddr lék allt þat, er lysti; gerðist þá harðla vel með þeim' (she laid him in bed beside her and wove herself around the outside of him, and it happened then that Oddr played all that he wanted; then things went mightily well between them).[256] The physical acts leading up to sex, including the erotic acts of lifting Oddr into her bed and coiling her limbs around him, are thus carried out by the female party. The male is initially depicted as Hildigunnr's passive 'leik[a]', though he soon takes a more dominant role, becoming the subject of the verb 'lék'. It is also worth noting the possible pun here: 'harðla vel' might intimate not only that their activities progressed satisfactorily, but also in a *hard* manner. We are thus cheekily advised that, though Oddr begins this tryst as a bawling infant, his erection proves one aspect of sexual maturity by the end.[257] This transition from cot to coitus should surely be considered a symbol of adolescent sexual awakening or, more accurately, initiation, in which this figuratively juvenile male achieves sexual maturity with the assistance of his troll lover. Moreover, considering their size difference, Oddr's adoption of this active role might have been somewhat comical. It was perhaps not construed as truly dominant, but rather plucky, with the image of a baby-sized man crawling over the body of his gigantic companion continually reminding audiences that this is a fledgling effort. Incidentally, this is the closest the sagas ever come to an unproblematised depiction of precocious, male infantile sexuality to foreshadow socio-sexual prowess. However, the fact that it is not only distanced via a

[255] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 343–4.
[256] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 340.
[257] On the use of *harðr* to describe an erection, see *Bósa saga*, 477.

supernatural depiction, but also logically negated by Oddr's literal adult status, corroborates my conclusion that this was a highly unsettling topic.

The other three texts portray a similar initial lack of enterprise. In *Kjalnesinga saga*, Fríðr actively — and implicitly sexually — gazes at Búi when she greets him, inviting him inside because she finds him visually promising.[258] She immediately starts ordering him around and, in a twice-repeated phrase, the youngster assumes a subservient role: he 'gerði svá' (did so).[259] Like Hildigunnr, Fríðr is also described as large as well as beautiful, while in some manuscripts Búi, like Örvar-Oddr, is identified by his hosts as 'skeggbarn' (bearded-baby).[260] These features strengthen the power asymmetry between these two characters, as well as characterising Búi's subservience and implied puniness in relation to his transitional age-based status, along similar lines to those noted above. The sexual valence of this power imbalance is made plain when Fríðr initiates their sleeping together. As above, it is only after this point that Búi develops a jointly active role, as indicated grammatically: '"skaltu nú hér sofa í nótt í mínu herbergi". Hann lét sér þat vel líka. Skemmtu þau sér þar um kveldit' ('you will now sleep here for the night in my bedroom'. He approved of this also. They amused themselves in the evening).[261] As above, Fríðr's father also euphemistically invites Búi to engage in such behaviour.[262] Though again perhaps dramatically ironic, Dofri's invitation reduces the potential for interpretations that the hero acts either illicitly or on his own initiative.

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[258] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 30. Though Karras suggests that the female gaze in medieval literature often only bolsters the capital of the viewed man, its potential to empower to the female viewer has been the subject of numerous recent studies. See Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Young Knights Under the Feminine Gaze', in Konrad Eisenbichler, ed., *The Premodern Teenager* (Toronto, 2002), 196; M. A. Jacobs, '"Hon stóð ok starði": Vision, Love, and Gender in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*', *Scandinavian Studies* 86/2 (2014), 150–66; John Lindow 'When Skaði Chose Njǫrðr', in Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin, eds., *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland* (Ithaca, 2008), 173–6.
[259] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 30.
[260] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 29, 32.
[261] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 31.
[262] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 32.

In *Hálfdanar saga*, Brana kills her own father, rendering his consent irrelevant. However, as above, it is she who initiates sex with the protagonist. Upon first glimpsing Hálfdan, she exclaims, 'hér er vel til yndis skipat, ok ætla ek mér við konungsson' (Here is a situation well arranged for pleasure, and I intend to get myself a king's son).[263] Like Fríðr, Brana immediately seizes scopophilic initiative in this passage, which is made more plainly voyeuristic via the euphemistic term 'ynd[i]' (pleasure).[264] Following this remark, she leaps at the lad, instigating the suggestive wrestling match that was mentioned above in relation to *Finnboga saga*. It is during this skirmish that Brana mocks Hálfdan in specifically age-based and gendered terms: '"Ertu gamall maðr, Hálfdan?" "Sextán vetra", segir hann. "Ok ertu þó enn eigi kvensterkr", segir hún' ('Are you an old man, Hálfdan?' 'Sixteen years old', he says. 'And yet you are still not woman-strong', she says).[265] As will be discussed further in Chapter Three, this excerpt demonstrates the conceptual elision of juvenile and senescent inability. For now, though, it is more significant that it couches Hálfdan's deficiency — his inability to dominate Brana in the martial and symbolically sexual act of wrestling — in relation to his apparently feminised youth. However, this 'þó enn' (yet still) construction suggests that Hálfdan has now reached an age at which surpassing *kvensterkleikr* has become an expectation, positioning him on the cusp of adolescent development. As mentioned above, he quickly rises to this challenge. Employing what McKinnnell calls the 'cross-buttock throw', which itself bears vaguely erotic undertones, Hálfdan throws Brana to the floor.[266] Unlike Sunnlöð, Brana lands on her stomach, but this is also intimated to be a submissive pose. First, Hálfdan commands Brana to lie 'á grúfu' (on her belly), related to the verb *grúfa* (to grovel), which implies her general capitulation. Second, as Preben

[263] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 333.
[264] See *Trójumanna saga*, 89.
[265] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 334.
[266] McKinnell, 'Fantasy Giantess', 209.

Meulengracht Sørensen demonstrates, this pose is also associated with specifically sexual submission, implying vulnerability to anal and, in this case, rear-entry vaginal penetration.[267] Hálfdan thus employs this wrestling sequence in the same manner as Illugi's riding: he uses eroticised violence to move away from feminised childhood and towards male adulthood. Next, when it comes to their literal sexual intercourse, it is again Brana who makes the first move: '[Hún] bað þá vera hjá sér um vetrinn. Hálfdan segir svá vera skyldu. Brana var þá allkát… Hálfdan lá hjá Brönu hverja nótt' (She asked them to stay with her over winter. Hálfdan says that would be so. Brana was then utterly delighted… Hálfdan lay with Brana every night).[268] Therefore, in both the sexually symbolic prelude and the intercourse itself, the troll-woman instigates their encounters. It is only during these interactions that Hálfdan adopts active roles, as implied physically and grammatically.

Finally, Ketill hængr is also invited to sleep with the troll-woman Hrafnhildr immediately upon meeting her father Brúni, this time with no potential for dramatic irony.[269] This protagonist's initial passivity is emphasised even once he has accepted Brúni's proposition, via its exaggerated, even comical physicalisation. Having just greeted the boy, this troll-father literally escorts the pair to bed and tucks them in. Within the saga's internal logic, this act is explained as Brúni's attempt to prevent his Finnish/trollish guests from seeing the pair. However, this does not diminish its additional connotations: he consents to their activities between the sheets by actively putting them there. Like the protagonists above, Ketill only adopts a sexually active

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[267] Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 67–74.
[268] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 336. On the specifically sexual valences of *kátr*, which corroborate the erotic initiative of Brana's invitation, see Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature', 35, and Jochens 'Before the Male Gaze', 6.
[269] *Ketils saga hængs*, 252.

stance once their intercourse commences, as indicated grammatically: Ketill 'skemmti sér við Hrafnhildi' (amused himself with Hrafnhildr).[270]

Considering these protagonists' juvenility, their transitions from acquiescence to dominance during these trollish trysts are significant. First, they indicate the role sex was imagined to play as an initiatory event, contributing to male maturation. Second, these progressions characterise the youthful development of sexual mastery as one in which an initially passive male might be guided or even coached, including by dominant female figures and their families. This runs contrary to the far more common presentations of this transition elsewhere, particularly in naturalistic episodes, in which young men are portrayed as innately sexually dominant. Consider, for example, Jochens's 'illicit love visit' trope, in which men demonstrate sexual activeness from the start, while women tend to be passive.[271] A common physicalisation of this dynamic is the man placing the woman on his knee, a sign of both intimacy and domination.[272] A similar act is performed by the fourteen-year-old Egill Skalla-Grímsson in his first sexual encounter. Here, Egill's inexperience *is* initially mocked by his female companion, which indicates that men might indeed have been thought to require sexual experience to enhance their reputations. The woman rejects the company of this youngster, who 'sjaldan hefr gefnar / vargi varmar bráðir' (has seldom given warm flesh to a wolf).[273] Considering the context of this encounter, at a feast at which men and women are pairing off to drink together, as well as the use of wolf imagery to refer to female genitalia elsewhere in the corpus, this taunt takes on a distinctly sexual meaning.[274] It repurposes the trope of feeding wolves as a descriptor of battle to suggest that, in addition to being an inexperienced warrior, Egill

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[270] *Ketils saga hængs*, 252.
[271] Jochens, 'Illicit Love Visit', 377.
[272] *Hallfreðar saga*,145; *Víglundar saga*, 90.
[273] *Egils saga*, 121.
[274] See *WONS*, 69, and Richard Harris, ed., '*Hjálmþérs saga*: A Scientific Edition', Ph.D. Dissertation, Iowa City, University of Iowa, 1970, 31.

has little experience of penetrative sex. However, this prodigy immediately lifts the woman closer to him and, having thus demonstrated socio-sexual dominance, the pair become suggestively 'allkát' (utterly delighted).[275] Such scenes obviously contrast with those analysed above, especially that of Hildigunnr lifting Oddr up bodily and putting him in her bed. The supernatural motif, in which the male initially inhabits the physically and sexually passive role, represents a direct reversal of the norm. Considering the ubiquity and starkness of this variation, it seems possible that the supernatural status of these troll-women provided *sögumenn* with a distanced platform on which to depict sexual maturation in a novel, perhaps more candid light. Presumably because he is not being shown as sexually submissive to a *human* woman, which would impugn his masculinity, the protagonist may be depicted as an inexperienced youngster, who learns to adopt an active stance via sexual practice with an apparently more adept female. The impact of this dynamic on medieval audiences could also have been significant. As I outline below, the enviably dominant position of these troll-women is soon diminished via their male lovers' desertions. However, until that point, female audience members might have responded positively to these portrayals of women inhabiting not merely active, but even superior roles in their sexual interactions with men.

Following his acquisition of socio-sexual dominance in the arms of his troll lover, the protagonist then departs for human society. In *Örvar-Odds saga*, *Kjalnesinga saga*, and *Hálfdanar saga*, the protagonist's abandonment is tolerated, facilitated and — in the lattermost — even instigated by the 'temporary troll lover'. At her parting with Örvar-Oddr, Hildigunnr tearfully tells him, 'þú átt ekki eðli til at vera hér álengdar hjá oss' (you do not have the nature to stay here longer with us).[276] The term 'eðli' denotes not just

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[275] *Egils saga*, 121. See n. 268 above.
[276] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 341.

character, but rather that something is *eðligr* (natural, appropriate). This detail exonerates Oddr by characterising his departure, even from the jilted female's perspective, as an inevitability for which neither lover can be blamed. Furthermore, even if audiences saw Oddr as the one primarily responsible for their separation, it is made very clear that Hildigunnr understands and permits his departure: she states that he would not be able to leave without her consent.[277] In *Kjalnesinga saga*, Fríðr is even more distraught: she initially attempts to prevent her human lover's desertion, and even intimates that it warrants his death. However, like Hildigunnr, she soon acknowledges the necessity of their parting, even assisting Búi by obtaining her father's blessing and the gift of a gameboard that was his initial errand.[278] Oddr and Búi are remarkably indifferent to the sadness of their troll lovers. As a result of their protagonistic status, it is possible that audiences were encouraged to share this apathy, and thereby recognise the troll-women as uncomplicatedly disposable partners.

The exoneration of Hálfdan Brönufóstri is even more extreme, since Brana resumes the control she temporarily ceded to him during their intercourse. Though it also seems to sadden her, she is the one to instigate and organise Hálfdan's departure, and even to plan his subsequent matrimony to Princess Marsibil.[279] Brana's initiative, selflessness, and stoicism in the face of her lover's parting and future marriage entirely absolve the hero of any guilt for his desertion.[280] Conversely, while Brana plans and endorses Hálfdan's love life without her, the boy reverts to an acquiescent state; he says only that he will 'eigi þrætra' (not argue) with her recommendations.[281] Indeed, he is even portrayed as more reluctant to separate than Brana. Though he does go to England to woo and eventually

[277] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 341.
[278] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 33–4.
[279] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 336–7.
[280] See also McKinnell, 'Fantasy Giantess', 210–11.
[281] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 336–7.

marry Princess Marsibil, he repeatedly asks for Brana to join him and it is the troll who must refuse.[282] Their respective stances compel audiences to see Hálfdan as blameless in his desertion, again permitting them to enjoy the spectacle of his empowering pre-marital sex without considering its potentially negative consequences for Brana.

The protagonists in these three sagas are therefore absolved for their temporary sexual liaisons, after which they advance — immediately, in the cases of Búi and Hálfdan — to court permanent wives.[283] This could reflectively indicate or have dialogically precipitated support for such a model in a general sense, contributing to the ideology of youthful, male, sexual entitlement discussed in the 'riding' episodes above. However, rather than pertaining to the concept of acceptable male domination and even sexual violence against women, these sagas present the idea that women might tolerate or even desire non-committal, pre-marital sexual activities with young men.

Furthermore, it is also possible that these 'temporary troll lovers' were connected to specific, 'real world' figures in the minds of *sögumenn* and audiences. These include some demographics with whom most medieval Icelanders could only imagine having contact, sexual or otherwise. First, as has been repeatedly argued, these episodes might expose Icelandic conceptions of foreign women. All these troll-women are encountered in distant lands, including Helluland and Finnmörk.[284] The connection between these trolls and Northern indigenous peoples is especially strong in *Ketils saga*, which uses the terms 'Finn[r]' and 'tröll' synonymously. This has led numerous scholars, most recently Lorenzo Lozzi Gallo, to suggest that such episodes pertain to the imagined sexual disposability of such ethnicities.[285]

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[282] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 337.
[283] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 384; *Kjalnesinga saga*, 40–1; *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 348.
[284] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 330; *Ketils saga hængs*, 251.
[285] Ketils saga hængs, 252, 259–60. Lorenzo Lozzi Gallo, 'Only Half-Human: Re-Reading *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*', Unpublished Conference Paper, *Leeds IMC*, Leeds, University of

Second, these episodes might have functioned as male fantasies of sex with women who were not only foreign, but also noble. All the 'temporary troll lovers' in question are descended from either troll or human royalty, but this interpretation seems most plausible in *Kjalnesinga saga*, in which Fríðr inhabits an especially courtly mountain-dwelling.[286] These trysts could thus symbolise the same irresistibility of young Icelanders to high-status women as that mentioned in reference to *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga* above.[287] Furthermore, perhaps due to the supernatural distance offered by this trope, Búi, Örvar-Oddr, and especially Hálfdan are permitted to enjoy the temporary embraces of these high-status figures with little to none of the censure found in these *Íslendingasögur*, either from their mistresses or from their own human communities. In Búi's case, for example, his temporary tryst has none of the impact on his three-year betrothal that is found in *Laxdæla saga*, at least from the perspective of his fiancée and her family. It is especially interesting to compare these 'temporary troll lover' episodes with Hrútr's affair with Gunnhildr in *Njáls saga*. Like these trolls, Gunnhildr actively instigates their intercourse. Furthermore, though she is enraged at his departure and attempts to cause him harm, Hrútr escapes her curse relatively unscathed.[288] This favourable portrayal of a man as the passive recipient of female wiles, as well as that of his pre-marital sex as a beneficial and relatively harmless procedure, are perhaps permitted — as they are with the 'temporary troll lovers' — by virtue of supernatural distance: Gunnhildr is also a troll.[289]

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Leeds, 2017. See also *WONL*, 63–70; Kroesen, 'Ambiguity in the Relationship', 60–1; and Straubhaar, 'Nasty, Brutish, and Large', 107, 118.

[286] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 29–31. See also *Ketils saga hængs*, 255; *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 334; and *Örvar-Odds saga*, 339.

[287] See ns. 103–4 above.

[288] *Njáls saga*, 11–21. See also ns. 124–7 above.

[289] On Gunnhildr's trollishness, as demonstrated throughout the corpus, see Chapter Four, ns. 104–6.

These troll-women might also have represented demographic groups with whom medieval Icelanders might more realistically have had contact, sexual and otherwise. For example, especially in *Örvar-Odds saga*, in which the troll is the most peculiarly maternal, it is possible that audiences associated this motif with the sexual availability of a particular type of servant: the nanny-type *fóstra* (foster-mother).[290] If female servants were available for male sexual use throughout the Middle Ages, a particularly likely candidate for such activities would be the ones charged with fostering such boys, especially if they were not much older than their wards. Hildigunnr might thus symbolise either the fantasy or reality of non-committal sex with such figures.[291]

Finally, and most compellingly, these 'temporary troll lover' episodes can be interpreted as supernatural counterparts to Jochens's 'illicit love visits'. As she asserts of the latter, they might pertain to male pre-marital affairs with mistresses from (presumably lower status) householding families.[292] This could be true for all four sagas, since trolls can always be associated with lower socio-economic groups, regardless of their apparently noble lineage.[293] However, this seems particularly likely in *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Ketils saga hængs*. In these two, this link is substantiated by the domestic nature of the troll households. Rather than in regal or rough-hewn caves, these trolls

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[290] On this type of fosterage, see Anna Hansen, 'Fosterage and Dependency in Medieval Iceland and its Significance in *Gísla saga*', in Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed., *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden, 2008), 75.

[291] Another expression of this particular symbolic mechanism is also found in Saxo; *Gesta Danorum*, 21. I return to this concept, though regarding elderly rather than youthful foster-mothers, in Chapter Four.

[292] On the specifically socio-economic aspects of the 'illicit love visit', see Jenny Jochens, 'Romance, Marriage, and Social Class in the Saga World', in Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin, eds., *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland* (Ithaca, 2008), 66–8.

[293] The lower-status symbolism of trolls is evinced in their greater covetousness for dairy products, basic Icelandic staples, than for gold; see *Egils saga einhenda*, 187; *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, 68; *Ketils saga hængs*, 252; *Vatnsdæla saga*, 34. When they are misshapen like Hrafnhildr, their physiognomy might also have been associated with social inferiority; see Amy Eichhorn-Mulligan, 'Contextualising Old Norse-Icelandic Bodies' in John McKinnell et al., eds., *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: The Preprint Papers of The Thirteenth International Saga Conference*, 2 vols. (Durham and York, 2006), 1.198–207.

seem to live in houses. These dwellings, even described as 'bæ[r]' (a farm) in *Ketils saga*, are inhabited by independent, working families, and are furnished with basic household items, such as Goðmundr's cot.[294] *Áns saga bogsveigis* further corroborates this symbolic link. Here, Án's informal tryst with a lower-status *human* daughter contains the same unmistakable verbal formula common to three of the 'temporary troll lover' episodes.[295] As the fourth in the *Hrafnistusögur* series to which *Ketils saga* and *Örvar-Odds saga* belong, it is highly likely that this text was read alongside two or more of these 'temporary troll lover' episodes.[296] It is therefore probable that audiences drew parallels between informal sex with the daughters of these troll families and those of lower-status, independent households. As mentioned above, such pre- and extra-marital sexual affairs are portrayed neutrally — albeit apparently begrudgingly — in the *samtíðarsögur*. However, as Jochens and Bagerius assert, they are presented negatively in the *Íslendingasögur* and *riddarasögur*, apparently indicating their widespread censure both before and after their supposed extirpation.[297] Such activities are even depicted somewhat cagily in episodes featuring human lovers from the distanced *fornaldarsögur*, including *Áns saga* and *Bósa saga*. These protagonists' liaisons seem to be enjoyed by their female lovers, but they occur without the knowledge or permission of the latter's families.[298] Conversely, these 'temporary troll lover' episodes present relatively — and, in *Hálfdanar saga*, emphatically — unproblematised accounts of such behaviour.

If they were interpreted along such lines, these episodes might demonstrate implicit ideological support for the use of pre-marital mistresses, made safe by the supernatural figure of the troll-woman. As contemporary descriptions or — after its supposed

[294] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 339–40; *Ketils saga hængs*, 251–2.
[295] *Áns saga bogsveigis*, 418. See n. 230 above.
[296] AM 343 a 4to, for example, contains all four *Hrafnistusögur*.
[297] See ns. 120–22 above.
[298] *Áns saga bogsveigis*, 418; *Bósa saga*, 476–93.

extirpation — literary remembrances of institutionalised concubinage, these episodes seem particularly to extol the apparent culture of consent among mistresses and their *giptingarmenn* to accept the inferior role in such relationships.[299] Corroborating Percivall's hypothesis about the use of pre-marital concubines as rehearsals for official matrimony, these episodes also present such activities as contributory to male socio-sexual maturation, including as a precursor to impending marriage.[300] Finally, these episodes characterise pre-marital affairs as innocuous, with little reference to the stigma such activities apparently began to accrue following the thirteenth century. On one particular source of shame — the reduction of a woman's marital value after losing her virginity — some of these sagas even note the existence of such concerns, though in a hypocritical manner that fails to implicate the protagonist.[301] During one of Brana's later appearances to facilitate Hálfdan's marriage to Marsibil, she laments that their female lovechild might have 'orðin fífl' (become seduced) in her absence.[302] Likewise, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, Búi refuses to marry his fiancée, Ólof in væna, upon his return to Iceland. This is because she has been kidnapped and, in Búi's own words, 'spillt' (spoiled) by a rival.[303] These references locate their respective sagas in contexts in which the informal sexual use of women could be considered detrimental, both to their families' honour and to their marriage prospects. However, via the supernatural symbol of the troll-woman, these sagas simultaneously support such activities when carried out by their protagonists, implying lingering ideological support for such youthful, masculine entitlement.

[299] See n. 110 above.
[300] See n. 112 above.
[301] See n. 119 above.
[302] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 343.
[303] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 40.

I turn now to *Ketils saga hængs*. Especially considering the extreme intertextual potential of these texts, this saga's radically contrasting portrayal might offer different answers to the same questions regarding pre-marital mistresses. Through the words and actions of the protagonist's father, this text repeats the ideology presented above: young men may enjoy trysts with troll-women, who might symbolise the daughters of lower-status families. These must be temporary, however, yielding to marriages with more appropriate brides. However, by focusing on the affective turmoil of its two lovers, *Ketils saga* calls into question the propriety and harmlessness of this such pre-marital affairs, as well as their efficacy in fostering stable adult masculinity. Though she does not discuss this episode with reference to Ketill's specifically sexual development, or to Icelandic customs of pre-marital concubinage, my interpretation follows that of Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir. She too recognises the emotional tribulations of Ketill and Hrafnhildr's romance, which she also suggests pertains to the troll-woman's unsuitability as a marital match.[304]

Three years after their separation, the troll-woman Hrafnhildr comes to see Ketill in his human community, bringing along their lovechild, Grímr loðinkinni. Ketill immediately invites her to stay, but this enrages Hallbjörn, his father. Hrafnhildr agrees to depart, though Ketill attempts to comfort her as she goes.[305] Hallbjörn's dismissal of Hrafnhildr is the first sign of his alignment with the principles depicted in the other three sagas. However, this sequence also demonstrates that neither lover shares these sentiments. In Hrafnhildr's arrival at Hrafnista and Ketill's immediate invitation for her to stay there, as well as his explicit concern for her wellbeing, both lovers seem to wish

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[304] *WONL*, 69–70.
[305] *Ketils saga hængs*, 255–6.

to maintain contact, perhaps sexually and romantically, after the protagonist's return to human society.

Consistent with my interpretation of this motif as symbolising pre-marital mistresses, Hallbjörn soon arranges his son's more appropriate betrothal, with direct reference to his erstwhile, apparently inappropriate lover:

> Bárðr hét maðr, góðr bóndi, ok átti dóttur fríða, er Sigríðr hét. Sá þótti þá beztr kostr. Hallbjörn bað Ketil biðja sér konu ok hyggja svá af Hrafnhildi. Ketill kvað sér ekki hug á kvánföngum, ok var hann jafnan hljóðr, síðan þau Hranfhildr skildu. Ketill kveðst mundu fara norðr með landi… en þó gekk fram þessi ráðastofnun, ok var veizlan góð. Ketill fór ekki af klæðum ina fyrstu nótt, er þau kómu í eina sæng. Hún fór ekki at því, ok samdist brátt með þeim.
>
> (A man was called Bárðr, a prosperous farmer, and he had a beautiful daughter, who was called Sigríðr. She was then thought to be the best marriage prospect. Hallbjörn told Ketill to get himself a wife, and thus leave off thinking about Hrafnhildr. Ketill said that he did not wish to think about marriage, and he was always taciturn after he and Hrafnhildr separated. Ketill said he would travel north along the coast… and yet this [Hallbjörn's] plan went forward and the marriage celebration was good. Ketill did not take off his clothes on the first night, when they came into one bed. She [Sigríðr] didn't trouble herself about this, and things soon worked themselves out between them.)[306]

Hallbjörn's stance in this excerpt demonstrates the *sögumaðr*'s familiarity with the pattern depicted in the other sagas. However, *Ketils saga* does not let this perspective stand unchallenged. Despite her apparent unsuitability, and in violation of his father's wishes, this passage indicates Ketill's persistent affection for his 'temporary troll lover'. Both in Hallbjörn's implication that Ketill cannot stop thinking about Hrafnhildr and in the boy's explicitly 'hljóðr' (taciturn) state, this passage implies Ketill's lovesickness for her. Moreover, when Hallbjörn requests that Ketill go and woo Sigríðr, the lad not only

[306] *Ketils saga hængs*, 256.

refuses, but also voices his intention to travel 'norðr með landi'. Audiences would likely have interpreted this to signify Ketill's intention to seek Hrafnhildr, since the latter's bearing as she rowed away just a few sentences earlier was described with identical diction.[307] Finally, Ketill's reaction to his arranged marriage with Sigríðr confirms his continued longing. Out of love or loyalty for Hrafnhildr, Ketill attempts to resist this marriage by refusing sexual contact. However, his efforts do not withstand Sigríðr's persistence and, ultimately, he relents. The latter detail is especially significant to this saga's criticism of pre-marital sexual experimentation. Numerous scholars identify lovesickness as an impediment to masculine supremacy in Old Norse-Icelandic sources, of which Ketill's infatuation is a prime example.[308] His time with Hrafnhildr has not prepared him for, but rather precludes him from, demonstrating adult socio-sexual dominance with his bride. It causes him to inhabit a passive position — the object of this woman's wiles rather than the active instigator — in the marital bed.

Hallbjörn eventually dies and Ketill settles into married life with Sigríðr, with whom he has his second child. Three years later, Hrafnhildr returns and Ketill once more invites her to stay with him. This evinces the same belief as earlier that the continuation of their interactions, possibly even cohabitation and intimate relations, would be appropriate, despite the presence of his human wife.[309] This time, though, Hrafnhildr is the one to refuse: 'hún kveðst ekki þá mundu dveljast. "Þar hefir þú nú gert fyrir um

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[307] *Ketils saga hængs*, 256.
[308] See Lindow, 'When Skaði Chose', 169; Margrét Eggertsdóttir, 'The Anomalous Pursuit of Love in *Kormáks saga*', tr. Phillip Roughton, in Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin, eds., *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland* (Ithaca, 2008), 97; and Bjørn Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Old Norse Society* (Turnhout, 2005), 27–32.
[309] Incidentally, Ketill's second offer of cohabitation extends this saga's commentary beyond pre-marital mistress to extra-marital ones, like those throughout the *Sturlunga* compilation and in *Laxdœla saga*. Hrafnhildr's refusal to accept this position also offers a unique voice to such women, suggesting such an arrangement to be undesirable for the *frilla*, not just the wife; see *Laxdœla saga*, 26.

fundi okkra ok samvistir í lauslyndi þinni ok óstaðfestu." Hún gekk þá til skips, mjök döpr ok þrungin' (she said that she would not remain there. 'You have now forfeited our meeting and living together, through your loose-mindedness and unsteadfastness.' She then went to her ship, very sad and troubled).[310] This passage grants Hrafnhildr a different perspective to those expressed by the troll-women above. Though they are all saddened, they each recognise the necessity of their lovers' abandonment and, to some extent, facilitate it. Hrafnhildr challenges this notion. While recognising that it is now dashed, she admits her sincere belief that the pair were going to live together in monogamous union, using a term — 'samvistir' (living together) — that primarily refers to married life. If, as I speculate, she represents Ketill's lower-status, pre-marital mistress, her expression that she is actually an appropriate marital match challenges the disregard for the social, sexual, and emotional wellbeing of such women. Moreover, unlike her counterparts above, Hrafnhildr refuses to exonerate the hero in this passage. Her unambiguous allocation of blame would have complicated interpretations that Ketill's abandonment of his pre-marital mistress was justifiable.

This passage pays considerable attention to Hrafnhildr's emotional state in response to Ketill's (admittedly unwilling) enactment of the 'temporary troll lover' pattern. In addition to the anger implied in her accusations, Hrafnhildr is explicitly described as 'mjök döpr ok þrungin' (very sad and troubled). However, it is not merely the statement of her sorrow that is unique in *Ketils saga*. Rather, this saga encourages greater sympathy for the perspective of the abandoned troll-woman due to the sentiments of its protagonist. The offhand disregard for the troll-women's feelings shown by Búi and Oddr, with the latter not uttering a single word after Hildigunnr's tearful speech, arguably gives the audience greater license to dismiss their lovers' distress. Conversely,

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[310] *Ketils saga hængs*, 257.

as this saga's protagonist, Ketill's persistent care for Hrafnhildr encourages audiences to consider her position more deeply. The abandonment of the troll-woman, and the human figure she might represent, is thus characterised as emotionally injurious to the female party, something that unfairly and erroneously relegates certain women to the position of disposable sexual conquest, and something for which the male party is entirely culpable.

Also uniquely, this episode demonstrates considerations of the possible negative emotional impact of pre-marital affairs on the male party. Ketill's second invitation for cohabitation confirms his continued lovesickness, with its rejection implying his subsequent disappointment. Moreover, the saga intimates that Ketill's lovesickness persists throughout his life. Some years after this emotional scene, he again heads north, this time with the explicit intention of finding her.[311] Additionally, not only has he named his human daughter Hrafnhildr, presumably out of lingering affection for this troll-woman, but he also swears an oath that this daughter will never be compelled to marry without her consent, perhaps an oblique reference to his own forced marriage to Sigríðr.[312] Hence, the saga seems to intimate that a young man, perhaps specifically because of his youth and romantic inexperience, might develop strong feelings for a first partner whom he is supposed to forsake. This leads to later confusion and sadness when he is expected to love — and show socio-sexual dominance over — another.[313] This saga thus criticises male pre-marital sexual experimentation, though from a different perspective than Jochens's 'illicit love visits'. While they focus on the slight to the woman's familial honour or marriage prospects, *Ketils saga* approaches the issue from an affective standpoint, emphasising the injurious emotional impact of such a model on the temporary mistress *and* her adolescent male lover.

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[311] *Ketils saga hængs*, 257.
[312] *Ketils saga hængs*, 256–7. See Gallo, 'Giantess as Foster-Mother', 11–12.
[313] Similar notions on young love — as perceived by both male and female lovers as permanent, exclusive, and unrepeatable — are expressed in *Gunnlaugs saga*, 88–107.

The 'temporary troll lover' trope is instructive on the diversity of late medieval Icelandic perspectives on male, pre-marital sexual experimentation. To begin with, it has the potential to express considerations of such activities as a fantasy or otherwise purely abstract construct. In such a scenario, these sagas indicate contrasting ideologies on the hypothetical sexual entitlement of young males. However, I maintain that these texts might also offer insight on medieval conceptions of the entrenched culture of concubinage of the thirteenth century, as well as the memories of that custom — in addition to the possibility of its continued enactment, perhaps without institutionalised endorsement — in subsequent centuries. The first three sagas demonstrate a broadly positive view of male pre-marital sexual affairs, offering a contrary perspective to the majority of naturalistic portrayals. Presumably due to the distanced nature of the troll-woman as a symbol, these episodes allow for the unproblematised and even laudatory depiction of youthful male dalliance with informal partners as an acceptable and innocuous avenue toward masculine sexual maturation, prior to its consummation in matrimony.

However, *Ketils saga hængs* indicates contemporaneous qualms surrounding this ideology. As mentioned above, such anxieties are evinced elsewhere. Jochens asserts that pre-marital affairs are criticised for their negative social impacts on mistresses and their families in the 'illicit love visit' trope, while Bagerius asserts that they are characterised as ignoble in the *riddarasögur*.[314] *Ketils saga* condemns such activities from a different angle. This text draws attention to the emotional attachment that two young lovers might develop, compelling the audience to sympathise with both parties when — due to the pressure to enact the pattern presented in the other sagas — they must part. Moreover, this episode does not absolve the male hero of guilt for his desertion, but rather expresses

[314] See ns. 120–22 above.

blame for his inconstancy when he acquiesces to the norm. *Ketils saga* thus problematises such conduct, suggesting that pre-marital sexual experimentation is an inequitable, ineffective, and emotionally injurious model for the accession to male adulthood. If I am correct that medieval Icelanders connected this episode to the custom or concept of using lower-status women as pre-marital concubines, *Ketils saga* indicates a further significant point. Considering his protagonistic status, audiences presumably supported Ketill's lifelong love for Hrafnhildr and opposed the perspectives of his father. Hence, this episode might have reflected or reinforced the notion not only that pre-marital sexual relationships are detrimental in themselves, but also that such mistresses — including women from lower-status households — should not be discounted as appropriate marital matches. The saga seems to demonstrate sympathy for romance across social divides, offering a more sentimental rationale for the directive, expressed in *Jónsbók*, that errant young men might be encouraged or coerced to marry the women with whom they have had pre-marital sexual relations.[315]

The supernatural episodes analysed above expand upon some the concepts derived from my survey of naturalistic depictions of male adolescent sexuality. The riding episodes present the disturbing notion that sexual violence could be imagined to benefit male maturation, to which naturalistic episodes like Finnbogi's tussle with the *griðkonur* only allude. Similarly, the 'temporary troll lover' episodes expand upon the numerous perspectives on pre-marital sexual affairs presented in the naturalistic corpus. For example, this trope's iterations in *Örvar-Odds saga*, *Kjalnesinga saga*, and (especially) *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra* portray such activities more positively — both with respect to their innocuousness to the female and advantageousness to the male — than the *samtíðarsögur*. The latter do not problematise such behaviours, but their matter-of-fact

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[315] *Jónsbók*, 82. See also *WONL*, 70.

descriptions could hardly be said to laud them. Likewise, though a range of negative portrayals of pre-marital sex can be found in naturalistic episodes outside the *samtíðarsögur*, *Ketils saga hængs* represents a significant extension of this criticism into the affective sphere. As will be elaborated in Chapter Four, it is also important to note that both sets of episodes characterise female figures as the gatekeepers of the 'rainbow coalition', against whom young men's departure from that disenfranchised group may be judged. All these male characters begin in positions of physical, social, and/or sexual inferiority to women. However, they can prove their accession to masculine adulthood by demonstrating the capacity to dominate these females — their transcendence of *kvensterkleikr*. Though these episodes portray a range of avenues through which such supremacy might be demonstrated, the notion that male development meant inhabiting a position of sexual superiority to women is the same.

# Chapter Two

## Female Youth: An Over-Inquisitive Adolescent and a Matrimonially Minded Maiden-King

This chapter examines representations of female adolescent sexual maturation in the sagas, through which I speculate on medieval Icelandic perspectives on this transition. Following another survey of primarily naturalistic depictions and references, this will be accomplished via close readings of supernatural episodes. These are the symbolic rape of a sixteen-year-old girl by a revenant in *Heiðarvíga saga*, as well as the unique depiction of an unwillingly misogamous *meykonungr* (maiden-king) in *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*. This chapter indicates substantial ideological diversity on the subject of female adolescent sexuality. On the one hand, it suggests the perceived dangers of the erotic volatility associated with this transition, which might have reinforced norms of female passivity in conjugal matters. On the other, it indicates the acknowledgement that the sexual and marital aspirations that women develop during adolescence could be beneficial, including as bolsters to consensual matrimony. This is especially — but intriguingly not only — when the young women in question do not pursue these urges actively, but rather develop a reserved yet receptive stance to male romantic advances.

Considering the masculine focus of the corpus as a whole, it is unsurprising that there are fewer depictions of female than male children in the sagas, which has also precipitated a lack of studies of this demographic.[1] Their existence is frequently stated in

[1] See Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood', 48; Agnes Arnórsdóttir, 'Nokkrar hugleiðingar um kynbundið uppeldi á miðöldum', in Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi Tulinius, eds., *Miðaldabörn* (Reykjavík, 2005), 101–11; and Jenny Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', in John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, eds., *Medieval Mothering* (New York, 1996), 213. On the broader European context, see Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, 30.

lists of offspring and, especially in certain genres, women can rise to narrative prominence in adulthood and old age.[2] However their childhoods are seldom explored. On the rare occasions when they are described, female children are usually characterised as insignificant in a similar manner to boys. As mentioned in the previous chapter, minors of both sexes are frequently lumped together by virtue of their shared vulnerability, which exempts them from martial danger.[3] Also relevant are the agreements between the 'temporary troll lovers' and their partners concerning their progeny. According to these terms, pre-adolescent boys and girls are of equally little interest to their fathers. Both must remain with their troll-mothers — marginalised by proximity to her femininity, as well as by exile beyond human society — until the age of ten or twelve. It is only at this juncture that boys join their fathers in human society, while girls must remain behind.[4] These associations of vulnerability, insignificance, and alignment with the feminine substantiate the point that children of both sexes were considered members of the 'rainbow coalition'.[5] However, just as pre-adolescent boys are sometimes portrayed inhabiting a superior position within this group, girls can be depicted as commensurately inferior. In an example mentioned in the previous chapter, the four-year-old girl who cries when slapped betrays her fragility, and perhaps that of her demographic at large, in comparison to her stoic two-year-old brother.[6] Similarly, the slanders levelled at idle or cowardly sons often compare them to daughters, suggesting pejorative associations with the latter group.[7] Another rare reference to female children is the play-acting episode from *Njáls saga*. Here, two boys and a girl perform a scene from

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[2] For examples of lists including female offspring, see *Eyrbyggja saga*, 12; *Sturlu saga*, 227. On strong, adult female characters, see Jenny Jochens, 'The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?' *Viator* 17 (1986), 35.
[3] *Egils saga*, 52, 66; *Hálfs saga Hálfsrekka*, 169; *Íslendinga saga*, 366.
[4] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 34; *Örvar-Odds saga*, 341.
[5] Clover, 'Regardless of Sex', 381–5
[6] *Svarfdæla saga*, 155.
[7] *Göngu Hrólfs saga*, 369; *Kroka-Refs saga*, 123–4.

the adult world around them.[8] Though admittedly outnumbered by depictions of exclusively male games, the fact that these children play together might corroborate their roughly equal status during this life stage.[9] However, the unnamed female is also the only child not granted direct speech, perhaps indicating her relative unimportance.

A few other portrayals of female children substantiate the prevalence of such notions, while simultaneously undermining their validity. When dividing his property with Gísli Súrsson, Þorkell wishes to retain guardianship over a foster-son. As Hansen notes, this leaves Gísli with Guðríðr, the implicitly less valuable foster-daughter, whom he accepts out of apparent charity.[10] However, it is Gísli who benefits from this exchange. He sends Guðríðr on a scouting mission and — considering how her errand unfolds, with the girl 'heilsat óbrátt' (not quickly greeted) upon commencing her reconnaissance — it seems that society's tendency to ignore children, perhaps especially girls, is central to Gísli's plan.[11] *Gísla saga* thus repeatedly indicates that conceptions of the relative insignificance of female children were robust in medieval Iceland. However, Gísli's manipulation of such conceptions, in addition to Guðríðr's ultimate success as a spy, might represent the tacit undermining of this notion. *Egils saga* contains a similar episode. Here, a mother redresses her husband's inhospitality by surreptitiously sending her ten- or eleven-year-old daughter to inform Egill of the better fare that is being withheld. Again, the logic of this episode might rest on the girl's perceived insignificance, with the mother assuming that her husband will not suspect or notice their daughter's activities. However, considering the manner in which this daughter addresses Egill — loudly and proudly speaking a verse — this episode demonstrates her commendable nature: this girl's grasp and authoritative defence of etiquette are greater

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[8] *Njáls saga*, 28–9.
[9] For exclusively male games, see *Egils saga*, 99, and *Flóamanna saga*, 250.
[10] *Gísla saga*, 35. See also Hansen, 'Fosterage and Dependency', 83.
[11] *Gísla saga*, 44.

than those of her father.[12] It seems clear from this range of episodes that the identification of female children as vulnerable, insignificant, and incapable — to an equal or greater extent than their male counterparts — was common among medieval Icelanders. Nonetheless, the latter two episodes imply their composers' playfulness with this concept, confirming its prevalence while simultaneously entertaining the notion that girls could be capable and admirable.

The relative lack of attention paid to girls in the sagas presumably stems from a notion inherent in the aforementioned 'temporary troll lover' agreements. Once they approach adolescence, boys become interesting to their fathers — and perhaps to society at large — because they start to become men, entering the all-important martial, legislative, and economic spheres. Hence, their childhood engagement in these spheres is relevant to saga narratives as a form of foreshadowing, and is often portrayed favourably. Conversely, immature female characters are *not* usually becoming men, so their childhood activities are less relevant to saga narratives. Indeed, if female children do attempt to mature via the same avenues as boys, they can be sternly rebuked, as demonstrated in some *meykonungr* sagas. When they attend to the maiden-kings' childhoods, these texts sometimes criticise their gender-bending activities. Hléguðr from *Stjörnu-Odda draumr* is an instructive example: 'hon var ólát í æsku sinni ok var ávallt því ódælli sem hon var ellri… hon vildi ekki kvennasið fága' (she was difficult in her youth and ever ungentle as she became older… she did not wish to cultivate female pursuits).[13] Hléguðr's adopted masculinity, which includes bearing arms and killing people, infuriates her father, leading to her exile and eventual death.[14] Beyond the *meykonungr* sagas, the twice-married yet still explicitly youthful Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir

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[12] *Egils saga*, 224–5.
[13] *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, 460. See also *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 54, and *Sigurðar saga þögla*, 100–101.
[14] *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, 460–75.

requests to join Kjartan and Bolli on their inaugural overseas quest, a unique example of a young woman's attempt to undertake this male rite of passage.[15] However, the fact that even the indomitable Guðrún is excluded from this journey substantiates the notion that girls were not expected to mature in the same manner as boys. Indeed, further contrary to Clover's arguments defending the 'one sex model' in medieval Iceland, such masculine-connoted development seems to be vehemently discouraged in these cases.[16]

If females were thought to undergo a transformation during adolescence, by what avenues were they expected to progress? To begin with, as intimated in *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, young women were encouraged to be '[d]æl[ar]' (gentle) and to cultivate 'kvennasið' (female pursuits). The latter might refer to 'hannyrðir' (handicrafts, especially needlework), as well as other predictably feminine activities, such as food and textile production.[17] However, as Anna Hansen and others assert, the central component of female adolescence seems to have been their development into sexually desirable and ultimately marriageable figures.[18] It is in such terms that female characters are most commonly introduced. In the aforementioned lists of offspring, daughters are often first described as the current or future wives or mothers of (implicitly more significant) male figures.[19] Alternatively, if their courtship features in the ensuing narrative, they can also be introduced using the extremely prevalent formula that they are the 'beztr kostr' (best match).[20]

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[15] *Laxdæla saga*, 115. On the youth of Guðrún and the foster-brothers, see *Laxdæla saga*, 112.
[16] See Clover, 'Regardless of Sex', 371.
[17] See *Egils saga einhenda*, 156; *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók)*, 260; *Haukdæla þáttr*, 60; and *Víglundar saga*, 75. See also Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', 213.
[18] Hansen, 'Representations of Childhood', 60–4. See also Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood', 45–9. For similar notions elsewhere in Europe, see Sally Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud, 1999), 166–7.
[19] See n. 2 above.
[20] *Ketils saga hængs*, 256. See also *Egils saga*, 18; *Laxdæla saga*, 17, 62; and *Njáls saga*, 5.

This conclusion coheres with Larrington's assessment of medieval European literature more broadly: 'women only become interesting to write about when they become old enough to marry'.[21] However, this ubiquitous focus on marriageability can also elucidate depictions of girls before that age, including some of the examples mentioned above. In the play-acting scene in *Njála*, the girl's role as Unnr supports the notion that, when female children are described, it is usually in reference to their futures as romantic partners. While the boys rehearse their possible futures as martial and legislative champions, hers are limited to those of daughter, wife, and object of male squabbles. This conjugal focus might also explain the attention paid to the childhoods of certain *meykonungar*. Their adopted masculinity usually foreshadows their later misogamy, thus pertaining directly to their conjugal potentialities. This interpretation is substantiated by the fact that girls' martial pursuits are not universally abhorred, particularly in instances where their tom-boyish activities do not develop into the full-blown misogamy of the *meykonungr*.[22]

The tendency to consider female children primarily in terms of future marriageability explicates what I count to be the majority of portrayals of this demographic. Very rarely, prodigiousness in girls is described using the same terminology employed for boys.[23] However, as Hansen and Jochens assert, it is far more common for female precocity to depend on traits that prefigure conjugal desirability, especially beauty.[24] Such is the case with the sagas' most prominent portrayal of a female child. *Njáls saga* opens by describing the beauty of Hallgerðr, physically well-developed but still a child, as denoted by her playing on the floor: "Œrit fǫgr er mær sjá, ok munu

[21] Carolyne Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters in Medieval European Literature* (York, 2015), 76.
[22] See *Egils saga einhenda*, 155, 189, and *Hervarar saga*, 198–204.
[23] See *Egils saga*, 80.
[24] Hansen, 'Representations of Childhood', 117–8; Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze', 6. See also *Laxdœla saga*, 86; *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, 98; and *Víglundar saga*, 64.

margir þess gjalda" (The maiden is sufficiently fair to see, and many will pay for that).[25] Hallgerðr is thus primarily understood not by her current status as a comely child, but by the impact of this beauty on her romantic future. The exclusive significance of this episode to foreshadow Hallgerðr's later marriageability is corroborated by the fact that, like numerous other beautiful girls, we hear nothing more of her until she matures and begins to attract proposals.[26] Likewise, the exceptional attention paid to another mixed sex play group — that of Víglundr and Ketilríðr — is explicable in that their childhood games foreshadow their future intimacy. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this episode emphasises the unfulfilled potentiality of their romance, with the instructive specification of chronological age. When both are ten, Víglundr attempts to pledge his love to Ketilríðr, but she rebuffs him. She expresses her hypothetical future willingness to marry him, but she does not find his pledge appropriate at this time, partly because they are not old enough to verify or actualise their feelings.[27]

These girls' eligibilities are thus couched in distinctly prospective terms. This should spur our consideration as to when young women *were* perceived to become appropriate sexual and marriageable entities, enabling our delineation of the boundaries of female adolescent maturation. The law-codes do indicate chronological thresholds at which women developed greater autonomy in a general sense, most commonly at sixteen and twenty.[28] These should not be overlooked as indicators of the adolescent development of women as independent beings. However, the fact that some of these thresholds can be explicitly overridden by women's marital status substantiates Hansen and Callow's suspicions that their conjugal identities were more significant to their

[25] *Njáls saga*, 7.
[26] *Njáls saga*, 29–30. See also *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, 105–6, and *Víglundar saga*, 65.
[27] *Víglundar saga*, 76.
[28] For sixteen, see *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 1.226, 2.23. For twenty, see *Grágás (Konungsbók),* 1.17, 1.129, 1.170, 1.226, 2.184; *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók),* 156, 162; and *Jónsbók*, 89. See also Hansen, 'Representations of Childhood', 60–4, and Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood', 49.

perceived maturation.[29] As was the case with boys, the laws provide little indication of the minimum age for female sexual or marital activity.[30] Beyond a reference to sixteen-year-old widows, the only clear codification in this regard is the repetition of the Canon Law minimum marriage age of twelve in *Kristinréttur Árna Þorlákssonar*.[31] As above, this reticence can be overcome by examining literary depictions.

Numerous sagas describe women as having reached appropriate ages for courtship and marriage, which demonstrates perceptions of a lower limit for such activities. This concept can be expressed via circumlocutions such as 'haf[a] aldr til' (to have reached the required age) or — even more convincingly, since it shows sociolinguistic entrenchment — the more specialised term 'gjafvaxta' (marriage-grown).[32] *Hallfreðar saga* and *Vatnsdœla saga* also feature an instructive verse on the subject:

> Allar vildu meyjar
> með Ingólfi ganga,
> þær er vaxnar váru;
> vesǫl kvazk hon æ til lítil.
>
> (All maidens wished
> to go with Ingólfr
> those who were full-grown;
> 'Woe' said she 'O! too little.')[33]

As Hansen notes, this verse emphasises Ingólfr Þorsteinsson's eligibility by suggesting his desirability even to 'asexual' female children.[34] Her inference corroborates the medieval Icelandic conception of a lower threshold for female romantic or sexual urges.

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[29] *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 1.225, 1.170; *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók)*, 156.
[30] Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood', 49; Hansen, 'Representations of Childhood', 61; *WONS*, 22.
[31] *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 1.225; *Kristinréttur Árna Þorlákssonar*, 169.
[32] *Víglundar saga*, 65; *Heiðarvíga saga* 221; *Grettis saga* 135; *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, 476. See also Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze', 25.
[33] *Vatnsdœla saga*, 100. See also *Hallfreðar saga*, 142.
[34] Hansen, 'Representations of Childhood', 128.

However, this verse evokes some sympathy for the 'til lítil' maiden's contravention of this norm, perhaps intimating that medieval Icelanders recognised but did not necessarily condemn the possibility of immature girls developing romantic desires. Specifically, this verse implies the little girl's affections to be flattering to Ingólfr, and also spares her from extreme opprobrium by foregrounding her admirable self-restraint. The girl recognises her age-based ineligibility, implying that her deviant desires are not converted into presumably more reprehensible actions.

We may turn to supernatural episodes for less ambiguous, not to mention less forgiving, evidence on the subject of inappropriately youthful female libidinousness. As I have written elsewhere, the 'troll-girl revelation' motif condemns female infantile sexuality clearly and ruthlessly.[35] In particular, the iteration of this trope in *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra* demonstrates its composers' and audiences' consideration of the hypothetical sexuality of five- and six-year-old females, which is presented as extremely undesirable.[36] This episode not only criticises the hypersexuality of the troll-children, however. The saga conceals their ages from both Hálfdan and the audience until the former has dispatched them in an erotically suggestive manner, thereby becoming complicit in their shame. Hence, *Hálfdanar saga* also condemns paedophilia: the perception and treatment of girls around these ages as erotic entities. In keeping with this interpretation, Hansen notes that not only boys, but also girls seem to have been exempt from childhood engagements and marriages in medieval Iceland.[37] Though episodes like Hallgerðr's demonstrate that girls could be assessed as potential partners while still children, they could not be treated as such until they were older.

[35] Matthew Roby, 'The "Troll-Girl Revelation" Motif: Female Infantile Sexuality and Paedophilia in *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra* and *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar*', *Scandinavian Studies*, forthcoming.
[36] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 333–4.
[37] Hansen, 'Representations of Childhood', 61.

As intimated in Ketilríðr's dismissal of Víglundr's proposal, it seems that girls at least as old as ten were still considered too young for marriage. A similar notion is presented in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*. Here, the mutual and clearly matrimonially motivated flirtations of the twelve-year-old Gunnlaugr and Helga are considered 'mikit gaman' (great fun) by the household. This reaction might indicate the increasing acceptance of the romantic activities of girls around this age. However, Helga's father makes it clear that a formal proposal of marriage remains unacceptable at this time.[38] Nonetheless, there are numerous depictions in which girls of similar ages are identified as sexually and even matrimonially appropriate entities. In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, Yrsa is specified to be twelve when she begins tending her herd. However, perhaps conspicuously, she is stated to turn thirteen before Helgi stumbles upon her and is overcome with desire, possibly suggesting that this was an age at which women could reasonably be considered sexually attractive.[39] Similarly, returning to the 'troll-girl revelation' motif, *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar* substantially raises the ages of its hypersexual troll-girls. This is an emendation that I argue was prompted by the uneasiness of one or more *sögumenn* with the female infantile sexuality and/or paedophilia expressed in *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*. Hence, it seems plausible that the twelve- and thirteen-year-old troll-girls depicted in this *þáttr* reflect contemporaneous notions of the earliest points at which their sexuality, though still clearly deviant, was not considered abhorrent from an age-based perspective.[40] There are also numerous examples in which female marriage around this age is presented as a hypothetical possibility. In *Vilmundar saga viðutan*, a king starts taking precautions against the imminent courtship of his daughter

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[38] *Gunnlaugs saga*, 60.
[39] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 18–19.
[40] *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar*, 50. The notion that this age bracket was a contentious threshold is corroborated in the fact that there is further variation between manuscripts of *Jökuls þáttr*, with the troll-girls' ages shifting between eleven and thirteen; Roby, 'Troll-Girl Revelation', forthcoming.

once she turns twelve.[41] Twelve is also the age at which Brynhildr Grímsdóttir receives her first marriage proposal.[42] Neither of these examples actually leads to marriage, but they intimate that girls as young as twelve could be plausibly perceived in this light.

The youngest ages at which women are actually depicted as brides are between twelve and fifteen; however, such early matrimony seems to have been both exceptional and controversial. The three youngest brides in the *Íslendingasögur* and *samtíðarsögur* are the fifteen-year-old Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, the fourteen-year-old Þorgerðr Glúmsdóttir, and the thirteen-year-old Ingibjörg Sturludóttir.[43] The first two of these marriages ultimately prove problematic, leading Callow to suggest that the brides' ages are specified in order to imply their inappropriate youth.[44] The third is also far from straightforward; it is a marriage of political exigency and, after the death of her husband shortly afterwards, Ingibjörg is described as still a 'barn at aldri' (child in years).[45] Similarly youthful nuptials are attested in later medieval sources, when they also seem to have been contentious. In 1431, when Þórdís Magnússdóttir sought to annul her ten-year-long marriage, her bridal age of fifteen is cited seemingly to corroborate that she could not have consented to the match. Though Þórdís's marriage was initially conducted and ultimately upheld by church authorities, which intimates tacit societal endorsement, her case suggests that women around this age could be considered too young for matrimony.[46] Further evidence that the cusp of a woman's teenage years was considered an absolute minimum threshold for matrimony can be found by returning yet again to supernatural episodes. A troll-girl in *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts* proclaims herself to be a twelve-year-old bride, though her status as not only a supernatural Other but also an

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[41] *Vilmundar saga viðutan*, 142–5.
[42] *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, 277.
[43] *Laxdœla saga*, 93; *Njáls saga*, 88–90; *Íslendinga saga*, 480–90.
[44] Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood', 53–4.
[45] *Íslendinga saga*, 494.
[46] *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, 4.448–9.

antagonist diminishes her potential as a model of acceptable norms.[47] *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar* seems more instructive, since here even a similarly Othered troll-king cannot countenance a wedding between his seven-year-old son and an eight-year-old human princess he has captured. He thus waits five years until the troll-boy is twelve and she thirteen.[48] This match is ultimately called off, since Jökull kills this troll-father and takes the princess for himself. However, the *þáttr* still ends with two narratively sanctioned marriages, featuring thirteen- and fourteen-year-old brides, the former a troll and the latter a human.[49]

The absolute minimum age at which women could be considered sexually and matrimonially appropriate entities thus seems to have been around the cusp of their teenage years. This approximately corresponds to the aforementioned Canon Law prescription, and to the commonly repeated speculation that medieval Icelandic brides had to be of reproductive age, a development that is thought to have occurred on average between twelve and fifteen.[50] However, the average female marriage age seems to have been considerably higher. Considering the implication that Þorgerðr and Guðrún are inappropriately young brides, Callow suspects that sixteen was considered a more reasonable age for female nuptials.[51] Moreover, based on a survey of the *samtíðarsögur*, Philadelphia Ricketts posits an average of around twenty-one.[52] Gunnlaugr's eventual

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[47] *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, 369.
[48] *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar*, 54–6. For a similar episode, see *Ectors saga*, 96.
[49] *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar*, 54–9.
[50] Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity*, 73; Hansen, 'Representations of Childhood', 61; Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze', 7. See also Darrell Amundsen and Carol Diers, 'The Age of Menarche in Medieval Europe', *Human Biology* 45/3 (1973), 368.
[51] Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood', 49, 53–4.
[52] Ricketts, *High-Ranking Widows*, 144. See also *WONS*, 39. This relatively high female marriage age, in addition to the fact that it seems similar to male marriage age, is somewhat unusual by broader European standards, according to which women married much younger than men. See Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters*, 76; Bresc, 'Europe: Town and Country', 460–6; Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages,* 30. However, as Bresc also notes, a higher female marriage age — around the age of twenty — does seem to have been more usual in late medieval Northern

engagement to Helga substantiates these hypotheses. Though clearly interested in matrimony when they are both twelve, Gunnlaugr waits until eighteen to propose formally. Her father's hypothetical willingness suggests that such negotiations were considered reasonable at this age. However, since Gunnlaugr yearns for an overseas quest, their engagement is postponed by a further three years, with marriage planned to occur around the age of twenty-one.[53] As primarily delineated by conjugal eligibility, female adolescent maturation thus seems to have begun during a woman's teenage years, beginning around the age of thirteen and becoming increasingly uncontroversial as she approached her mid- and late teens.

Once they attain this minimum age of eligibility, women begin to be portrayed as sexually desirable, with youth a predictable factor in their attractiveness. This notion is demonstrated cogently in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*. When the spell that had transformed Princess Ingibjörg into an aged troll-woman is lifted, she returns to the 'blóma sem hún hafði áðr haft í æsku sinni' (bloom which she had previously had in her youth), at which point she becomes an appropriate match for the protagonist.[54] They do not only become desirable, however. As shown in the verse cited above, 'meyjar' (women, especially young, unmarried, and/or virginal) also begin to develop desires of their own once they are 'vaxnar' (grown).[55] As also suggested above, this verse characterises its maidens' urges as acceptable and even desirable, since they bolster

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Europe. See Bresc, 'Europe: Town and Country', 466, as well as Conor McCarthy, *Marriage in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2004), 17; P. J. P. Goldberg, 'Marriage, Migration, and Servanthood: The York Cause Paper Evidence', in *Woman Is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society, c. 1200–1500* (Stroud, 1992), 3–13; and, ultimately, J. Hajnal, 'European Marriage Patterns in Perspective', in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley, eds., *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* (London, 1965), 101–20.

[53] *Gunnlaugs saga*, 59–68.

[54] *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, 231. For other explicit associations between female youth and sexual attractiveness, see *Adonias saga*, 106, 176; *Eyrbyggja saga*, 70; *Grettis saga*, 208; and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 41.

[55] *Vatnsdæla saga*, 100.

Ingólfr's masculine capital. This implication is lent further protagonistic support in Ingólfr's burial instructions. He wants to be interred closer to the road than his kinsmen, so that the 'Vantsdal-meyj[ar]' (maidens of Vatnsdalr) will remember him better.[56] Of course, female lust can be depicted as perverse when taken to extremes, especially through the use of supernatural symbolism.[57] However, based on instances like these from *Vatnsdœla saga* and numerous others discussed below, it seems that the sexual and/or romantic urges of young women were not always decried in medieval Iceland.

As demonstrated in the 'temporary troll lover' episodes in the previous chapter, the notion of females acting on such desires — taking sexual initiative and giving men the opportunity for rambunctious sexual play — could also be imagined in a positive light. However, beyond exceptional episodes like that of Valgerðr inviting flirtation by hiding a ball under her skirts, it seems that supernatural distance — or another form of Othering, ethnic, socio-economic, or otherwise — was generally required to depict such female initiative favourably.[58] Naturalistic saga episodes usually indicate that women converting romantic desires into advances was considered deviant and detrimental. *Ljósvetninga saga* contains one of the most thoroughgoing expressions of such concerns, though its pertinence to female youth is only implicit.[59] Here, Friðgerðr Ísólfsdóttir is the subject of one of the corpus's many 'illicit love visits'. Her first suitor is an 'ungr' (young) man, whose age might have influenced interpretations of Friðgerðr by association.[60] Unlike what Jochens notes to be the majority of women in such positions, Fríðgerðr is implied to be active in her courtship.[61] Rather than discouraging the unnamed suitor, whose anonymity alone might corroborate his less active role in the

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[56] *Vatnsdœla saga*, 109.
[57] Consider *Egils saga einhenda*, 176, and *Þrymskviða*, 424.
[58] *Hallfreðar saga*, 142.
[59] For a prior assumption of her youth, see Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature', 39.
[60] *Ljósvetninga saga*, 63–4.
[61] Jochens, 'Illicit Love Visit', 377.

affair, Ísólfr attempts to solve this problem by sending his daughter to live with the local *goði*, Eyjólfr. Ísólfr states that it is *her* presence that is diminishing the family's honour and implies that this chieftain might be able to handle her better.[62] The implication of Friðgerðr's deviant sexual activeness is soon made clearer. Impeded by bad weather on her journey to Eyjólfr's homestead, Friðgerðr chooses to lodge elsewhere. She eventually moves to Veisa, where she has sexual liaisons with at least one man, including one of the householder's adolescent foster-sons. When she becomes pregnant, Friðgerðr and Ísólfr both seek admissions of paternity and compensation from this householder, but are rebuffed because her alleged promiscuity prevents any one man's responsibility from being ascertained. She is twice slandered as 'ekki fálynd' (not low-spirited [i.e. sexually unreserved]) and once accused of having 'fjǫllyndi' (extreme spiritedness [i.e. flirtatiousness]).[63] As Keens notes, Friðgerðr's culpability is never actually specified.[64] What is clear is that — if it were true — an unmarried woman's libidinous behaviour would have been considered problematic, detrimental to her family's honour, and liable to cause legal or social issues regarding potential offspring.

Hence, although female conjugal urges are sometimes described as beneficial in and of themselves, eligible young women seem to have been expected not to convert these urges into actions. *Jónsbók* supports this notion, suggesting that women's pre-marital sexual activities were detrimental to their marital and inheritance prospects, while such activity among men is expressly permitted.[65] Of course, we must presume that there was some acceptance of female pre-marital sex during the period of entrenched concubinage around the thirteenth century, since former *frillur* — including Vigdís Gíslsdóttir, Sturla Sighvatsson's pre-marital mistress — subsequently marry other men

[62] *Ljósvetninga saga*, 64.
[63] *Ljósvetninga saga*, 65–70.
[64] Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature', 40.
[65] *Jónsbók*, 94–6. See also Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity*, 177.

with no discernible complications.[66] However, in that context, the sexual activities of such women as concubines were presumably sanctioned or even directed by their *giptingarmenn*, while *Grágás* indicates that surreptitious sex, including that in which young women were themselves complicit, was prohibited.[67]

Young women were not only expected to refrain from instigating or participating in informal sexual liaisons. Potential brides also seem to have been expected to be passive in their matrimonial negotiations. This concept is presented in *Haukdœla þáttr*, one of the most sustained explorations of youthful female conjugal concerns in the corpus. Indeed, this *þáttr* is so conspicuously didactic that, despite its presence in the purportedly historical *Sturlunga* compilation, it seems to be more of a parable on this subject.[68] Here, two unmarried sisters, both called Þóra, converse about their nuptial prospects. The fact that they are namesakes is significant. First, it corroborates the episode's fabular nature, constructing these characters as what Joseph Harris has identified elsewhere as distinctly 'un-sagalike' types: blatant foils for direct comparison.[69] Second, it compels the *sögumaðr* to refer to them as 'ellri' (elder) and 'yngri' (younger) Þóra throughout. This draws repeated attention to their relative ages, and perhaps even encourages interpretations of the sisters' divergent behaviours in light of this attribute.[70] Though their numerical ages are not specified, they seem likely to have been considered newly eligible maidens, perhaps in their teens or early twenties. The elder is the primary instigator of their conjugal conversation, demanding that the pair discuss their dream husbands. The younger resists, claiming not to have considered this subject because she is content with things the way they are — living with her parents as a

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[66] *Íslendinga saga*, 479.
[67] Recall Chapter One, n. 110. See also *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 2.36.
[68] Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters*, 143.
[69] Joseph Harris, 'Gender and Genre: Short and Long Forms in Saga Literature', in Susan Deskis and Thomas Hill, eds., *Speak Useful Words and Say Nothing* (Ithaca, 2008), 273.
[70] *Haukdœla þáttr*, 60.

daughter and a maiden, rather than becoming a wife. In true folktale fashion, the younger attempts to discontinue this line of conversation three times. This repetition emphasises not only her indifference and/or uneasiness toward the subject, but also the zeal of her elder sister's matrimonial aspirations. Unable to leave off the subject, the elder reveals her desire for Jón Sigmundarson, an eligible bachelor, at which point the younger discloses that she would like to marry Þorvaldr Gizurarson, an even higher prize. The younger Þóra's wish is somewhat grisly, since it would require the death of Þorvaldr's paramour, Jóra Klængsdóttir. However, as is substantiated later, her prediction is not only (or not even) primarily a personal desire, but rather an uncanny prescience of — and admittedly contented acquiescence to — her marriage to this man.

Following Jóra's death, the elder Þóra envies her sister's prediction, and tries to arrange this match for herself. When Þorvaldr and Jón happen to visit the Þóras' homestead, they are to sleep in the bed usually belonging to the sisters. The elder knows that Þorvaldr tends to sleep next to the wall and, since this is also where she sleeps, she proposes a pact. If the two men make marriage proposals in the morning, each sister should each have the one who slept in her customary position. The logistics of this arrangement colour the elder's designs with eroticism. Her interest in marrying Þorvaldr becomes enmeshed with her desire to inhabit the same nocturnal, implicitly sexual space, their bodies not physically touching but superimposed in the same proximal location across a temporal gap. Then, in the episode's key revelation of her passivity, the younger Þóra reproaches her sister's matrimonial meddling: 'Hví muntu eigi skil… hversu þú skipar hvílum? En þat mun verða um forlög okkur, sem áðr fyrir ætlat' (Why won't you understand… however you order sleeping arrangements? Things must develop according to our fate, as was intended before).[71] It so happens that Þorvaldr allows Jón first choice

[71] *Haukdœla þáttr*, 62.

of sleeping positions and he chooses the wall instead. The younger Þóra is thus rewarded for her passivity by gaining Þorvaldr's proposal, while the elder is punished with the less eligible match.[72]

The ramifications of this *þáttr* are significant. Since neither Þóra is entirely devoid of matrimonial aspiration, this episode confirms that such desires were not condemnable in and of themselves. Women were expected and even encouraged to develop matrimonial interests once they became eligible. However, especially considering the repeated attention drawn to their relative ages, the sisters' respective behaviours and fates construct a commentary on the nature of this development. The fact that the elder Þóra is overcome with the urge to control her marriage, while the younger is content to await her fate, might indicate that the nature of women's conjugal desires was thought to change over their course of their adolescence. As their maturation advances, women are here presented as becoming increasingly volatile, overcome by the strength of their matrimonial aspirations. The sisters' respective marital matches at the conclusion of the *þáttr* suggest that such overwhelming urges, as well as women's active attempts to fulfil them, were considered ineffectual and undesirable.

Larrington recognises similar commentaries elsewhere, in what she refers to as the 'sisters' quarrel' motif. In both Chretien de Troyes's *Le Conte du Graal* and the Middle High German *Diu Crône*, the judgement of the elder of two sisters is portrayed to be clouded by 'anxiety about her marriage prospects'. Conversely, 'the younger sister, still a child, has no such stake… She speaks from clear-eyed apprehension of the truth.'[73] Curiously, though she also analyses *Haukdœla þáttr*, Larrington does not construe it in this vein. Rather, she focuses on how allegedly 'bold', 'heartless', and 'ambitious' the

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[72] *Haukdœla þáttr*, 60–62.
[73] Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters*, 131–2. See *Conte del Graal*, 1087–1108, and *Diu Crône*, 279–92.

younger sister is in declaring her desire for the greater man, since another woman must die to facilitate this union.[74] However, the younger's callousness does not seem to be the narrative's central focus. First, Larrington misrepresents the younger Þóra's reticence to participate in this discussion at all, as well as the nature of her eventual admission about Þorvaldr. Her marital preference is admitted under pressure, which can hardly be construed as boldness, and is also later implied to have been resignation to fate, rather than macabre jealousy of Jóra Klængsdóttir. Second, as Larrington herself admits, it is the apparently 'heartless' younger Þóra who is rewarded. Because of her 'rel[iance] on fate', she secures the more eminent husband and becomes the mother of Gizurr jarl.[75] Larrington explains this alleged incongruity as the result of the *þáttr*'s folkloric inflections. However, a reading in which the sisters' deserts are congruent with their respective attitudes seems more compelling. Far from being the more 'bold' or 'ambitious' of the pair, the younger sister is a picture of passivity. She does have an uncanny prescience regarding her husband, but she accepts it meekly, seeking neither to gossip about nor influence it, and is ultimately rewarded for her reserve.[76]

Based on this conclusion, we should consider whether medieval Icelandic maidens were ubiquitously expected to be passive in the arrangement of their marriages. As Jochens and others note, it certainly seems that women and their *giptingarmenn* were obliged to await male proposals.[77] This is confirmed proverbially in *Völsunga saga*: 'Fátitt er þat at bjóða fram dætr sínar' (It is a rare thing to offer one's daughter).[78] However, there do seem to have been exceptional circumstances in which this norm

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[74] Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters*, 143.
[75] Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters*, 143.
[76] See also Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature', 89–92.
[77] *WONS*, 24; Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature', 39; Lise Præstgaard Andersen, 'On Valkyries, Shield-Maidens and Other Armed Women in Old Norse Sources and Saxo Grammaticus', tr. Gillian Fellows Jensen, in Rudolf Simek et al., eds., *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz* (Vienna, 2002), 306.
[78] *Völsunga saga*, 54.

could be acceptably contravened. These include when fathers were desperate to ensure their daughters were appropriately married in the face of inappropriate or non-committal advances from other men, or when they were powerful magnates deploying their daughters to consolidate alliances.[79]

Even after being approached by suitors, there are numerous legal and literary references indicating that women were supposed to maintain their passivity, with the consent of their *giptingarmenn* framed as the primary requirement for marriage. *Grágás* and *Jónsbók* both support this model, implying its robustness both during and after the Commonwealth Period.[80] Its prevalence in the thirteenth century is corroborated throughout the *samtíðarsögur*, including in *Haukdœla þáttr*, which depict matrimonial negotiations as exclusively masculine affairs.[81] Sagas from other genres also continue to express support for this model throughout the medieval period. As mentioned above, Ketilríðr's first reason for rebuffing Víglundr's pledge of love is their immaturity. However, her second reason is that this ought to be her father's decision.[82] Finally, as will be discussed in this chapter's second close reading, the *meykonungr* motif generally decries women's rights to control their matrimonial affairs. Following her martial defeat to Hrólfr Gautreksson, the formerly misogamous *meykonungr* Þorbergr is forced to revert to her status as the *mey* Þornbjörg, at which point she contentedly submits father's counsel to marry Hrólfr.[83] The paternalistic model evinced in these examples is referred

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[79] On the former, see Jochens, 'Illicit Love Visit', 365, and *Hallfreðar saga*, 144–5. On the latter, see Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Women and Sexual Politics', 40, and *Íslendinga saga*, 271, 302.
[80] *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 2.34–5, *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók)*, 162; *Jónsbók*, 84–6, 312.
[81] *WONS*, 47–54. See, for example, *Íslendinga saga*, 479–84.
[82] *Víglundar saga*, 76.
[83] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 82–4.

to as 'secular', 'parental', or 'familial consent', and seems to have been the standard pattern for marriage negotiation throughout Iceland's early history.[84]

However, as Agnes Arnórsdóttir demonstrates, an additional model of consent rose to prominence in late medieval Iceland. This is referred to as 'ecclesiastical', 'bridal', or 'mutual consent', and requires the uncoerced agreement of both partners to validate marriage. Initially promulgated in patristic writings, this model was re-asserted by the medieval church in the twelfth century, though it was slow to impact customs in many parts of Europe.[85] It was known to Icelandic clerics as early as 1189, though seems only to have been first prescribed as law in 1275 in *Kristinréttur Árna Þorlákssonar*: 'Heyra skulu og góðir men jáyrði meyjar þeirra' (And good men should hear the maiden's assent).[86] Ratified only six years later, *Jónsbók* seems to represent a backlash against this stipulation, re-affirming the matrimonial control of *giptingarmenn*.[87] However, as shown in a 1314 amendment to *Jónsbók*, as well as an instance of annulment due to lack of consent in 1429, it seems that the mutual consent model did begin to impact medieval Icelandic conceptions and customs in the fourteenth century and later.[88] Moreover, whether as an effort to inculcate mutual consent in the face of its contravention, or — as seems increasingly likely in later texts — as a reflection of genuine Icelandic customs, sagas from throughout the late Middle Ages can show conspicuous support for bridal assent.[89] This is famously true of *Laxdœla saga*. In addition to consistently depicting female consent as contributory to successful marriages,

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[84] Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity*, 21, 75; Agnes Arnórsdóttir, 'Two Models of Marriage? Canon Law and Icelandic Marriage Practice in the Late Middle Ages', in Mia Korpiola, ed., *Nordic Perspectives on Medieval Canon Law* (Helsinki, 1999), 79; *WONS*, 17–20.
[85] Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity*, 69–73.
[86] *Kristinréttur Árna Þorlákssonar*, 167. See also Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity*, 83–7, and *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, 1.287.
[87] Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity*, 95; *WONS*, 46.
[88] *Jónsbók*, 418; *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, 4.394. Recall also n. 46 above.
[89] See *Ketils saga hœngs*, 257; *Njáls saga*, 31–45 *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, 316; *Svarfdœla saga*, 148; and *Víglundar saga*, 73–4.

this saga also includes the exceptional instance of the teenage Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir actively manipulating her matrimonial status.[90] She and Þórðr, the man she truly desires, scheme to contrive their divorces and subsequent union, so that Guðrún's first non-consensual marriage can be superseded by a more successful, consensual one.[91] Excepting their inclusions of the reprehensibly misogamous *meykonungar*, who are usually brought to heel either by their suitors or *giptingarmenn* in apparent defence of male matrimonial control, the *riddarasögur* also repeatedly defend mutual consent.[92] Most notably, the machinations of an evil, trollish mother are thwarted because of her (ludicrously incongruous) resolution that the princess she has kidnapped must consent before marrying her son.[93]

As Agnes also emphasises, the mutual consent ideology did not entirely supplant the practice of familial consent. Rather, both models are portrayed as valid — including as joint requirements — in sources throughout the late Middle Ages and beyond.[94] Indeed, the persistence of familial consent in a context that also recognised mutual consent is indicated in a particular sequence of consultation and referral that is quite common in the sagas. These episodes offer women the chance to decide on their marriage, at which point they elect to defer to their *giptingarmenn*.[95] Hence, to the

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[90] *Laxdœla saga*, 93–4, 206. See Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 1991), 197.

[91] *Laxdœla saga*, 95–6. Guðrún is admittedly already a wife, which — even according the law-codes that show little respect for mutual consent — would have afforded her some control over subsequent marriages; see *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 2.29–30, and *Jónsbók*, 86. See also Chapter Four, ns. 27–8. However, her schemes still represent a unique defence of female control over matrimonial affairs, outshone only by the maiden-king Ingigerðr in the close readings below.

[92] See *Ectors saga*, 106; *Saulus saga ok Nikanors*, 87; and *Sigurðar saga þögla*, 246.

[93] *Valdimars saga*, 60–3.

[94] Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity*, 107–9, 156, 171, 279–81; Bjørn Bandlien, 'The Church's Teachings on Women's Consent: A Threat to Parents and Society in Medieval Norway and Iceland?', in Lars Ivar Hansen ed., *Family, Marriage, and Property Devolution in the Middle Ages* (Trømso, 2000), 72; Agnes Arnórsdóttir, 'Two Models', 89–90.

[95] *Áns saga bogsveigis*, 420, 421; *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, 292; *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, 456; *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, 32; *Laxdœla saga*, 63–5.

question as to whether eligible women were expected to be entirely passive in their sexual and matrimonial futures, the answer is complex. In the thirteenth century, there seems to have been a prevailing imperative that women, especially those marrying for the first time, would be largely uninvolved in their romantic and matrimonial negotiations. However, even at that time, some Icelanders were aware of the doctrinal importance of mutual consent. The latter model is also expressed in some sagas of that period, and goes on feature prominently, alongside familial consent, in texts from the fourteenth century and beyond. The following readings consider how female sexual maturation was considered in relation to these two models of consent.

### An Over-Inquisitive Adolescent…

Some medieval Icelandic sources describe female adolescence as accompanied not only by the onset of women's sexual desirability, but also the burgeoning of their own desires. Acting on these urges is often portrayed as deviant and detrimental, which implicitly reinforces the need to regulate young women's activities in the sexual and conjugal spheres. This notion is presented with exceptional urgency in the following account of a ghostly sexual assault. This episode is primarily attested in *Heiðarvíga saga*, but presumably belonged to the immanent narrative of Víga-Styrr in and around the thirteenth century, as it also appears in *Eyrbyggja saga*. In this episode, Styrr's corpse is stored in a farmstead en-route to burial. During the night, the farmer's two adolescent daughters approach the corpse, with the elder overcome by a frantic and implicitly voyeuristic urge to see his body. She steps too close, causing Styrr to reanimate and — depending on the version — either grasp the girl or speak a suggestive verse. In both cases, the revenant's interaction with this inquisitive adolescent is erotically charged and

may thus be interpreted as a symbolic sexual assault, which in *Heiðarvíga saga* is ultimately fatal. Snorri goði apologises to her father, but the latter demurs, apparently blaming his dead daughter for this tragedy. Hence, though this episode employs a male figure as its monstrous Other, it also refuses to exonerate its female victim. *Heiðarvíga saga* therefore seems to denounce the development and active expression of sexual appetites among female adolescents, warning of much grislier consequences than the naturalistic episodes from *Ljósvetninga saga* and *Haukdæla þáttr* discussed above. Moreover, in its contrasting portrayal of the two girls' behaviours, this episode can be construed as another Icelandic iteration of the 'sisters' quarrel' motif from the latter text. In addition to portraying the elder's urges in more distinctly sexual and perilous terms, *Heiðarvíga saga*'s commentary also bears more specific pertinence to adolescence, since it provides the sisters' ages. This episode depicts female urges as becoming increasingly volatile between fourteen and sixteen, with their deadly consequences implying the need to control female sexuality around that age.

As noted above, the dating of sagas — and therefore the context to which their embedded commentaries pertain — is a knotty issue. However, this is rarely so true as with *Heiðarvíga saga*, which 'is not actually lost, but came as close to being so as any work that exists at all can have done'.[96] David Evans here refers to *Heiðarvíga saga*'s remarkable transmission history, which begins with the separation of its only surviving copy — Holm. Perg. 18 4to — into three fragments before the early eighteenth century. While in the keeping of Árni Magnússon, the fragment containing the first fifteen chapters, which includes the episode under scrutiny here, was destroyed in the Copenhagen Fire of 1728. Árni's assistant, Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík, subsequently

[96] David Evans, review of Bjarni Guðnason, *Túlkun Heiðarvígasögu*, in *Saga-Book* 24 (1997), 361.

composed a version of this lost section from memory. Though he was guided by a list of unusual words he had made when initially examining the vellum, Jón's redaction was made more than a year after this consultation.[97] Hence, though the original manuscript is thought to be late thirteenth-century, a large section of our current version of the saga should be examined with caution insofar as it relates to the Icelandic norms of that time. Not only was it subject to general decay arising from its existence in the memory of a single individual for more than a year, but also it could have been inflected by the norms of Jón's own personal and cultural contexts. This seems especially likely when dealing with controversial subjects like female sexual development.

How reliable is Jón Ólafsson's retelling? Numerous details from the account itself indicate his honest, scholarly attempt to recall the lost fragment. First, he consciously favours his own recollections over conflicting accounts from other sagas, even though deferring to them might have enhanced the credibility of his recollections.[98] Second, rather than fabricating or gleaning them from these other sources, Jón also admits when he cannot recall certain details, indicating his greater interest in accuracy than creating a polished whole.[99] This might also suggest that, when Jón *does* include a specific detail, such as a numerical figure, he does so only when confident in his recollection. However, as Susan Blackall and Joanne Shortt Butler note, the rediscovery of the manuscript's second fragment in 1772, and the final missing leaf in 1951, exposed some errors in Jón's recollection. These include the misremembering of certain names and the omission

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[97] On the history of *Heiðarvíga saga*, see Alison Finlay, 'Interpretation or Over-Interpretation: The Dating of Two *Íslendingasögur*', *Gripla* 14 (2003), 62–3, and Susan Blackall, ed. and tr., '*Heiðarvíga Saga*: A Translation from the Old Icelandic', M.A. Dissertation, Queen's University, Kingston, 1975, vi.
[98] See *Heiðarvíga* saga, 216, n. 2.
[99] See *Heiðarvíga saga*, 215, n. 1.

of introductory exposition for events following the fifteenth chapter.[100] Of the episode in question here, we can be certain that it is not entirely fabricated, since a version of it is described in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Furthermore, Jón himself claims that, though he recalls other sections of the narrative imperfectly, he is confident in his account of the events surrounding Styrr's death.[101] Finally, though this might admittedly indicate Jón's conscious or unconscious reliance on these other texts as sources, the episode's structural and thematic similarities to *Haukdæla þáttr*, as well as a further scene from *Grettis saga*, indicate that Jón's account would not be out of place in the medieval Icelandic context. Providing we explicitly acknowledge our conclusions to be contingent on the unverifiable presumption of the accuracy of Jón's account, we should thus proceed to interpret this sequence from *Heiðarvíga saga* in reference to medieval Icelandic norms from around the thirteenth century. In so doing, I hope to bring this understudied saga and almost entirely unstudied episode into the literary and cultural-historical, rather than exclusively stemmatic, conversation.[102]

Jón's account foregrounds the sisters' ages in their introductions: 'Bóndi átti dœtr tvær; hét ǫnnur Guðríðr; hon var sextán, en hin fjórtán vetra' (The farmer had two daughters; one was called Guðríðr; she was sixteen, and the other was fourteen years old).[103] The point at which these details were introduced in the saga, if they ever were, can never now be discerned. However, the fact that Jón gives their ages such precedence might indicate that they were a noteworthy feature of the original. This might have prompted audiences to consider the sisters' actions in light of their adolescence, as well

[100] Blackall, ed. and tr., '*Heiðarvíga saga*', xxxii, and Joanne Shortt Butler, 'Minding the Gaps: Approaches to Jón Ólafsson's Reconstructed **Víga-Styrs saga*', Unpublished Conference Paper, *Saga Conference*, Háskóli Íslands, Reykjavík, 2018.
[101] Kristian Kålund, ed., *Heiðarvíga saga* (Copenhagen, 1904), 1.
[102] The only scholarship on this episode of which I am aware is in an unpublished Master's thesis; see Fernando Guerrero, 'Stranded in *Miðgarðr*: *Draugar* Folklore in Old Norse Sources', M.Phil. Dissertation, Oslo, University of Oslo, 2003, 127–8.
[103] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 233.

as the two-year gap in their maturation. They lie together in bed, while the body of Víga-Styrr dries by the fire, having become wet during a river-crossing. Jón then describes Guðríðr's insomnia: 'tók þeiri ellri svá mjǫk at óróask, at hon brauzt á hæl ok hnakka. Hin spyrr, hvat veldr; hon segir, at hon hafi heyrt mikit sagt af Víga-Styr, en aldri sét hann, meðan hann var á lífi; nú sé sér á engu meiri fýsn en at sjá hann (the elder experienced such great restlessness that she fought heel and neck. The other asks what is wrong. She says that she has heard much said about Víga-Styrr, but had never seen him while he was alive; now she had no greater desire than to see him).[104] This passage indicates Guðríðr's extreme agitation, with the 'brauzt á hæl ok hnakka' idiom implying, at least in Jón's recollection, the frenetic nature of her distress. This passage also explains that her insomnia is caused by her overwhelming desire to see Styrr's corpse. This urge could be construed platonically via Guðríðr's own explanation: she claims to be impressed by his reputation. However, aside from the sexual capital already implicit in a male champion's reputation — especially when discussed at night, in bed, and among women — other features of this episode characterise Guðríðr's restlessness as erotically charged.[105]

First, 'fýsn' is a euphemism for carnal lust.[106] If Jón recalls the term correctly, its presence in the lost vellum might have conjured sexual interpretations among medieval audiences. A second feature, less contingent on Jón's recollection of specific diction, is Styrr's implicit nakedness. Before commencing its journey, Snorri goði 'bjó' (prepared) Styrr's body, implying its Christian shrouding.[107] The presence of such a garment is confirmed at numerous points, including just before the sisters approach the body, when

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[104] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 233–4.
[105] Recall the sexual and/or conjugal tenor of similar conversations: *Haukdæla þáttr*, 60–1; *Gísla saga*, 30–1.
[106] *Cleasby-Vigfússon*, 184.
[107] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 233.

Jón notes that the 'húð' (hide bag) into which Styrr is sewn has come open during its river-crossing.[108] As medieval audiences would have understood implicitly, Styrr's body would be naked inside this (now compromised) covering.[109] The reanimation of Þórgunna in *Eyrbyggja saga* is an instructive analogue for this detail, since this saga's audiences were likewise expected to assume, without prompting, that her explicit nakedness arose from her shrouding.[110] Therefore, interpretations of Guðríðr's frenetic desire were likely coloured by the implication that she intends to gaze upon Styrr's unclothed body through his torn shroud, contributing to the sexual tenor of her nocturnal agitation.

Once we recognise Styrr's implicit nakedness, this episode becomes oddly reminiscent of another sexual assault, mentioned in the previous chapter: Grettir's rape of the *griðkona*. Like Styrr, Grettir is wet, having swum to the mainland to retrieve fire. He arrives exhausted, bathes in a spring, and falls asleep without dressing. He thus lies in a state of wetness, nakedness, and unconsciousness similar to that of Styrr. Grettir is then approached by two female figures, one of whom, the *griðkona*, is excited to discover his unclothed form. She is especially gleeful to see his exposed penis, which is apparently smaller than expected. The other woman, a *bóndadóttir* (farmer's daughter), cautions her, but the servant's interest in Grettir's genitals proves insurmountable. She makes several impulsive forays towards him, getting closer each time, until Grettir finally grabs and rapes her.[111] *Grettis saga*'s textual history is also uncertain; it is first attested in late fifteenth-century manuscripts, but its composition is usually posited to have been in the

[108] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 234.
[109] See Andrew Dennis et al., eds., *The Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás*, 2 vols. (Winnipeg, 1980, 2000), 1.26, n. 8, and Thomas DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia, 1999), 73.
[110] See Chapter Four, n. 197.
[111] *Grettis saga*, 239–41.

early fourteenth.[112] If medieval audiences were familiar with this episode, its striking similarities to the one in *Heiðarvíga saga* might have spurred them to make intertextual connections, perhaps colouring their interpretations of Guðríðr's motivations with the *griðkona*'s explicit genital voyeurism. Though her urges are less overtly sexual, the actions of the sixteen-year-old Guðríðr are very similar to those of this unfortunate servant: they are intense and frenetic; they are directed towards the prostrate corpse of an inanimate, naked, glistening male form as it dries by a fire; and they threaten to overcome her better judgement, as well as the advice of another, more reserved female figure.

Based on the source of this rational judgement, *Grettis saga* characterises female members of the householding classes as wiser and less sexually volatile than servants. However, in *Heiðarvíga saga*, this commentary follows age-based rather than socio-economic lines. Upon hearing the cause of Guðríðr's frantic preoccupation, her fourteen-year-old sister admonishes her, bluntly asserting that viewing a corpse, especially that of someone so feared in life, is inherently *un*appealing.[113] Based on the difference of opinion between the two sisters, and on the fact that their primary distinguishing features are their respective ages, this episode seems to construct a commentary regarding female adolescent maturation. Coherent with my interpretation of *Haukdæla þáttr*, this episode portrays women as developing from sensible into irrational and even unstable individuals during their adolescence. The insinuation of Guðríðr's scopophilic urges characterises this to be a shift towards specifically sexual volatility, rather than what might have been construed as the primarily socio-economic ambition of the elder Þóra. Moreover, if Jón relates their ages accurately, this instance also provides more specific detail than

[112] Robert Cook, '*Grettis saga*', in *MSAE*, 241–3.
[113] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 234.

*Haukdæla þáttr*, suggesting such changes to occur between fourteen and sixteen. Finally, the *Heiðarvíga saga* episode also employs its supernatural distance to present the consequences of these urges in more exaggerated terms. Guðríðr's punishment is not limited to a marital match with the slightly less eminent of two men. Rather, her adolescent urges are devastating: they cause extreme mental and emotional agitation, as well as leading her into physical and ultimately fatal danger.

Guðríðr initially attempts to follow her sister's advice, but her excitement returns with redoubled intensely. She overrides her sister's protestations and the pair get out of bed to approach the body. Though they creep up to Styrr's naked corpse together, Jón's account repeatedly reminds audiences that the elder is the primary instigator and voyeur: 'ræðr sú ellri ferðinni, en hin ferr eptir… [þær] skyggnask nú sem bezt at honum, ok var sú ellri nærgǫngulari' (the elder leads the way, and the other follows… they now peer as best as they can at him, and the older one was the nearer to him).[114] In response to her intrusive gazing, and in a manner that audiences might recognise from the *Grettis saga* analogue, Styrr then reanimates and assaults her in a distinctly sexual manner.[115]

According to *Eyrbyggja saga*, Styrr 'upp setzt ok helt um miðja dóttur bónda' (sat up and held a farmer's daughter around the middle).[116] Aside from corroborating the existence of the narrative as a whole, this reference affirms the episode's sexual tenor in the medieval context. As Keens demonstrates, terms for women's midsections are frequently employed in euphemisms for sexual touching.[117] Styrr's actions in *Eyrbyggja saga* could therefore have been interpreted as grasping the girl around the waist with libidinous intentions, or even as euphemistic groping at more intimate parts of her body.

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[114] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 234.
[115] On the sexual nature of the revenant Styrr's actions, see also Guerrero, 'Stranded in Miðgarðr', 127–8.
[116] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 153.
[117] Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature', 45.

Hence, it seems probable that the sexual tone recounted by Jón is not invented, but rather featured in his original source and in the medieval immanent narrative more broadly.

In his own account, and perhaps in the lost vellum, the erotic undertones of Styrr's assault are even more explicit and unsettling. In response to Guðríðr's intrusion, the revenant speaks a verse. Though Jón declines to attempt a verbatim reconstruction, he describes its contents:

> Horfinn er fagur farfi, etc., en þó var sama meining fyrst í henni, og var þar nefndur litr, en eigi farfi; nefndi þar í blæju heim eða því líkt, og eigi býður hann henni þar að kyssa sig, heldur segir, að hún muni innan skamms byggja með sér moldbúaheim eða því líkt.
>
> ('Fled is fair hue, etc.', and though the sense was the same [as just quoted] at first, the word used was colour and not hue; then it named the veil-realm or something similar, and he did not ask her to kiss him, but rather said that she would soon reside with him in the soil-dweller's realm, or something similar).[118]

First of all, this note vindicates our cautious attention to the diction of Jón's account, since it establishes that he believes himself capable of recalling specific terms, in this case 'litr' rather than 'farfi'. More significant for my purposes, however, are the sexual undercurrents of the details recalled by Jón. To begin with, he intriguingly dismisses the proposition that Styrr invites Guðríðr to kiss him. This rebuttal of a supposition of unknown origin suggests one of two things. It is possible Jón was so certain of the sexuality of the episode that he believed Styrr's request of a kiss would not have been out of place. Jón's note could thus be interpreted as positing that, even though Styrr did not *literally* ask for a kiss, his similarly sexual motivations are revealed in the following details. Alternatively, this refutation might indicate that someone else who had consulted the manuscript and discussed it with him — possibly Árni Magnússon himself — recalled a kiss where Jón did not. Again, such a scenario would imply the episode's

[118] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 234.

memorably sexual nature, due to which individuals attempting to retell it might accidentally insert erotic actions.[119]

Furthermore, Jón's recollection of Styrr's actual invitation to Guðríðr — to reside with him in 'moldbúaheim' (soil-dweller's realm) or 'blæju heim' (veil-realm) — has distinctly erotic connotations. On the face of it, since they imply Guðríðr's impending interment or funeral respectively, Styrr's words might have been interpreted as non-sexual threats against the girl's life.[120] However, the medieval perception of Styrr's invitation would have been more nuanced, deriving significance from the extremely prevalent elision of the grave and the sexual or conjugal bed throughout the corpus. This trope employs the shared death or committal of lovers as symbols of their permanent union, sometimes even including the implication of post-mortem or trans-mortal sexual contact.[121] Considering the ubiquity of this trope, it is likely that medieval audiences interpreted Styrr's verse, beyond a mere threat against Guðríðr's life, to be an invitation to be his post-mortem romantic or sexual partner. It is tempting to suggest that this not only characterises Styrr as a libidinously motivated revenant, but also heightens the sexual nature of the episode as a whole. It might retrospectively affirm the erotic charge of Guðríðr's nocturnal excitement and voyeurism via talion logic. Just as Grettir

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[119] Despite Jón's statement to the contrary, a reconstruction of Styrr's verse, first appearing in Jón Árnason's nineteenth-century folklore collection, also includes an invitation to kiss the ghost: 'kám er á kampi vorum / kysstu, mær, ef þig lystir' (grime is on my beard / kiss, maiden, if you wish); *Heiðarvíga saga*, 234, n. 1. This implies that other readers, including the author of this reconstructed verse, have interpreted Jón's retelling of this assault as sexual.

[120] *Blæja* refers to a funeral garment, having none of the conjugal connotations modern readers might associate with a bridal veil. The headgear associated with married women was rather the *faldr* (headdress); Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze', 13–14.

[121] See *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, 281–3; *Helreið Brynhildar*, 351; *Hervarar saga*, 197; *Örvar-Odds saga*, 331; *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, 348; and *Völsunga saga* 70. See also Kathleen Self, 'The Valkyrie's Gender: Old Norse Shield Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender', *Feminist Formations* 26/1 (2014), 157, and McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 218–31.

responds to the *griðkona*'s sexual interest in his penis by penetrating her with it, so too might Styrr's libidinous reaction imply the sexual nature of Guðríðr's activities.[122]

Though the girl's implicitly erotic interest in Styrr's naked body has already been established, her intensely negative response indicates that she neither expected nor desired his gruesome sexual advances. Her convulsions upon hearing Styrr's suggestive verse are so great that it takes four people to restrain her. She cries and struggles violently all night, and by morning she is dead.[123] In a general sense, this symbolic rather than naturalistically depicted sexual assault can offer valuable insight into medieval Icelandic conceptions of sex crimes and their consequences. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Grettir's rape of the *griðkona* has no discernible impact on his respectability, at least as far as his host is concerned. Even more alarmingly from a modern standpoint, that episode presents its female victim's response ambiguously: 'Griðka œpði hástǫfum, en svá skilðu þau, at hon frýði eigi á Gretti, um þat er lauk' (The servant woman cried and wept aloud, but they parted in such a manner, that she did not taunt Grettir about that when it was finished).[124] This excerpt could surely be a litotic indication of the *griðkona*'s traumatised silence following this attack. However, its vagueness has also led scholars to suggest that Grettir's rape is portrayed as an appropriate response to the woman's attack on his manhood, and even one she comes to enjoy.[125] The *Grettis saga* rape seems an especially likely candidate for such

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[122] For medieval Icelandic familiarity with talion logic, see especially *Adonias saga*, 226, and William Miller, *Eye for an Eye* (Cambridge, 2006), 51. For the incorporation of this logic into the Old Norse-Icelandic *ergi*-complex, whereby *ergi*-inflected misdeeds are rebuked via sexual or *níð*-inflected punishments, see *Gísla saga*, 10; *Ljósvetninga saga*, 52; *Vatnsdœla saga*, 80; *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, 19; and Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 68.
[123] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 234.
[124] *Grettis saga*, 241.
[125] See Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 123; Carl Phelpstead, 'Size Matters: Penile Problems in Sagas of Icelanders', *Exemplaria* 19/3 (2007), 430; and Jochens, 'Illicit Love Visit', 386. The notion that women might come to enjoy intercourse that begins as rape is not unknown to either medieval European or specifically Icelandic literature; see Louise Sylvester, *The Medieval*

interpretations, since — as mentioned above — the slave and subsequently servant populations seem to have been perceived as sexually available throughout the Icelandic Middle Ages.[126] This attack is more likely to have been interpreted unproblematically than if, for example, Grettir had raped the *bóndadóttir* instead. However, as Fredrik Ljungqvist and others note, even in cases of rape against women from householding families, the medieval Icelandic literary and linguistic corpora are reticent on its negative physiological or emotional impacts, more commonly describing it as a crime against women's *giptingarmenn*.[127] Succinct confirmation of this ideology is found in *Grágás*, which notes that the punishment for various types of illicit sexual contact was the same whether the woman desired them or not.[128] According to this stipulation, rape might have been treated as no more reprehensible than an illicit yet consensual affair, since the key factor was that such sex was not sanctioned by women's legal administrators. When the sagas do imply the harm experienced by householding females upon being raped, as in *Hallfreðar saga*, the cause and nature of their distress are left largely unexplained.[129] Conversely, Styrr's symbolic rape of Guðríðr offers a more detailed and sensitive treatment of the female experience of sexual assault. This event is unambiguously depicted as emotionally traumatic and physically lethal. Its fatal nature might indicate the physical injury that could accompany sexual assault, in addition to symbolising its more conceptual impact on a woman's future prospects.[130] It thus offers valuable evidence for

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*Romance and the Construction of Heterosexuality* (New York, 2008), 52, and *Sigurðar saga þögla*, 203–9.

[126] See Chapter One, ns. 105–7.

[127] Fredrik Ljungqvist, 'Rape in the Icelandic Sagas: An Insight in the Perceptions about Sexual Assaults on Women in the Old Norse World', *Journal of Family History* 40/4 (2015), 434, 437. See, for example, *Króka-Refs saga*, 152. See also *WONL*, 122–5, and Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 89–91.

[128] *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 2.47. This law is specifically about illicit kisses, but the same section also discusses sentences for fornication being the same whether the woman wishes to prosecute or not, which might likewise refer to her consent, or lack thereof, to the act itself.

[129] See *Hallfreðar saga*, 180–6.

[130] See Chapter One, ns. 119, 302–3.

the conception of rape as an emotional, physical, and social offence to the woman in question, long before its more assured conceptualisation in such terms, which Agnes Arnórsdóttir only confidently locates in the sixteenth century.[131]

However, on the subject of the female victim's age, this episode bears more specific commentary. Since Jón's recollection makes such explicit reference to the fact that she is sixteen years old, and two years older than the sister whose reticence keeps her out of harm's way, this episode might be interpreted to present the dangers of sexual assault in reference to female maturation. Since Styrr is the monstrously Othered figure, it is possible that medieval audiences interpreted him as primarily culpable in this attack. The ensuing commentary might then have been that women become more susceptible to the predations of sexual fiends once they reached a certain age, level of physical development, or eligible status. The corpus is replete with instances that would support such an interpretation, in which malevolent characters — often supernaturally, ethnically, or otherwise Othered — prey on females who have reached sexual maturity, sometimes wives, but also often daughters and specifically 'ung[ar]' women.[132] Indeed, there are even instances that state the adolescent ages of such vulnerable females. *Laxdœla saga* repeatedly specifies that Melkorka is kidnapped and sold into slavery at the age of fifteen.[133] Since they first encounter Melkorka as a sex slave, audiences might have inferred that she was kidnapped with this purpose in mind.[134] Such episodes indicate a widespread recognition of the sexual danger hovering over young women as they enter their sexually available and marriageable years, to which *Heiðarvíga saga* could certainly contribute. It might imply, based on the sisters' respective ages, that the sixteen-

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[131] Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity*, 284.
[132] *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, 291. See also *Adonias saga*, 176; *Egils saga*, 201–6; *Grettis saga*, 62; and *Ljósvetninga saga*, 3–4.
[133] *Laxdœla saga*, 27–8, 58.
[134] *Laxdœla saga*, 22–5.

year-old Guðríðr was in greater intrinsic danger because of her more advanced sexual maturity and desirability.

However, though this commentary, in which the monstered Styrr is blamed for this assault, is potentially valid, it is not the primary implication of Jón's account. To begin with, this interpretation cannot account for the fact that, based on the conclusions presented above, Guðríðr's fourteen-year-old sister should also have been considered sexually mature in medieval Iceland. Of course, this might relate to Jón Ólafsson's own cultural context. Remembering that one sister was sexually developed while the other was not, he might have given Guðríðr's sister an age that seemed inappropriately young to him but would not have to medieval Icelanders. This is unlikely, however, since the ages of consent and marriageability remained as low as twelve in many European countries, including Denmark, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[135] We must therefore ask: what differentiates the two sisters that could have been interpreted as responsible for their contrasting fates in this episode? I posit that Jón's recollection presents Guðríðr's sexually connoted inquisitiveness as partially, if not chiefly, responsible for her sexual assault. From a modern standpoint, this seems to downplay the culpability of the real perpetrator of this act and might be seen as 'victim blaming'. However, the medieval text, at least as Jón presents it, compels interpretations in precisely these terms.

In addition to the fact that Guðríðr becomes the victim of this attack because — like the reckless *griðkona* — she draws physically closer to Styrr than her sister, the saga elicits such conclusions in her father's response to Snorri goði's condolences: 'Bóndi

[135] Vern Bullough, 'Age of Consent: A Historical Overview', *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality* 16/2–3 (2005), 37, and Martin Killias, 'The Emergence of a New Taboo: The Desexualization of Youth in Western Societies Since 1800', *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 8/4 (2000), 466. In Denmark, the age of consent of twelve was first legislated in the mid-nineteenth century; see Killias, 'Emergence of a New Taboo', 466.

svarar, at hann hafi enga skuld í, þótt svá illa hafi til tekizk, heldr sé þat óskǫp dóttur sinnar' (The farmer says that he [Snorri] had no blame, though things had gone badly; rather, that would be the ill fate of his daughter).[136] The key term requiring contextualisation here is 'óskǫp'. In its singular, non-negated form, *skap* refers to an individual's innate qualities, including temperament or mood. However, the plural *skǫp/sköp* more often refers to fate, with its negated form referring to ill fate or bad luck, as translated by Keneva Kunz.[137] Hence, this statement might abdicate the allocation of blame altogether. However, when considered in light of scholarship on medieval Icelandic conceptions of luck and fate, Guðríðr's father's words take on deeper significance. As Bettina Sommer and Gareth Evans note, fate does not seem to have been understood as something affecting individuals as passive objects. Rather, it is usually correlated to 'an innate quality of the character in question', and could be influenced by particular activities.[138] Sommer asserts that the most common behaviours negatively impacting fate were those comprising the '*ergi*-complex', which — for women — included libidinousness.[139] Hence, if interpreted as luck or fate, the 'óskǫp' attributed to Guðríðr here might have been understood as the logical result of her personality, perhaps specifically her sexually connoted curiosity and activeness in pursuing it. Moreover, the plural term *óskǫp/ósköp is* also attested in sagas where it unambiguously refers to the undesirable traits of the individual in question. For example, in an episode that will be discussed in the following chapter, it is used to describe the wickedness of a trollish queen. Hvít's 'óskö[p]' are hardly implied to be the result of random luck, but rather

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[136] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 235.
[137] Keneva Kunz, tr., '*The Saga of the Slayings on the Heath*', in Viðar Hreinsson et al., eds., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders including 49 Tales*, 5 vols. (Reykjavík, 1997), 4.81.
[138] Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 142. See also Bettina Sommer, 'The Norse Concept of Luck', *Scandinavian Studies* 79/3 (2007), 287–93.
[139] Sommer, 'Norse Concept of Luck', 288–91. On female *ergi*, see Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Hildr's Ring: A Problem in *Ragnarsdrápa*', *Medieval Scandinavia* 6 (1973), 75–92. See also n. 57 above.

pertain to her general, as well as specifically sexual, deviance.[140] Hence, closer to the translation by Susan Blackall and following the meaning of the term in the singular, it seems that óskǫp' could also have implied 'ill mind' or 'ill temperament', referring to Guðríðr's disordered or even wicked personality.[141] If Jón Ólafsson is correct in recalling this dialogue between Snorri and the father, which refers to some aspect of Guðríðr's character as responsible for this tragedy — possibly using the specific term 'óskǫp' — this episode would seem to apportion blame to the adolescent girl for her symbolic sexual assault.

The ensuing commentary would be that the sixteen-year-old Guðríðr has developed erotically charged urges that are doubly detrimental to her character. In centripetal terms, they cause her to lose control of her internal state: she becomes restless, irrational, and singularly driven by implicitly sexual urges. In centrifugal terms, her inability to resist acting on these urges puts her in a compromising sexual situation, leading to emotional and ultimately fatal injuries for which she is presented as jointly or even chiefly to blame. Building on conclusions derived from *Haukdœla þáttr*, the respective ages and activities of Guðríðr and her sister corroborate the notion that adolescent women might have been thought to become more sexually volatile as they matured. At fourteen, still in the early years of her sexual development, Guðríðr's sister is able to retain a rational and non-erotically dominated outlook, which keeps her out of harm's way. However, as their adolescence wears on, women's sexual energies are here characterised as becoming increasingly chaotic, which can lead to potentially dangerous urges and behaviours.

[140] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 50.
[141] Blackall, ed. and tr. '*Heiðarvíga saga*', 26.

Unlike young men, whose adolescence is primarily portrayed as an empowering transition, the developments embodied by Guðríðr might have been considered to necessitate young women taking on new disenfranchisements. When they were a- or proto-sexual children, their limitations were correspondingly non-erotic, excepting the blanket notion — demonstrated in the 'troll girl revelation' motif — that sexual activity was prohibited to them. However, as adolescent females matured, they seem to have assumed more specific romantic and sexual restrictions. For one, this episode might decry their budding erotic activeness altogether, perhaps signifying the need to deny young women the opportunity to express their sexual appetites. Traces of such impulses can be found in the 'illicit love visit' trope, most vividly in Steingerðr's father's attempts to lock her up, or Friðgerðr's father's to move her away, to prevent their willing dalliance.[142] The legendary trope of enclosing eligible women in fortressed bowers might also relate to such concepts; this could be a solution not only to their increased desirability, but also to their newfound erotic instability.[143] On the other hand — as will be considered in the following reading of the *meykonungr* trope — this episode might imply the need for such intensifying sexuality to be controlled and redirected, perhaps via sanctioned matrimonial negotiations. Again, this impulse can also be seen in some 'illicit love visits', in which *giptingarmenn* either implore their kinswomen's suitors to make

[142] *Kormáks saga*, 218; *Ljósvetninga saga*, 64.

[143] See n. 41 above. In *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, Alfífa's response to Hálfdan's invasion of the maidens' bower corroborates such concerns: 'Engan mann hefi ek sét væna en þik, ok þat vilda ek, at þit Marsibil, frændkona mín, attizt' (I have never seen a more beautiful man than you, and I wish that you would marry Marsibil, my kinswoman); *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 338–9. This example contrasts with those in *Haukdæla þáttr* and *Heiðarvíga saga*. Though their ages are not foregrounded, Alfífa seems younger than Marsibil. She is old enough to marry at the end of the saga, but is also portrayed playing on the floor like Hallgerðr just before that point; *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 344. Here, however, Alfífa is the more conjugally eager of the two maidens, while the elder is more rational and subdued. This still suggests perceptions of a period of volatility associated with female youth, but perhaps indicates that this was not considered permanent; it might abate as women become mature adults.

formal marriage proposals, or find other, more respectable men to do so.[144] However, in *Heiðarvíga saga*, this imperative to control sexual behaviour is not directed, as in most ‘illicit love visits’, at informal and disrespectful male advances, but rather at female sexual volatility. Considering the chaotic nature of adolescent female urges presented in *Heiðarvíga saga*, its commentary if interpreted in relation to matrimony would presumably have built on that in *Haukdæla þáttr*. *Heiðarvíga saga* seems to prescribe female *passivity* in romantic matters, in line with the familial consent model presented above.

**… and a Matrimonially Minded Maiden-King**

Guðríðr’s symbolic sexual assault can be seen to defend familial consent as a safeguard against the sexual volatility of female adolescence. As mentioned above, the majority of *meykonungr* romances also defend this doctrine, though taking precisely the opposite tack. These sagas decry the misogamy of their maiden-king characters and support their coercion into marriage by male figures: *giptingarmenn*, suitors, or both. However, the unique maiden-king romance *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* portrays a middle ground between the volatile sexuality of Guðríðr and the equally undesirable misogamy of almost all *meykonungar*. Princess Ingigerðr begins the saga with a commendable marital stance: reserved yet receptive to the prospect of marriage. Ingigerðr does subsequently develop the misogamy common to all *meykonungar*; however, this is the result of her stepmother’s evil curse and runs contrary to her own latent sentiments. Once this spell is lifted, *Sigrgarðs saga* terminates its heroine’s misogamy, but not in a manner that promotes familial over mutual consent. By simply allowing Ingigerðr to return to her

[144] See *Fóstbræðra saga*, 161; *Hallfreðar saga*, 144–5; and *Kormáks saga*, 224–5.

former state of reserved marriageability, this conclusion defends female conjugal aspirations and consent as essential components of marriage. The saga takes further significant advantage of this supernatural spell to distance Ingigerðr from her words and actions while enthralled. The curse provides a platform for her to express her marital and even sexual desires, and to play an exceptionally active role in the arrangement of her marriage. Indeed, the curse permits Ingigerðr to be even more influential in organising this match than Sigrgarðr, her eventual husband. *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* thus represents one of the sagas' most emphatic vindications of the aspirations and even active involvements of women in matrimonial affairs. It might thus corroborate the robustness of the mutual consent doctrine in the fifteenth-century Icelandic society of its composition and reception.[145]

The maiden-king sagas depict women in positions of supreme political power. These figures tend to be staunchly opposed to relinquishing control to male suitors, who must therefore defeat and dominate them. The *meykonungr* trope was enormously popular in late medieval Iceland, appearing in no fewer than twelve *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*.[146] Moreover, though aspects of this trope might betray foreign influence, the development of the *meykonungr* as she appears in the sagas has been described as a distinctly Icelandic phenomenon.[147] Something about this trope certainly seems to have resonated with medieval Icelanders, which has compelled many prior scholars to consider its significance. To begin with, maiden-king narratives have long been interpreted as escapist fantasies. Heterosexual men might have enjoyed imagining flirtations with such powerful women, as well as the more disturbing idea of conquering

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[145] On this sagas' fifteenth-century attestation and supposed composition dates, see Jürg Glauser, '*Sigrgarðs saga frækna*', in *MSAE*, 582.
[146] *WONL*, 164, n. 2.
[147] Kalinke, *Bridal Quest*, 207.

or even raping them into submission, as often happens in these narratives.[148] Although this is problematised by their eventual and sometimes humiliating defeats, women might also have relished *meykonungr* narratives as fantasies of the supremacy usually beyond their reach.[149] In her political and even military activities, the *meykonungr* inhabits a distinctly masculine role before her capitulation. Some go so far as to adopt masculine names and pronouns, which are respected by other characters and even the narrator.[150] Hence, scholars have also suggested that the *meykonungr* reflects contemplations of the imagined flexibility, but ultimate intransigence, of medieval Icelandic gender norms.[151]

In an influential study, and self-proclaimedly the first to connect the trope to a specific Icelandic custom, Carol Clover asserts that the maiden-king is a literary embodiment of the 'daughter-clause' from *Grágás*.[152] This clause stipulates that, in the absence of male heirs, women could act as surrogate sons, recipients of wergild and inheritance, and even prosecutors in cases of feud.[153] An incidental component of Clover's argument pertains to marriage. Since most *meykonungar* are misogamous, Clover suggests that they might symbolise the 'choosy and even reluctant' matrimonial stances of these female sons, whose special rights would dissolve once married.[154] Other scholars have speculated further on connections between maiden-kings and marital norms. Expanding Clover's argument to account not only for the *meykonungr*'s reluctance to marry, but also for her near-ubiquitous defeat and domination, Jóhanna

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[148] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Gender, Humour, and Power', 220; Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 111–12; Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 180. See also *Gibbons saga*, 75, and *Sigurðar saga þögla*, 200–1.
[149] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Gender', in Ármann and Sverrir Jakobsson, eds., *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (New York, 2017), 234; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Gender, Humour, and Power', 222; Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 99, 106.
[150] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 55.
[151] Self, 'The Valkyrie's Gender', 146–66; Layher, 'Caught Between Worlds', 185–91.
[152] Carol Clover, 'Maiden Warriors and Other Sons', *JEGP* 85/1 (1986), 46–8.
[153] *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 1.200–1.
[154] Clover, 'Maiden Warriors', 47.

Katrín Friðriksdóttir suggests that most iterations of the trope do not merely reveal considerations about the 'choos[iness]' of certain women. Rather, they condemn such women, demanding that they be forced out of their misogamy and be compelled to marry.[155]

Of course, these sagas therefore suggest that it was obligatory for women to be matrimonially available, which could already nuance the conclusions of the close reading above. Just as *Haukdœla þáttr* and *Heiðarvíga saga* warn against young women developing excessive marital or sexual urges, these maiden-king romances indicate that it was equally deviant for young women to exempt themselves from romantic interactions altogether.[156] These sagas might thus have been construed to encourage women's activeness in aspiring to marriage, perhaps in a manner aligned with mutual consent. However, since most maiden-kings do not abandon their misogamy willingly, but must instead be overcome by male suitors and/or *giptingarmenn*, the standard iteration of the trope does not necessarily prescribe that women develop such aspirations on their own. Rather, these texts imply the redundancy of such development, affirming the power of male figures to enforce matrimonial availability irrespective of the female stance. Hence, as Jóhanna Katrín suggests, they actually seem to denounce women's rights to choose between their suitors and instead support their *inactivity* in matrimonial negotiations: the doctrine of familial consent.[157] Moreover, in reference to female sexual maturation, the role played by the successful male suitors in most maiden-king romances might further nuance this interpretation. Once forcibly bedded and/or wedded, the majority of former

[155] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Gender, Humour, and Power', 219–23; *WONL*, 108, 129; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'From Heroic Legend', 242. See also Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 96, and Kalinke, *Bridal Quest*, 83, 130–3.
[156] An obvious caveat is taking holy orders, which *Grágás* presents as an exceptional justification for women to refuse marriage; *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók)*, 156.
[157] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'From Heroic Legend', 242.

*meykonungar* find themselves happily married.[158] These sagas might therefore suggest that women ought only to develop conjugal urges when compelled to do so in courtship, marriage, and/or sexual intercourse.[159] To an even greater extent than with male sexual awakening in the 'temporary troll lover' episodes, female sexual development is thus depicted as contingent on transformative erotic contact with members of the opposite sex. Such *meykonungar* not only need men to properly inhabit their sexual roles, but even to desire sexual concourse in the first place. Since these conclusions are derived from the most common iterations of the *meykonungr* trope, the possibility that they indicate prevalent medieval Icelandic notions cannot be overlooked.

However, Jóhanna Katrín also notes an exception to these romances' propensity to promote the male overthrow of women's misogamy, and their attendant defence of familial consent. She points to the maiden-king Nitida's uncoerced acceptance of a marriage proposal, which she argues supports the doctrine of mutual consent instead.[160] However, *Nitida saga* is not the sole exception in this manner. Another maiden-king's choice of good suitor over bad — admittedly under martial threats from the latter, but certainly not the result of violent or humiliating overthrow — is depicted in *Ála-Flekks saga*.[161] Furthermore, Princess Ingigerðr in *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* represents an even greater exception. This *meykonungr* does not merely agree to, but rather actively arranges the marriage to which she ultimately assents, a potentially deviant act that I argue is permitted by the supernatural veil of her misogamous curse.

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[158] See *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 84; *Sigurðar saga þögla*, 258; and *Victors saga ok blávus*, 47.
[159] See also Henric Bagerius, 'Mandom och mödom: Sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk identitet på det senmedeltida Island', Ph.D. Dissertation, Gothenburg, University of Gothenburg, 2009, 162–3, 204–5; Layher, 'Caught Between Worlds', 183; and Clover, 'Maiden Warriors', 47, n. 32.
[160] *WONL*, 129; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'From Heroic Legend', 243. See also *Nitida saga*, 29–33.
[161] *Ála Flekks saga*, 97.

Like all maiden-king romances, *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* presents female misogamy in profoundly negative terms. Ingigerðr's refusal of appropriate suitors, to the extent of adorning her fenceposts with their severed heads, is described as 'mikel vandræde' (a great evil).[162] *Sigrgarðs saga* further decries female misogamy via the primary mechanism of Cohen's monster theory. Ingigerðr's aversion to marriage arises from a spell cast by her evil stepmother Hlégerðr.[163] By associating Ingigerðr's misogamy with this trollish Other, the saga implies this stance to be undesirable, simultaneously characterising its opposite — female marriageability — as beneficial. Numerous other *meykonungr* sagas also decry misogamy by supernatural Othering, presenting their heroines' unwillingness to marry as correlated to their 'kuk[l] ok klókskap[r]' (sorcery and crookedness).[164] However, it is highly significant that Ingigerðr's monstrous misogamy is condemned by association to a trollish figure other than herself. Most *meykonungr* sagas indicate the need to rectify an aversion to matrimony that develops independently in the maiden-king. However, *Sigrgarðs saga* characterises Ingigerðr as a blameless victim of her unwilling misogamy. Indeed, she even embodies a commendably receptive stance to marriage, which needs only to be restored rather than violently or humiliatingly imposed by her suitor.

That misogamy is contrary to Ingigerðr's own inclinations is implied in the circumstances surrounding its magical inducement. Since Hlégerðr's curse is punitive, the misogamy it engenders was surely interpreted as contrary to the princess's wishes. Ingigerðr's pre-curse amenability to marriage is also presented in her own words. After having murdered King Hergeirr, Ingigerðr's father, Hlégerðr attempts to win his daughter's favour by offering to find her a husband. Ingigerðr responds coldly: 'audna

[162] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 49.
[163] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 47–8.
[164] *Clári saga*, 7. See also *Sigurðar saga þögla*, 101, and *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, 474.

mun räda giptïngu minne' (fate will guide my marriage).[165] The passivity exemplified in this passage is reminiscent of the commendable stance of the younger Þóra. Ingigerðr refuses actively to seek a husband, but her reference to 'giptïn[g] m[ïn]' also implies that she is not averse to the prospect of proposals. From her own perspective, such an event is characterised as an imaginable, perhaps even agreeable possibility.

Instructive for my purposes, Ingigerðr's adolescence is also specified at this juncture. When she implies her openness to marriage, only to be immediately cursed with misogamy, 'hun var þä .xv. vetra gǫmul' (she was then fifteen years old).[166] The saga subsequently indicates that her misogamy persists for at least eight years, once more couched in a direct expression of her age: 'for so framm um hennar räd, þangad til sem hon hafdi þrja vetur um tvitǫgt' (her rule continued in this way until she was twenty-three).[167] These explicit statements of the *meykonungr*'s chronological age, given at the onset and approximate cessation of her misogamous tendencies, are exceptional in the maiden-king romances. They invite examinations of this text for its commentary on female maturation and, in particular, the chronological development of young women's conjugal inclinations. Since Ingigerðr's misogamy is depicted as a heinous punishment that conflicts with her own matrimonial receptiveness, it seems possible these ages delimit the worst possible period at which a woman could thus behave: her peak marriageable years. This inference coheres with the minimum and average female marriage ages presented in the survey above. *Sigrgarðs saga* substantiates the conclusion that — as Ingigerðr already seems to have before the curse — women in late medieval Iceland were expected to become receptive to marriage by fifteen, and perhaps to have consented to some such proposal by their early twenties.

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[165] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 47.
[166] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 48.
[167] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 49–50.

The saga offers further insight into Ingigerðr's positive, pre-curse stance towards matrimony, with similarly instructive reference to adolescent development. The whole episode in which Hlégerðr kills the king and curses her stepdaughter is precipitated by two other marriage proposals. This stepmother's equally trollish brothers seek to wed Ingigerðr's sisters. Hlégerðr endorses these suits, so the king — a *senex amans*, besotted with his supernatural second wife — relays them to his daughters. The girls refuse these proposals on two grounds. First, they claim to be 'üngar' (young) and therefore unready for such proposals.[168] Though their ages are not specified, the fifteen-year-old Ingigerðr is their elder sibling.[169] *Sigrgarðs saga* thus portrays women younger than fifteen as inappropriate marital partners, though precisely how much younger is unclear. This also coheres with my findings above, perhaps corroborating a minimum marriage age in women's early teens. Second, all three sisters posit the unsuitability of these trolls as husbands, with Ingigerðr herself suggesting that 'skilldu þær bïda betra gjafordz enn þessa' (they ought to wait for better matches than these).[170] This statement confirms Ingigerðr's pre-curse receptivity to marriage. Though dismissive of these particular proposals, she is clearly not misogamous. She predicts and accepts her sisters' eventual marriages, but also defends their right to refuse undesirable suitors. Her defence of this entitlement — already aligning her with the mutual consent doctrine — is also made in direct contravention of the counsel of her father and stepmother. Ingigerðr therefore embodies not only a vindication of mutual consent, but also an implicit critique of familial consent. This critique is bolstered in the fact that the supernaturally Othered Hlégerðr chides her husband for deferring to his daughters in such matters, slandering such behaviour as unmanly.[171] This troll thus exhibits exclusive support for the familial

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[168] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 46.
[169] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 45.
[170] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 46.
[171] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 46.

consent doctrine, which is condemned by association with her malevolence and monstrosity. Incidentally, this saga also connects the two notions of the sisters' excessive youth and their inability to choose among suitors. Immediately after proclaiming their 'üngar' status, the sisters state that they are 'örädnar' (uninformed), and are specifically unfamiliar with the men in question.[172] This suggests that, at least within the mutual consent model presented in *Sigrgarðs saga*, the minimum female marriage age was not only a function of women's physiological maturation, but also of their knowledge and cognitive abilities to discern between suitors.[173]

Implicit in Ingigerðr's stance is that, when an appropriate suitor does arrive, his success will depend on the affirmative assent of the female party. This implies her recognition of female conjugal inclination and consent, and of their importance to matrimonial negotiation. However, it is in a statement she makes while under Hlégerðr's curse that Ingigerðr is most clearly aligned with such concepts. In the process of weaving a web of deception to foil Sigrgarðr, she pretends to accept his marriage proposal. While they discuss the details, Sigrgarðr suggests that she should seek the approval of her 'göd[ir] vin[ir]' (good friends).[174] Ingigerðr interprets this to mean *giptingarmenn*, to whom her will should be subject. Irritated, she cogently — if somewhat aggressively — outlines her contrary perspective on marriage proceedings: 'eg ä hier ődrum ad räda enn ei adrer mier… megu vid þvï vel ockra trü bïnde tvő saman, þö at vid kőllum þar ei flejre at, utan ockra hejmulega smäsvejna' (Here I rule over others and not others over me… We may therefore make our oath between the two of us, even if we do not even call there anyone beyond our household servants).[175] In this passage, Ingigerðr explicitly claims

[172] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 46.
[173] Recall a similar implication in the 1431 divorce proceedings of Þórdís Magnússdóttir; n. 46 above.
[174] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 54.
[175] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 54–5.

that her own consent, and not that of her hypothetical legal administrators, is sufficient to validate her marriage. In terms reminiscent of Árni Þorláksson's defence of mutual consent, she does admit the requirement of witnesses.[176] However, in her disdainful remark about 'smäsvejna' (literally, small or petty servants) — as opposed to the *góðir menn* whose input is recommended by Árni and Sigrgarðr — Ingigerðr proclaims that they need not outrank her. If these words were interpreted as straightforward expressions of Ingigerðr's stance on marriage, they would advance her earlier statements, implying her vehement and exclusive conviction in the mutual consent doctrine.

The issue with such an interpretation is that these words are spoken during her misogamous curse, and so should not be perceived as direct or uncomplicated reflections of Ingigerðr's perspective. However, it does seem possible that medieval audiences considered her words to be emanations of her true stance through the veil of the spell, especially when they correspond — in kind if not in scale or tone — to her pre- or post-curse perspectives. As Alaric Hall argues, Hlégerðr's curse does not comprehensively control Ingigerðr's expressions; sometimes her sublimated emotions and principles shine through. He cites her contradictory response to a false report of Sigrgarðr's death, which includes both her offhand, verbal dismissal of this news as well as physical indications of her true grief: her large, bloody tears.[177] Though tears, like many outward expressions of affect, are notoriously difficult to interpret in sagas, Hall proposes that they indicate her fondness for Sigrgarðr and sorrow at his supposed demise, feelings corroborated by her post-curse love for the prince.[178] Hall's suggestion is relevant to my argument, since it indicates the *meykonungr*'s emotional, perhaps romantic interest in Sigrgarðr, despite its

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[176] See n. 86 above.
[177] *Sigrgarðs saga frœkna*, 74–5.
[178] Hall et al., eds. and trs., '*Sigrgarðs saga*', 97. On tears in Old Norse-Icelandic texts, see Kristen Mills, 'Grief, Gender, and Genre: Male Weeping in Snorri's Account of Baldr's Death, Kings' Sagas and *Gesta Danorum*', *JEGP* 113/4 (2014), 472–96, and Erin Goeres, 'How to Do Things with Tears: The Funeral of Magnús inn góði', *Saga-Book* 37 (2013), 5–26.

current obstruction by her curse. Furthermore, when it comes to the *meykonungr*'s verbal expressions, Hall suggests that the saga employs Ingigerðr's cursed voice as a platform for uncompromising social commentaries. He points to her 'trenchant' criticisms of male pre-marital sex, of the type enjoyed by Örvar-Oddr, Búi Andríðsson, and Hálfdan Brönufóstri above. Hall argues that the supernatural nature of Ingigerðr's curse shields her flagrant criticisms, compelling audiences to consider them, but without the saga lending them explicit support.[179] By ventriloquising them in the utterances of the cursed version of this otherwise benevolent woman, the *sögumaðr* 'stoops to conquer', associating a valid yet contentious argument with a character whose current Otherness diminishes the need for a rebuke. The same could be true of the *meykonungr*'s vehement support of mutual consent, which might also have been controversial in its contemptuous disregard for the power of *giptingarmenn*. As mentioned above, both models of consent held sway in fifteenth-century Iceland, seeming to have been considered joint requirements for matrimony. However, the cursed Ingigerðr is permitted to express exclusive support for this model, as well as her desire to marry Sigrgarðr in accordance with its precepts, but in a manner that only loosely implies its coherence with the stance of her uncursed, more straightforwardly positive alter-ego.

Ingigerðr's cursed voice also provides a platform for the expression of female sexual desire. While under the spell, she repeatedly thwarts Sigrgarðr's sexual intentions, as well as — I argue — her own sublimated lust. On the first two occasions, she somehow induces his slumber before their coitus can commence.[180] On each of the following mornings, Ingigerðr mocks Sigrgarðr for his apparent sexual incapacity: 'vist

[179] Hall et al., eds. and trs., '*Sigrgarðs saga*', 97.
[180] The lack of clarity in the maiden-king's schemes has been cited to indicate *Sigrgarðs saga*'s imperfect incorporation tropes from other texts. In this case, it is likely that the *sögumaðr* inadvertently omits reference to a sleeping potion, as found in *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, 36. See Hall et al., eds. and trs. '*Sigrgarðs saga*', 84–5.

hugda eg til meira um… enn so mun mier fara sem ǫdrum, at eg mun slika lute ei þola leinge ordalaust (I certainly expected more in this regard… but I will proceed in such a way as others would, in that I will not long tolerate such a thing in silence).[181] As above, the *sögumaðr* employs Ingigerðr's supernaturally altered state to present a potentially controversial notion, and one not often expressed overtly.[182] This passage asserts the existence of female sexual desires and expectations, both in the character of the *meykonungr* and, via the reference to '[a]dr[ar]' women, in the female population more broadly. According to her scornful remark, women want sex and they will not tolerate indolence or impotence in their partners forever. An imperative for men to sleep with their wives is admittedly noted in *Grágás*. However, this stipulation predictably foregrounds the rights of her former *giptingarmenn* as the primary grievants, not to mention beneficiaries, in such a suit.[183] As in her statements on the mutual consent doctrine, the cursed Ingigerðr's words here are aggressive in tone. However, the point articulated through her scornful remarks might have implied Ingigerðr's true perspective: just as she has developed currently sublimated matrimonial inclinations toward Sigrgarðr, this *meykonungr* might also harbour sexual desires for the prince.

The most compelling evidence that audiences would have interpreted some of Ingigerðr's cursed expressions as reflections of her true stance is found in her efforts to counteract Hlégerðr's spell. In these actions, Ingigerðr was almost certainly interpreted as expressing her own will through the veil of the curse, setting the wheels of her recovery in motion and returning herself to — rather than being conquered, raped, or otherwise forced into — a position of receptive marriageability. The terms of Hlégerðr's curse, revealed to Ingigerðr alone, are highly specific. Her sisters are turned into a sow and a

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[181] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 67. See also *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 59–60.
[182] On the scarcity of female desire in the corpus, see *WONL*, 69, and Jochens, 'Illicit Love Visit', 378. As mentioned above, there are a few infamous exceptions to this trend; see *Njáls saga*, 24.
[183] *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 2.55. Recall also *Njáls saga*, 23–9.

foal, while Ingigerðr herself is cursed to be the misogamous *meykonungr*, until Hlégerðr's *fjöregg* — an egg containing her life-force — is broken against the princess's own nose.[184] As Hall also notes, audiences surely interpreted it as no coincidence that Ingigerðr sends Sigrgarðr's two companions — the men who will marry her sisters — to round up her pigs and horses, or that she sends Sigrgarðr himself — her own future husband — to collect eggs.[185] As with her cursed statements above, the *meykonungr*'s tone in these requests is severe. She refuses to provide further information about these tasks and threatens the adventurers with death if they fail.[186] Her hostility and unhelpful terseness seem to be presented as the effects of the curse: Hlégerðr's magic apparently prevents her from asking the men directly to help her break the spell. However, Ingigerðr's requests were undoubtedly interpreted as her surreptitious efforts to do just that: to lift the curse and dispel her unwanted misogamy.[187] The distinction between the tone and substance of the cursed Ingigerðr's words is instructive for the examples discussed above. It corroborates the possibility that, though she expresses them scornfully, her positions on mutual consent and female sexual expectation, as well as her matrimonial and even carnal desire for Sigrgarðr, were interpreted as genuine. The fact that Ingigerðr gives Sigrgarðr the quest for the *fjöregg* corroborates her conjugal interest in this man, suggesting her hope that he will marry her once the curse is lifted.

Once Sigrgarðr returns with the egg, the *meykonungr*'s role in overcoming her supernaturally imposed misogamy becomes even more active. Demonstrating her premeditation, she takes Sigrgarðr's sword in hand and awaits his arrival. When he enters, Ingigerðr apparently attempts to strike him, causing Sigrgarðr to defend himself

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[184] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 47–8.
[185] Hall et al., eds. and trs., '*Sigrgarðs saga*', 97; *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 78–80.
[186] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 78–80.
[187] For other cases where cursed females free themselves by enlisting the unwitting assistance of uncursed males, see *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, 274–6; and; *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, 246–7, 247–50; and *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 355–9.

with the only thing to hand: the *fjöregg*. It is theoretically possible, though extremely unlikely, that this was interpreted as another genuine act of violence towards the prince dictated by the curse, as Ingigerðr has already tried to harm and even kill him on multiple occasions.[188] Such is the interpretation of Henric Bagerius, who argues that *Sigrgarðs saga* bears the same commentary against female autonomy and mutual consent as the other maiden-king sagas. In support of this interpretation, Bagerius fails to recognise the significance of this oological altercation. Though he has previously acknowledged the curse, his description of this scene states only that 'Sigrgarðr försvarar sig med ett ägg' (Sigrgarðr defends himself with *an* egg), using the indefinite article to imply the incidental nature of this object.[189] However, since Sigrgarðr is forced to defend himself by breaking this specific *fjöregg* against Ingigerðr's nose, precisely as dictated in Hlégerðr's curse, it seems more likely that the princess's attack was intended and interpreted as a deliberate effort to trigger the breaking of the spell. Ingigerðr is thus characterised as a figure of extreme romantic initiative, acting and even risking her own safety to return herself to a state of marriageability.

Following this attack, Ingigerðr is apparently defeated and dominated. After regaining consciousness, she crawls to Sigrgarðr's feet and attempts to kiss them. He tries to stamp on her, but is restrained by his companions. Then, following her more complete recovery, she sends word to Sigrgarðr that she is ready to submit herself to him: 'ek gef mik. ok allt mitt riki j hans ualld. Ok uera huort sem hann uill frilla hans. Edur eigin kona' (I give myself and all my kingdom into his power. And I will be whichever he wishes: either his *frilla* or his wife).[190] Numerous scholars have interpreted this sequence as coherent with the other maiden-king romances: Sigrgarðr seems to have

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[188] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 62, 77–8.
[189] Bagerius, 'Mandom och Mödom', 162, emphasis mine. For his awareness of the curse, see Bagerius, 'Mandom och Mödom', 160.
[190] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 102.

vanquished the *meykonungr*, valiantly overthrowing her misogamy and asserting control over her matrimonial future. For example, Bagerius states, '[n]är mökungen har återfått medvetandet och inser att hennes liv står på spel… Rädslan gör henne ångerfull, och hon vädjar till mannen att försöka få en förlikning till stånd' (when the *meykonungr* has regained consciousness and realised that her life is at stake… The fear makes her repentant, and she appeals to the man to try and get a settlement).[191] However, such interpretations are incompatible with the princess's active role in breaking the curse. To begin with, Ingigerðr does not make this appeal upon unexpectedly discovering that Sigrgarðr has gained the upper hand; rather, she voluntarily ceded victory to him. Furthermore, Ingigerðr's repentance of her former stance does not arise from her fear of death at Sigrgarðr's hands. Though it follows that she would retrospectively abhor some of her violent and misogamous actions under the curse, over which she had no control, Ingigerðr's offer is actually in line with her stance all along. As a fifteen-year-old, she intimated her openness to marriage. Additionally, while cursed between the ages of fifteen and twenty-three, she continued to express conjugal receptiveness — albeit through a veil of scorn — and even seems to have developed marital and sexual interests towards Sigrgarðr specifically. Hence, though Ingigerðr superficially adopts the position of the vanquished foe at this point, the saga actually characterises her as the primary orchestrator of her own conquest.

This 'frilla' line requires further attention. Its tone of humiliated capitulation might reasonably have been interpreted to promote the male domination and female passivity of the familial consent doctrine, as it does in most other *meykonungr* romances. To begin with, it is possible that this line represents a clumsy literary hangover from such

[191] Bagerius, 'Mandom och Mödom', 162. See also Jóhanna Katrín, who asserts without reference to the curse that Ingigerðr had wished to 'avoid marriage' for 'her own ends', and Jürg Glauser, who suggests simply that Sigrgarðr 'subdues Ingigerðr and takes her as his wife'; *WONL*, 125, and Glauser, '*Sigrgarðs saga frækna*', 582.

sagas, which jars with the specifics of this narrative. Indeed, *Sigrgarðs saga* has been noted to be somewhat derivative, imperfectly incorporating features from other romances.[192] This line might thus indicate *Sigrgarðs saga*'s inherited defence of familial consent, despite its own otherwise staunch defence of mutual consent.

However, it is also possible to interpret Ingigerðr's humble submission as congruent with her inclination towards, but renewed passivity in the organisation of, marriage. At this point, Sigrgarðr has actually abandoned his ambition to woo the *meykonungr*. Not realising significance of the *fjöregg*, the prince interprets Ingigerðr's attack as a final, unforgiveable act of aggression and is now bent on her annihilation.[193] Hence, Ingigerðr's message — comprised not only of this offer of submission but also of an explanation of the curse — might have been interpreted as a necessary announcement of her resumed marriageability. The details of her offer can also be construed to align with her earlier perspective on marriage proposals. They express her anticipated consent in marrying Sigrgarðr, but explicitly leave the choice to pursue formal marriage negotiations to the man. Of course, the tone of this line marks a clear regression from the self-assurance with which Ingigerðr expressed similar convictions before the curse. However, this might be necessary to (over)compensate for her recent words and actions, and thereby sanction her continued status as a benevolent character. While under the curse, Ingigerðr was permitted to influence her own marital status in an exceptionally active manner. In her choice of Sigrgarðr as her husband, as well as her machinations to ensure his proposal, she behaved much more actively than, for example, the elder Þóra above. Indeed, Ingigerðr behaved in a manner that she herself implied to be deviant when she refused Hlégerðr's help to seek an advantageous match. If this potentially deviant

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[192] See n. 180 above.
[193] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 101–2.

level of activeness and initiative continued beyond the breaking of the curse — and beyond the veil of supernatural distance it offered — audiences might have expected it to require problematisation or even punishment. Hence, it is vital that Ingigerðr does not arrange her marriage, but only her marriageability. Her return to the meekness emphatically demonstrated in this 'frilla' line is therefore essential to the integrity of this saga's commentaries: both the un-cursed Ingigerðr's moderate defence of mutual consent and the cursed Ingigerðr's more exaggerated, aggressive, supernaturally shielded vindication of the same model.

Ingigerðr's sisters' marriages provide further evidence that the conclusion of this saga maintains its defence of mutual consent, rather than conforming to the genre's ubiquitous demands of female passivity. With respect to her own match, Ingigerðr's consent is not specified beyond the 'frilla' line above, though her efforts to bring this arrangement about leave little doubt as to her willingness. However, Ingigerðr explicitly ensures the consent of her sisters before they marry Sigrgarðr's companions.[194]

Finally, it is not only Ingigerðr's reserved receptivity to consensual marriage that endures after the spell is broken. The sexual desires and expectations expressed through her cursed voice are also corroborated at this point: 'Ok er þæ eigi þess getit ath Ingegerdur hefde nǒckurar sleitur uid Sigurgard j huilubrǒgdum' (And it is not said that Ingigerðr showed any backsliding in her bedtime activities with Sigrgarðr).[195] Presumably because it is no longer shielded by supernatural distance, this excerpt is far less emphatic in its expression of female lust than her cursed statements. Indeed, since it only asserts that Ingigerðr did not 'sleit[a]' (regress, backslide), it might have been interpreted only to suggest her passive tolerance of Sigrgarðr's activities in the bedroom.

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[194] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 107.
[195] *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 107.

However, considering the likelihood that her cursed expressions of sexual desire were interpreted to contain nuggets of truth under their scornful tone, it also seems plausible that medieval audiences understood this line as typical saga understatement. It approvingly affirms Ingigerðr's sexual desires and their satiation in marriage.

Unlike the majority of *meykonungr* romances, in which the self-sprung misogamy of the maiden-kings is overridden by male figures, *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* presents female conjugal inclinations and even actions as beneficial to the achievement of consensual matrimony. Indeed, Ingigerðr is permitted to play a greater and more deliberate role in the arrangement of her marriage than her future husband. Her activeness in arranging her marriage is exceptional not only among *meykonungr* romances, but also in the corpus as a whole. For example, Ingigerðr shows more initiative than Nitida in her acceptance of Lifornius's marriage proposal, which, though uncoerced, still constitutes her acquiescence to a male offer.[196] Furthermore, Ingigerðr's actions demonstrate even greater control of her matrimonial future than the scheming of Guðrún and Þórðr in *Laxdœla saga*.[197] First, as mentioned above, Guðrún has already been married at this point. This makes her a less powerful representation of an adolescent maiden's matrimonial inclinations, due to the additional rights already afforded to wives and widows.[198] Second, while that scheme is hatched jointly by Guðrún and Þórðr, Ingigerðr's efforts to arrange her marriage are undertaken alone. She does not have the conscious support of her would-be husband, and even risks his potentially deadly ire by carrying them out. Finally, though Ingigerðr is reminiscent of other cursed women who enlist the unwitting help of men to break their spells, her specifically matrimonial activeness is more clearly foregrounded.[199] Although such women do often get married

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[196] *Nitida saga*, 29–33.
[197] *Laxdœla saga*, 95–6.
[198] See n. 91 above. See also Chapter Four, ns. 27–8.
[199] See n. 187 above.

afterwards, their curses are more general — usually making them ugly or trollish, which only indirectly impedes their marriageability — while Ingigerðr is directly and exclusively terminating her misogamy.

Following the courageous and independent dismantling of her misogamy, Ingigerðr reverts to her stance of reserved yet receptive inclination towards marriage. The saga's explicit commentary thus supports the more restrained matrimonial stance she embodies before and after her curse. However, even after this reversion, audiences would not have soon forgotten this woman's extreme initiative and activeness in the arrangement of her marriage, which is characterised as essential to the foundation of its happy ending. Likewise, they might not have immediately dismissed some of the more aggressive statements she made while cursed, including her outright refutation of the familial consent model, or her statements in defence of female sexual urges and expectations.

This chapter has outlined two commentaries on female sexual maturation that are presented in supernatural saga episodes. The symbolic sexual assault by a revenant in *Heiðarvíga saga* suggests perceptions of female sexual development as problematic, with young women implied to become increasingly volatile erotic entities as their adolescence advances. This episode therefore seems to support the suppression or regulation of female sexuality during this life stage, tacitly defending the model of familial consent. Similar notions are expressed in the majority of the maiden-king sagas, which were composed as early as the thirteenth century and remained popular throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Though these texts do characterise female marital availability as obligatory, they do so with little to no regard for female consent in the matter. However, some maiden-king romances feature positive examples of the independent development and active pursuit of matrimonial and even sexual urges in young women. Most notably,

the fifteenth-century *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* re-orients the taming sequence common to these sagas to put its unwillingly misogamous female and her suitor on the same side. This woman takes active steps to overcome her supernaturally induced misogamy, leading to her ultimate reward in a consensual and sexually active marriage. It is possible that these sagas' contrary perspectives reflect their respective temporal contexts, with *Sigrgarðs saga*'s defence of female activeness justified by the more widespread support for mutual consent by the fifteenth century. However, it is also important to remember that the value of mutual consent was acknowledged in Icelandic sources at much earlier points, while the value of familial consent continued to be recognised long after. Therefore, it is most judicious not to interpret these commentaries as demonstrating a linear progression away from the rejection of female adolescent sexuality towards its ultimate acceptance as a key component of consensual marriage. Rather, these texts simply signal the existence of an array of perspectives on female sexual development during the Icelandic Middle Ages, which are each given more detailed and arguably uninhibited exploration via supernatural motifs.

## Chapter Three

## Male Senescence: Craven Kings and Rapacious Revenants

This chapter examines representations of elderly male sexuality. Following a broad introduction to senescence, this will begin with a survey of primarily naturalistic depictions of old men, first in general and then with emphasis on sexuality. I will then analyse two supernatural motifs. These are the elderly kings infatuated with trollish women in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, and rapacious revenants from several texts, including *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* and *Völsa þáttr*. To begin with, this chapter indicates the prevalence of sources that lament the socio-sexual decline of male senescence, particularly when this is manipulated by overbearing women. Consistent with these concerns, many naturalistic episodes seem to endorse the idea of old men retaining their vigour indefinitely, including in the sexual sphere. However, in their sympathetic characterisations of these besotted monarchs, and in their censure of the unnatural vigour of hypersexual revenants, these supernatural episodes indicate that such decline was not merely a regrettable inevitability. It could also be construed as understandable, appropriate, and even desirable. Though this ideology is rarely expressed in naturalistic episodes, these episodes indicate that an elderly man's retention of socio-sexual dominance could be considered more deviant than his pitiful deterioration.

Ármann Jakobsson identifies senescence, like adolescence, as a neglected topic in Old Norse-Icelandic scholarship.[1] Lack of prior research might stem from the often-repeated notion that medieval Icelandic and broader European writings do not focus on

[1] Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders', *JEGP* 104/4 (2005), 301.

ageing.[2] This assumption rests on a persistent but arguably specious notion. It is often claimed that, due to harsher living conditions, individuals in the Middle Ages seldom reached what we would recognise as old age.[3] As a result, societies might not have paid much attention to, or developed prevalent stereotypes surrounding, this life-stage.[4] Ármann Jakobsson decisively refutes such notions. His reasoning relies not only on the textual evidence, which he argues scholars like Lúðvík Ingvarsson have dismissed or massaged whenever it describes what is erroneously presumed to be unrealistic old age, but also on a more fundamental logical point.[5] It is indisputable that high infant mortality rates and the dangers of young adulthood — combat, childbirth, and the most onerous manual labour — would have lowered the average life expectancy. However, there is no reason to presume that individuals who survived these high-risk periods could not have lived to extreme old age.[6]

Attempts to quantify the prevalence of senescence in medieval Iceland have yielded varied results. Jón Björnsson suggests that just 5% of the population were over sixty-five during the Settlement Age, while estimates for the frequency of three-generation families range from under 12% to over 30% throughout the medieval period more broadly.[7] Hence, I follow Gillian Overing's judicious statement that old people

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[2] See Shannon Lewis-Simpson, 'The Challenges of Quantifying Youth and Age in the Medieval North', in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden, 2008), 7; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Becoming Old', 227; and Miller, 'Beating Up', 759.

[3] On the Icelandic context, see Miller 'Beating Up', 759. On the broader European context, see Chris Gilleard, 'Old Age in the Dark Ages: The Status of Old Age during the Early Middle Ages', *Ageing and Society* 29/7 (2009), 1065–70.

[4] See Sally Crawford, '"Gomol is snoterost": Growing Old in Anglo-Saxon England', in Martin Henig and Tyler Jo Smith, eds., *Collectanea Antiqua: Essays in Memory of Sonia Chadwick Hawkes* (Oxford, 2007), 54.

[5] Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Patriarch', 265. See Lúðvík Ingvarsson, *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn* (Egilsstaðir, 1986), 274–301.

[6] Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Patriarch', 271. See also Shahar, *Growing Old*, 32.

[7] See Jón Björnsson, 'Aldraðir á Íslandi Fyrrum', in Hörður Þorgilsson and Jakob Smári, eds., *Sálfræðibókin* (Reykjavík, 1993), 789; Gillian Overing, 'A Body in Question: Aging, Community, and Gender in Medieval Iceland', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29/2 (1999), 213–16; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Becoming Old', 236; and Philadelphia Ricketts,

were a visible if 'moderately unusual' presence in this society.[8] Moreover, the sagas feature many prominent senescent characters, including some whose extremely advanced ages are specified outright.[9] The frequency and detail of such portrayals not only corroborate that senescence was visible, but also suggest that it was topic of interest to *sögumenn* and audiences. Indeed, even the depictions of supernaturally advanced old age, which scholars like Lúðvík Ingvarson would surely be justified in discounting when attempting to access genuine expectations surrounding senescence, demonstrate a keen interest in this life-stage.[10]

The most overtly taxonomic discussions of old age in the Middle Ages are found in the aforementioned *Aetates hominis* tradition. On average, such texts locate the onset of senescence around the age of fifty, though in some cases as late as seventy-two.[11] Such advanced boundaries further demonstrate that individuals were considered capable of surviving to such ages in the Middle Ages, and perhaps also that they did so in reality. *Aetates* texts also prove the existence of distinct stereotypes surrounding this life-stage. They generally associate senescence with descent and decay, commonly figured as the downward arc of a parabola, or as the cold winter following the vivacity of summer.[12]

*Aetates hominis* texts are attested in medieval Iceland.[13] However, as noted in Chapter One, scholars argue with regard to the medieval European and specifically

'"Spoiling them Rotten?": Grandmothers and Familial Identity in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland', in Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed., *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden, 2008), 170, respectively.

[8] Overing, 'Body in Question', 213.

[9] Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Patriarch', 267–82. Consider even the most canonical *Íslendingasögur*, which indicate sustained interest in both male and female ageing: *Njáls saga*, 281–343; *Egils saga*, 249–98; *Laxdœla saga*, 11–13, 228–9.

[10] See *Fljótsdœla saga*, 219; *Norna-Gests þáttr*, 187; and *Örvar-Odds saga*, 289.

[11] Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age*, 146. For the numerical boundaries of various *Aetates hominis* schemata, see Shulamith Shahar, 'Who Were Old in the Middle Ages?', *Social History of Medicine* 6/3 (1993), 316–19, and Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 6–93.

[12] Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 7, 12. Examples of positive conceptions of senescence in *Aetates hominis* are rare, but do exist; see Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 82.

[13] *Alfræði íslenzk*, 3.34, 98.

Icelandic contexts that these schemata might not have represented the conceptions of most people, especially the un- and under-educated majority.[14] As with adolescence, Shahar speculates that the average person's assessment of senescence was more pragmatic, and also took non-chronological criteria into account.[15] In particular, she and others have emphasised the importance of functionality: as long as individuals remained useful, they might have been considered vigorous aged adults rather than truly elderly.[16] Notably for the study of Iceland, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson claims the monolithic significance of this attribute. He posits a linguistic distinction between useful 'aged' adults — apparently described using the adjective *gamall* — and a useless 'old' people — signalled by the noun *elli*.[17] Jón Viðar's position is so extreme that he asserts that anyone over twelve incapable of carrying out adult tasks was considered old, but that anyone chronologically aged who remained useful was not, a stance that has since been uncritically repeated.[18]

In these assertions, Jón Viðar goes too far. Contrary examples to his *gamall*/*elli* argument are so numerous as to render it unworkable. Both the ablest and feeblest aged characters are described as old using both terms.[19] When such figures are vigorous, their strength is often expressed in direct reference to their age, couched in expressions of surprise like 'gamall og þó inn vaskasti' (old and yet the most valiant).[20] Hence, when

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[14] For Iceland, see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Becoming Old', 229–31. For the broader European context, see Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 93.
[15] Shahar, *Growing Old*, 29–31.
[16] Shahar, *Growing Old*, 31. See also Youngs, *Life Cycle*, 33, and Overing, 'Body in Question', 212–15.
[17] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Becoming Old', 231–2.
[18] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Becoming Old', 233. See Thomas Morcom, 'After Adulthood: The Metamorphoses of the Elderly in the *Íslendingasögur*', *Saga-Book* 62 (2018), 25–6, 48.
[19] For uses of *gamall* in descriptions of useless old age, see *Fljótsdæla saga* 216; *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 93; *Reykdæla saga*, 225; *Víga-Glúms saga*, 18; and *Þorsteinns saga Víkingssonar*, 187. For uses of *elli* to refer to powerful and even sexually potent men, see *Eyrbyggja saga*, 12, and *Ljósvetninga saga*, 44, 139.
[20] *Ljósvetninga saga*, 77. See also *Flóamanna saga*, 317; *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, 211.

elderly individuals did retain prowess, it was considered in light of, but certainly did not negate, their perceived senescence. Regarding useless individuals over twelve, it suffices to note that *kolbítar* — quintessentially hopeless adolescents — are never identified as old, and are only exceptionally even compared to this demographic, with far more prevalent analogies being made to females.[21] One rare instance in which a feeble adolescent *is* compared to 'gamall maðr' (an old man) is the wrestling episode from *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, discussed above. However, Hálfdan does not defend himself only by proving his functionality. His immediate rebuttal that he is 'sextán vetra' (sixteen years old) shows that this is a primarily chronological — and presumably sarcastic — insult, of which his youthful age is enough to clear him.[22] Neither are incapable adults referred to as old without also being chronologically aged. An instructive example is the aforementioned Helgi Ingjaldsson from *Gísla saga*. Though a grown man, and though cruelly depicted as useless, he is never referred to as old, being compared instead to an animal or troll.[23]

Hence, incapability and oldness seem to have been two different metrics, though they are certainly linked. There was an expectation that elderly individuals would be less vigorous and it is likely that, after becoming sufficiently chronologically aged, they might have been considered senescent earlier or later depending on their functional deterioration. However, no matter how incapable individuals were, they were only thought to be elderly once they crossed a certain chronological threshold. Additionally, regardless of the vigour individuals beyond that threshold might display, they can still be explicitly identified as old. Statements of adults' numerical ages are rare in the sagas.[24]

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[21] See Chapter One, n. 60.
[22] Hálfdan also proves his martial ability, though this seems to be a rebuttal of the implications of incapacity in Brana's age-based and gendered insults, rather than of the literal truth of her identification of the boy as elderly and/or female; *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 334.
[23] *Gísla saga*, 79–83.
[24] Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood', 50; Miller, 'Beating Up', 759.

However, based on a few rare episodes that include both specifications of chronological age and insinuations of elderliness — in which characters in their thirties are explicitly said to be not *old*, while those in their fifties and sixties *are* — this threshold could tentatively be defended to have been around fifty or sixty.[25] Hence, to temper Jón Viðar's statements, it seems more reasonable to suggest that medieval Icelandic assessments of senescence relied on multiple factors, including but not necessarily limited to chronological age and functionality.

Jón Viðar also asserts that senescence was universally disdained in medieval Iceland.[26] However, this might be because of his erroneous, exclusively use-based understanding of that category. Indeed, his hypothesis might be rephrased to posit that useless adults were disdained in medieval Iceland, which seems an absurdly uncontroversial point, though I hope to problematise even this notion in the readings below. When we attend to the sources themselves and consider all depictions of senescent figures — either based on their chronological age or, more conclusively, the explicit use of the terminology of senescence — we encounter a broad spectrum of attitudes.[27]

While incapability was not the attribute that literally made a person old, it does seem to have been an important factor in determining whether an aged person was perceived with esteem or derision. Hence, in spheres where brains were prioritised over brawn, elderly individuals seem quite able to have garnered respect. In Iceland and

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[25] See *Fóstbræðra saga*, 265; *Flóamanna saga*, 315–16; and *Íslendinga saga*, 434–5, respectively. See also prohibitions from the laws, which indicate that people over sixty, seventy, and eighty should be exempted from certain tasks; see *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar inn fyrri*, 256; *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 1.35; and *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók),* 305.

[26] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Becoming Old', 234–7.

[27] The terminology of senescence includes adjectives like *gamall* and *hniginn*, verbs like *eldask/eldast*, and nouns like *elli*, *karl*, and *kerling*.

throughout Christendom, one such sphere was the clergy.[28] Icelandic sources frequently describe clerics acceding to the highest episcopal positions in later life, after which they can enjoy prestige, ecclesiastical power, and even secular influence into their eighties or even nineties.[29] The context-dependent nature of this esteem is exemplified in the figure of Guðmundr Arason. His prophetic powers and relentless consumption of religious literature continue to glorify him, even as he lies bedridden and blind — clearly useless in most contexts — at seventy-five.[30] There are other non-physical spheres in which old men are depicted as capable and commendable. *Hávamál* notes the wisdom of the words of the elderly, a sentiment repeated in reference to poetry in *Þorleifs þáttr jarlskálds*.[31] These indicate a general respect for knowledge acquired through long experience, as well as the specific notion that poetic skill might benefit from years of practice.[32] The idea that the elderly might purvey unique wisdom, including as sources for bygone events, is also proclaimed by Ari inn fróði about his foster-father, Hallr.[33] On this point, it is also worth noting the use-value of old men as foster-fathers in general, who may be depicted as not only intelligent, but also caring and beloved by their wards.[34] Finally, the sagas regularly depict elderly men as formidable political and legal operators.[35] Particularly clear instances include 'hærukarlinn Snorr[i] goð[i]… ok ráð hans' (the grey-haired old man Snorri goði… and his counsels), as well as Brennu-Njáll, who even in his dotage has

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[28] Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Patriarch', 271–7; Crawford, 'Gomol is snoterost', 54–5; Shahar, *Growing Old*, 66.
[29] *Haukdæla þáttr*, 58–9; *Guðmundar saga dýra*, 192–4; *Þorláks saga*, 84–86.
[30] *Íslendinga saga*, 399–401.
[31] *Hávamál*, 349; *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds*, 222.
[32] Both of these notions are also embodied in the figure of Óðinn, who, owing to his mythic origins, might indicate that the association between age, wisdom, and poetic acumen he exemplifies was deeply entrenched in medieval Scandinavian and even broader Germanic cultures. See *Gylfaginning*, 21, and *Vafþrúðnismál*, 366.
[33] *Íslendingabók*, 21.
[34] *Fljótsdæla saga*, 221, 257–8; *Ljósvetninga saga*, 54, 61–2; *Sigurðar saga þögla*, 98.
[35] See Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Patriarch', 267–82, and Morcom, 'After Adulthood', 32–7.

greater foresight than his vigorous sons.[36] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson claims that elderly individuals were 'never' involved in the formal arbitration of legal disputes.[37] However, the sagas present numerous examples of old men providing legal advice and even actively converting such counsels into settlements, which they do to great acclaim.[38] In such non-physical spheres, senescence seems not to have been a burden, and could even have been a boon.

Of course, even within such spheres, there is room for negative conceptions. First, there are portrayals of old men who retain non-physical capability and influence, but are abhorred for other reasons. These include their general malevolence, as in the cases of cantankerous old householders and chieftains, whose grouchiness can even be explicitly correlated to their advancing ages.[39] They also include the common literary association of the old man with out-dated customs and ideologies, whether this is their promotion of feud violence over peaceful settlement — including as bullying patriarchs — or their embodiment of paganism over Christianity — including as wicked magic practitioners.[40] Second, in both clerical and chieftainly contexts, the sagas imply that senescent deterioration might eventually preclude activity. Abdications from or refusals of such positions are sometimes justified by old age, perhaps in recognition of the concomitant decline in physical or mental acuity.[41] Such notions are presented in *Bandamanna saga*, in which Ófeigr takes advantage of his senescence to 'stoop to conquer'. He employs a

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[36] *Grettis saga*, 221; *Njáls saga*, 281. The connection between age and cunning is another exemplified by Óðinn; recall *Vafþrúðnismál*, 366.
[37] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Becoming Old', 236–7.
[38] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 317–8; *Grænlendinga þáttr*, 284–5. Consider also Úlfljótr, who is said to establish law codes in both Iceland and Norway when over sixty; *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, 341.
[39] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 81; *Egils saga*, 287–8. See Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age', 298.
[40] *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs*, 70; *Finnboga saga*, 299–300. On the use of the figure of the old man to represent — and often, but not always, to denigrate — the 'old ways', see also Ármann Jakobsson, *Troll Inside*, 148–50; Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 77; and Minois, *History of Old Age*, 192.
[41] *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, 150; *Vatnsdæla saga*, 99-100. See also *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók),* 305.

disguise of elderly frailty, in which his feigned ignorance and intellectual innocuousness play a crucial role, to rescue his son from legal peril.[42] The saga ultimately defends Ófeigr's concealed acumen and, by extension, perhaps that of old men at large. However, the plot hinges upon the prevalence of expectations of his debilitating senescent decline.

It is in spheres requiring physical strength that old men are more commonly depicted as incapable, and are thus rendered as figures of pity or scorn. Old men are frequently depicted as physically feeble in relation to manual work, martial violence, and other deeds of masculine capital.[43] Admittedly, some elderly males *are* portrayed as physically adroit, including Hrútr Herjólfsson, who kills a thief at the age of eighty.[44] However, such hardy old men are more clearly exceptional than those who retain non-physical aptitude. While senescence seems an unexceptional and even advantageous trait in figures of intellectual or spiritual authority, the age of physically vigorous geriatrics is more often implied to be extraordinary. In Hrútr's case, his age is stated outright in conspicuous proximity to this deed, implying a noteworthy juxtaposition between his senescence and his actions.[45] Such expectations of physical decline are also demonstrated in the surprisingly long-lasting martial capability of Finnbogi rammi.[46] Like Ófeigr, Finnbogi consciously employs expectations of his senescent weariness to lull his enemies into a false sense of security before vanquishing them, intimating both the notion that exceptional old men could remain strong *and* the prevalence of expectations to the contrary.[47]

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[42] *Bandamanna saga*, 321–38.
[43] See *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar inn fyrri*, 257; *Ketils saga hængs*, 246; *Íslendinga saga* 463; *Þórðar saga kakala*, 6, 8; and *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar inn síðari*, 267–8, respectively.
[44] *Laxdœla saga*, 104–5.
[45] *Laxdœla saga*, 104–5. Recall also the aforementioned statements of surprise at the vigour of elderly men: n. 20 above.
[46] *Finnboga saga*, 336.
[47] *Finnboga saga*, 326–31.

The many examples of old men who are either literally or expectedly feeble lead to a notion asserted by numerous scholars: the old man is not a straightforwardly acceptable target for violence.[48] When incapable, attacking him is considered shameful.[49] When he retains exceptional strength or mental acuity, his status as a victim of slander or assault is more ambiguous, but is still filtered through his identity as elderly and presumably in decline.[50] A particularly instructive instance is that of Hrútr challenging Mǫrðr to a duel. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson cites this example to argue that capacity rather than chronological age was the defining feature of senescence. He claims that, though perhaps an inferior fighter, Mǫrðr's capability as a chieftain means that he could not have been considered old and was therefore a legitimate target of Hrútr's challenge.[51] However, as William Miller had already noted, the saga draws repeated attention to how, despite his legislative acumen, Mǫrðr's explicit old age *is* a factor in his capitulation, which calls the propriety of Hrútr's manoeuvre into question.[52]

Connected to this conception of the elderly as pitiable — deserving protection from friends and pity from foes — is that decrepit old men seem to revert to their status among the 'rainbow coalition', alongside most females and pre-adolescent males.[53] The clearest statement of this regression is a verse spoken by Hólmgǫngu-Bersi, which likens his frailty and dependence to those of his juvenile foster-son:

> Liggjum báðir
> í lamasessi
> Halldórr ok ek,
> hǫfum engi þrek;
> veldr elli mér,
> en œska þér,

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[48] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age', 298; Miller, 'Beating Up', 756, 760.
[49] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 15–16.
[50] *Njáls saga*, 314; *Friðþjófs saga*, 251.
[51] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Becoming Old', 233.
[52] *Njáls saga*, 58–61. See also Miller, 'Beating Up', 755–7.
[53] For examples that connect the juvenile, the female, and the elderly as a single, pitiable group, see *Svaða þáttr*, 484–88; *Egils saga*, 52; and *Reykdœla saga*, 169–70.

þess batnar þér,
en þeygi mér.

(We both lie
in lameness,
Halldórr and I,
we have no power;
old age causes this for me,
and youth for you,
this will improve for you,
But not for me.)[54]

Indicating a similar conceptual framework to the parabola from the *Aetates hominis* tradition, Bersi's verse portrays juvenile and senescent disenfranchisements as proximally distant but qualitatively similar ends of an arc.[55] Just as Bersi would have done, Halldórr will soon become an adolescent, outgrowing his powerlessness and acceding to adulthood. However, on Bersi's side of the parabola, there is only further descent, with no such prospect of betterment. In the *Laxdœla saga* version of this verse, Halldórr is a baby and the pair are literally useless. In *Kormáks saga*, however, the boy is twelve, and the pair eventually team up to score a victory for the 'rainbow coalition'. As with Ófeigr and Finnbogi, the *Kormáks saga* version ironically employs the conceit of their parallel disenfranchisement for narrative effect, but in doing so admits the prevalence of that conceit in medieval Iceland.

When considering this male journey out of and then back into the 'rainbow coalition', the biological sex and corresponding gender identity of the coalition's other members — the majority of women — is also relevant. As discussed in Chapter One, juvenile male characters could herald their accession to adult masculinity by demonstrating the ability to conquer women. Likewise, it seems that women were also

[54] *Laxdœla saga*, 76. See also *Kormáks saga*, 261.
[55] See n. 12 above.

imagined to be the gatekeepers of the 'rainbow coalition' on the other side of adulthood, welcoming the return of old men who could no longer subjugate them.

Male senescent decline is often framed in gendered terms. First, as many scholars have noted, ageing is portrayed as a process by which men become less admirably masculine and more aligned with the feminine.[56] Hrafnkell Freysgoði is famously told that 'svá ergisk hverr sem eldisk' (each one who ages becomes more associated with *ergi*), and the aged Egill Skalla-Grímsson clutters up the feminised space of the kitchen.[57] Second, with greater resemblance to the martial episodes from Chapter One, re-entry into the rainbow coalition might have been evaluated on the basis of a man's *kvensterkleikr*: can he dominate women, or do they dominate him? Elderly male characters are often subjugated to female powers. For example, Egill does not only inhabit the kitchen, but also begins to be mocked by his servants, including women. His scheme to wreak havoc at the *Alþing* is also easily thwarted by his daughter.[58] Similarly, in *Heiðarvíga saga*, the wife of a certain aged Þórólfr mocks his senescence and ultimately overrules his decisions, giving her husband's long-unused sword to a kinsman in need.[59] Most pointedly and, based on its potentially mythological origins, in a manner perhaps firmly entrenched in medieval northern mentalities, it is instructive to recall the personifying figure of Elli (Old Age) from *Gylfaginning*. She is an old woman and the process of succumbing to senescence is figured as a wrestling match with her.[60] Elli's gender is extremely significant to her symbolism: when men succumb to old age, they are framed as becoming susceptible to physical domination by women, falling short of

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[56] Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 78–83; Clover, 'Regardless of Sex', 381–5.
[57] *Hrafnkels saga*, 126–7; *Egils saga*, 294–8. On *ergi*, recall Chapter One, n. 57.
[58] *Egils saga*, 294–8.
[59] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 261–2.
[60] *Gylfaginning*, 42–3. See also *Egils saga*, 60. The hag as the personifier of senescence is also found in Irish traditions, which are possible sources for *Gylfaginning*; see Rosemary Power, '"*An Óige, An Saol agus an Bás*", "Feis Tighe Chonáin", and "Þórr's Visit to Útgarða-Loki"', *Béaloideas* 53 (1985): 254–5.

the *kvensterkleikr* they presumably surpassed in their youth.[61] In the extension from Finnbogi's physical dominance of the *griðkonur* to the sexually significant riding episodes in Chapter One, I examined how this power struggle during male adolescence had erotic connotations. This chapter considers whether a similar extension from physical or social to sexual *kvensterkleikr* is also depicted in the transition into male senescence.

Throughout medieval Europe, senescence was associated with decreased sexual ability and desire, and with corresponding imperatives to refrain from erotic activities.[62] Such notions find literary expression in the extremely pervasive *senex amans* trope. A 'stock figure of fun', this caricature of male old age is mocked for the discrepancy between his impotence and his extreme sexual lust or covetousness, and is often dominated or cuckolded by his wife.[63] As Shahar notes, this female partner is seldom the focus of opprobrium. The old man is the primary figure of scorn, while the potentially deviant and often adulterous actions of his partner are portrayed — whether humorously or tragically — as justifiable responses to his decrepitude.[64]

Are these ideologies reflected in the sagas? First, the decline of old men's sexual functionality is alluded to in a verse by the aged Egill, which seems to lament his soft penis.[65] Second, whether this is marked by an explicit renunciation of sexual pursuits, or whether it is simply implicit in the cessation of references to such activities, numerous elderly male characters do withdraw from the sexual sphere.[66] Third, and finally, when it comes to old men who attempt to remain sexually active, Ármann Jakobsson and

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[61] On similar notions in the broader medieval context, see Youngs, *Life Cycle*, 166.
[62] Youngs, *Life Cycle*, 166, 184. See also James Brundage, 'Sex and Canon Law', in Vern Bullough and James Brundage, eds., *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York, 1996), 37, and P. Osmund Lewry, 'Study of Aging in the Arts Faculty of the Universities of Paris and Oxford', in Michael Sheehan, ed., *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe* (Toronto, 1990), 32.
[63] Youngs, *Life Cycle*, 166–9.
[64] Shahar, *Growing Old*, 80.
[65] *Egils saga*, 294. See Phelpstead, 'Size Matters', 425.
[66] *Grettis saga*, 286–9; *Guðmundar saga dýra*, 161; *Jarlmanns saga*, 65–6.

William Miller suggest that the *senex amans* trope — along with its implicitly misandristic and ageist commentaries — is also common in Old Norse-Icelandic literature.[67] However, the corpus does not support this third point, containing remarkably few straightforward *senex amans* figures. Admittedly, the Norwegian *Strengleikar* contain two conventional iterations of the motif, translated from French, at least one of which seems to have been known in Iceland.[68] There are also other, presumably less derivative saga episodes that cohere with the *senex amans* ideology. For example, in *Víglundar saga*, the elopement of a young bride and her paramour is depicted with little sympathy for her elderly fiancée.[69] However, elderly male sexuality is more often portrayed favourably. Numerous characters, including Hrútr Herjólfsson, have children in their old age, implying both their active efforts *and* abilities in that sphere.[70] Hrútr's oldest reproductive act, when he is at least sixty-eight, is expressed in profoundly positive terms. His love for this youngest son is especially strong, eliciting sympathy when the latter is killed by witches.[71] Furthermore, the sexuality of elderly men can even be lauded in the (presumably fictionalised) voices of their female partners. Marianne Kalinke gestures to *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, which she argues represents an unusual contravention of the *senex amans* ideology.[72] Here, the beautiful Princess Ingibjörg voluntarily chooses the old suitor over the young, preferring proven over potential greatness.[73]

Admittedly, Ingibjörg's choice does elicit a slanderous response from Óláfr, the rebuffed younger suitor, which smacks of standard *senex amans* ideologies. Upon

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[67] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age', 304; Miller, 'Beating Up', 760.
[68] *Strengleikar*, 18, 230. See Kalinke, *Bridal Quest*, 30.
[69] *Víglundar saga*, 73–4.
[70] *Laxdæla saga*, 105–6. See also *Eyrbyggja saga*, 12, and *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, 280.
[71] *Laxdæla saga*, 106.
[72] Kalinke, *Bridal Quest*, 29–30.
[73] *Hrólfs saga Gaturekssonar*, 45–8. Hjördís makes a similar decision when marrying Sigmundr; *Völsunga saga*, 25.

ambushing the elderly Gautrekr, Óláfr claims that 'eigi hæfir svá gömlum karli at válka svá væna mey' (it is not proper for such an old man to tumble with such a beautiful maiden).[74] However, while this passage indicates the *sögumaðr*'s awareness of such notions, and perhaps also their traction among medieval Icelanders, *Hrólfs saga* undermines their validity. Gautrekr retorts that, though certainly old, he is defiantly 'óragr' (not associated with *ergi*) and slays this upstart with ease.[75] There are numerous similar episodes in which characters — often jealous younger men — rebuke the sexual or marital rights of their elders, including the one from *Sturlu saga* cited by Ármann Jakobsson and William Miller to substantiate the prevalence of *senex amans* figures in Old Norse-Icelandic.[76] However, both there and elsewhere, the sagas tend to undermine such statements, defending old men via demonstrations of their vigour, or via the affirming deeds and sentiments of their wives and communities. In *Sturlu saga*, the woman is returned to her aged husband, implying communal support for their marriage, while in a baffling episode from *Hrólfs saga kraka*, a young woman has her nose bitten off for scoffing at her hypothetical union with an eighty-year-old man.[77]

Gautrekr does not merely disprove his status as a derisible *senex amans* through martial combat, however. His eligibility is also justified in his sexual and reproductive capacity. This attribute is specified to be decisive in Ingibjörg's choice to marry him, and is also soon proven when he fathers a child.[78] The importance of virility to old men's acceptable engagement in sex is also emphasised in *Flóamanna saga*, which further suggests that this capacity should be expressed in a socio-sexually dominant fashion. Here, Helga's displeasure at the prospect of her marriage to the fifty-five-year-old Þorgils

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[74] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 49.
[75] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 49.
[76] See n. 67 above.
[77] *Sturlu saga*, 78–9; *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 84. See also *Hallfreðar saga*, 145–50, 180–6, and *Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar*, 288.
[78] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 49.

örrabeinsstjúpr is explicitly connected to his old age, once more implying the existence of suspicions against elderly male sexuality in medieval Iceland. However, after a period of strife, Helga's stance softens and the pair enjoy a happy, procreative marriage. Helga's contentment follows what seems to be a symbolic episode in which a rooster, having been repeatedly pestered by a hen, attacks his female assailant and 'leggr at henni ok berr hana, þar til er hon mæðist' (overcomes her and thrashes her, until she becomes exhausted).[79] If audiences interpreted these chickens as symbols of the human couple, one probable interpretation would be that Þorgils has somehow proven his ability to dominate Helga, which assuages her doubts as to his eligibility. Especially considering her ensuing pregnancy, it seems likely that this was interpreted as specifically sexual domination. As was the case during adolescence, *Flóamanna saga* thus indicates that the evaluation of an old man's ability to dominate women and thereby defend his exclusion from the 'rainbow coalition' — his *kvensterkleikr* — has erotic dimensions. Þorgils is virile, even to the extent that he can exhaust his younger wife in bed, which confirms his eligibility despite his age.

So when can an old man be uncontestedly decried as a *senex amans* in medieval Icelandic literature? In keeping with the analyses above, the key elements seem to be his physical, social, and sexual decline, including his particular inability to dominate women. One such example is found in *Víglundar saga*. The feeble body of the fake-Þórðr is described in grotesque and dehumanising terms, with a verse spoken by Víglundr drawing attention to his 'hrumr' (decrepit) frame and quivering 'krummur' (claws, paws).[80] Þórðr's frailty, which is implied to extend to sexual incapacity in the laconic statement of his unconsummated marriage, also has a harmful emotional impact on his

[79] *Flóamanna saga*, 315–17.
[80] *Víglundar saga*, 114.

wife, the beautiful Ketilríðr.[81] However, this episode also corroborates the notion that it is difficult to find uncomplicatedly negative *senex amans* figures in saga literature. Þórðr turns out to have been Víglundr's quick-witted and vigorous uncle Helgi all along, with his feigned frailty having been a test of Ketilríðr's faithfulness.[82] The episode surely demonstrates that, had they been genuine, Þórðr's physical and sexual impotence would have been sufficient to condemn his senescent marriage. However, the *sögumaðr* stops short of actually portraying such grotesque elderly male sexuality.

One portrayal of a truly feeble *senex amans* is found in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, in another episode that emphasises the particular importance of dominance over female figures. The power dynamic between Áki and Gríma, an elderly married couple, is expressed outright: 'karl hafði kvánríki' (the old man was under female control).[83] This power asymmetry is similar to the one in the episode from *Heiðarvíga saga* cited above, though here it bears more explicit relevance to sexual domination.[84] Gríma uses threats of romantic and erotic abandonment, in tandem with provocative indications of her future sex life with their male guest, to coerce her old husband into killing and robbing this man in his sleep.[85] Áki's powerlessness is thus implied to have a sexual basis. This old man does not have sovereignty over his social or conjugal interactions with his wife, but his apparent desire to continue enjoying such contact leaves him vulnerable to her manipulations.

This survey prompts several preliminary conclusions. In many cases, elderly male sexuality is portrayed surprisingly positively, providing the old men in question maintain social, physical, and reproductive capacities, as well as the specific ability to dominate

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[81] *Víglundar saga*, 103–114.
[82] *Víglundar saga*, 115.
[83] *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, 97.
[84] See n. 59 above.
[85] *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, 97.

their female partners, sexually and otherwise. On the other hand, if such a man is *in*capable in these areas but still attempts to pursue erotic activities, especially with younger women, he might be mocked in accordance with standard *senex amans* ideologies. He is a grotesque and pitiful figure in himself and, with respect to his female partner, he is either a tragic waste of her beauty or is liable to be duped or dominated. I will now explore these notions in greater depth, with particular recourse to supernatural depictions. The first readings analyse depictions of feeble monarchs who marry young, supernatural women. These episodes nuance the conclusions above. They suggest that even quintessentially incapable *senex amans* figures, though pathetic in their lack of *kvensterkleikr*, are not always uncomplicatedly decried in the sagas. I then analyse depictions of hypersexual revenants, through whom the *sögumenn* seem to have developed a representation of male senescent sexuality that is more resoundingly condemned. This is a figure whose presence in medieval European literature has, to my knowledge, been little discussed: the *senex amans* who is deviant not because of the disjunction between his extreme lust and impotence, but precisely because his libido continues to be matched by his unnatural virility.

**Craven kings…**

The most frequent and formulaic iteration of the *senex amans* in the sagas is the story pattern in which an elderly, widowed king marries a mysterious younger woman. She turns out to be a troll, who controls or even kills the king in her quest for power and, in some cases, for younger men. This motif was undeniably popular, appearing in five *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*, including the episode from *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* analysed above. However, I limit my analyses to the two that most clearly emphasise the

king's senescence: *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*.[86] In each of these texts, the elderly monarch's marriage is catastrophic. His impotence is implied to precipitate his wife's adulterous and homicidal misconduct, while his infatuation permits her deeds to go unpunished. Based on the conclusions above, we might expect these men's inadequacies to garner condemnation. However, via the kings' exculpation for seeking remarriage in old age in the first place, their sympathetic portrayals throughout these episodes, and the supernatural Othering of their wives, these sagas do not uphold such censure. The kings' incapacities are certainly lamentable, but are depicted more as bait for the wickedness of female Others than as wicked in their own right.

As above, we must consider the context to which these sagas' commentaries apply, especially since both of their earliest witnesses are post-medieval. *Hrólfs saga kraka* is first attested in seventeenth-century manuscripts, apparently derived from a sixteenth-century version, though it is possible that the narrative is considerably older than that.[87] A 1461 booklist from Möðruvellir indicates that a saga of Hrólfr kraki existed at that time, but its resemblance to the one extant is necessarily speculative.[88] Moreover, the Skjǫldungr lore from which *Hrólfs saga* draws is older still. For example, the figure of Hrólfr appears in the Old English *Beowulf* and *Widsið*.[89] In thirteenth-century Iceland and Scandinavia, he features in *Ynglinga saga*, *Skáldskaparmál*, and Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, which are in turn based on older, non-extant works, such as **Bjarkamál* and **Skjǫldunga saga*.[90] As to how the extant *Hrólfs saga* relates to such traditions, it is instructive that it shares many features with these earlier texts. These include broader plotlines, like the incest narrative between Hrólfr and Yrsa, as well as highly specific

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[86] See also *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, 270–6, and *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 357–9.
[87] Jonathan Evans, '*Hrólfs saga kraka*', in *MSAE*, 304.
[88] Evans, '*Hrólfs saga*', 304. See also *Diplomatarium Islendicum*, 5.290.
[89] *Beowulf*, 36, 41; *Widsið*, 73.
[90] *Ynglinga saga*, 54–60; *Skáldskaparmál*, 1.58–9; *Gesta Danorum*, 48–62. See Evans, '*Hrólfs saga*', 304.

details, like the bizarre nose-biting episode mentioned above.[91] These parallels demonstrate that the extant saga contains material much older than its earliest witnesses, though whether this implies its own age or merely the *sögumaðr*'s reliance on such texts as sources cannot be discerned. For my analysis, it is particularly relevant to note that, though the character of Böðvarr bjarki is attested in numerous earlier Skjǫldungr narratives, his origin story as the grandson of the *senex amans* King Hringr is not. According to Ralph O'Connor, this episode is a later addition to *Hrólfs saga* from around the fifteenth century.[92] Conversely, considering this narrative's quasi-historical nature, Ármann Jakobsson argues that *sögumenn* might have been more reluctant to make alterations to it than they would with more consciously fictive material, calling into question the possibility of such additions once it had been recorded in saga form.[93] Based on the Möðruvellir reference and the popularity of Skjǫldungr lore in the thirteenth century, Ármann asserts that *Hrólfs saga kraka* took this form between 1230 and 1450.[94] Taking these arguments into account, I examine this episode as likely copied and consumed in Iceland between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, certainly later, and possibly earlier, though with my confidence in its existence and resemblance to the extant version diminishing the further back we look.

*Hjálmþés saga*'s medieval pedigree is likewise knotty. It is also first attested in the seventeenth century, though scholars suggest that it was composed in a similar form in the fifteenth.[95] Many elements of the saga, including the basic features of its *senex amans* subplot, are also attested in a corresponding *rímur* tradition: *Hjálmþésrímur*.[96]

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[91] *Gesta Danorum*, 53. See n. 77 above.
[92] Ralph O'Connor, '"Stepmother Sagas": An Irish Analogue for *Hjálmþérs saga ok Ölvérs*', *Scandinavian Studies* 72/1 (2000), 26.
[93] Ármann Jakobsson, '"Le Roi Chevalier": The Royal Ideology and Genre of *Hrólfs saga kraka*', *Scandinavian Studies* 71/2 (1999), 140, 147.
[94] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Roi Chevalier', 140.
[95] Richard Harris, '*Hjálmþés saga*', in *MSAE*, 285. See also O'Connor, 'Stepmother Sagas', 1.
[96] *Hjálmþérsrímur*, 9–10.

Although these *rímur* are likewise first attested in seventeenth-century manuscripts, Richard Harris asserts their fourteenth-century composition, which might suggest the currency of this story pattern — though not necessarily the pre- or even contemporaneous existence of the saga version — around that time.[97] As with *Hrólfs saga*, I take a cautious approach, recognising the reproduction and consumption of this episode to have certainly occurred in the seventeenth century, probably as early as the fifteenth century, and possibly — though indeterminately — earlier than that. Finally, in addition to their speculative composition dates, the relevance of these sagas' commentaries on elderly male sexuality to late medieval Icelandic society is bolstered by the iteration of this story pattern — though with less explicit reference to male senescence — in *Gríms saga loðinkinna*. The latter is attested in the fifteenth century and was supposedly composed in the early fourteenth.[98]

These two kings' excessive infatuation with their supernatural second wives is first implied in their hasty and apparently irrational decisions to wed. Despite being grief-stricken at the deaths of their former queens, they are exaggeratedly eager to rekindle their love lives. *Hjálmþés saga* emphasises the intensity and immediacy of King Ingi's passion for Lúða: 'konungr þóttist enga slíka sét hafa at allri kurteisi ok sköruleik, ok rann honum þegar mikill ástarhugr til hennar' (the king thought that he had seen none like her in all courtesy and nobility, and great love for her immediately ran through him).[99] O'Connor has already noted that this excerpt's florid, romance-inflected style jars with Ingi's 'old Viking' persona, a disjunction that draws attention to — and characterises as ludicrous — his effusion of emotion.[100] To this, I would add the implication that the king's response is underpinned by lust. Ingi knows nothing of Lúða's

[97] Harris, '*Hjálmþés saga*', 285; Harris, ed., '*Hjálmþérs saga*: A Scientific Edition', xxiii-xxiv.
[98] Peter Jorgensen, '*Gríms saga loðinkinna*', in *MSAE*, 243.
[99] *Hjálmþés saga*, 234.
[100] O'Connor, 'Stepmother Sagas', 4–5.

character or background; his overwhelming 'ástarhugr' and admiration of her courtly virtues stem solely from his (presumably sexual) gaze at her 'forkunnar væ[n]' (remarkably beautiful) form.[101] Similarly non-rational motivations are implied in *Hrólfs saga*. King Hringr's snap decision to marry Hvít is undertaken without concern 'at hún sé eigi rík' (that she is not wealthy/powerful).[102] This invites considerations of alternative incentives and, in light of Hvít's prior portrayal as captivatingly beautiful to Hringr's men, audiences probably assumed an eruption of implicitly carnal urges similar to that experienced by Ingi.[103]

The reference to Hvít's socio-economic deficiency also foreshadows the inappropriateness of her marriage to Hringr, based on the norm of *jafnræði* (an equal match).[104] As discussed in previous chapters, medieval Icelandic marriages were partially considered economic and/or political contracts.[105] As a literary reflection of this norm, youthful courtships are sometimes portrayed as guided or even compelled by parental figures, who seek to override the passions of their suggestible male wards in order to ensure advantageous marriages.[106] Hringr's socio-economically frivolous marriage implies that old men might have been thought to require similar guidance. The vulnerability of both these kings to overpowering amorous impulses suggests that they — and perhaps the real demographic they represent — are a liability, prone to gambling their family's wealth and status on a whim.[107] That these kings' exaggerated affective responses arise from senescence is also implicit in both texts. In *Hrólfs saga*, Hringr's

[101] *Hjálmþés saga*, 234.
[102] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 41.
[103] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 40.
[104] On the importance of this concept, see Bandlien, 'Church's Teachings', 65, and *WONS*, 21–2, 191–2.
[105] See Chapter One, n. 306, and Chapter Two, ns. 79–84.
[106] Recall *Ketils saga hængs*, 256. See also *Kormáks saga*, 215.
[107] Such norms are corroborated elsewhere in the sagas and laws, which suggest the right of an old man's pre-existing heirs to prevent senescent marriages, or disinherit the offspring that might ensue: *Egils saga*, 16–18; *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 1.224.

hurried matrimony is immediately followed by a statement of his old age.[108] Similarly, though Ingi's age has not yet been specified, O'Connor claims that audiences would have connected his infatuation to his 'dotage'.[109] The latter has already been implied when his son Hjálmþér assumed some adult duties following the death of Ingi's first wife, and is soon confirmed explicitly in the words of the queen.[110]

This statement of Ingi's senescence by Queen Lúða is made in relation to the other attribute that paradoxically accompanies infatuation in many *senex amans* figures: sexual inability. Ingi's impotence is first insinuated in the fact that the royal couple are lying in bed when Lúða asks about his grown-up heir.[111] Ó'Connor argues that a question about the existence of a younger male in this setting implies her sexual dissatisfaction.[112] Once the king tells her about Hjálmþér, Lúða wastes no time in seeking out and attempting to seduce him. She complains of his father's impotence, characterising her sexless union with such a 'gamal[l]' (old) and 'örvasa' (decrepit) man as a cruel twist of fate.[113] *Hrólfs saga* also describes King Hringr's concomitant senescence and impotence. First, these are intimated in the narratorial voice immediately after Hringr's marriage to Hvít: 'Er konungr nokkut við aldr, ok fannst þat brátt á drottningu' (The king is somewhat old, and this could soon be noted in the queen).[114] As Phelpstead notes, this vague second clause insinuates Hringr's inability 'to meet Hvít's sexual needs'.[115] Second, like Lúða, Hvít soon attempts to seduce her stepson with direct reference to his father's incapacity.[116]

[108] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 41.
[109] O'Connor, 'Stepmother Sagas', 25.
[110] *Hjálmþés saga*, 233, 244–5.
[111] *Hjálmþés saga*, 244.
[112] O'Connor, 'Stepmother Sagas', 8.
[113] *Hjálmþés saga*, 244–5.
[114] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 41.
[115] Phelpstead, 'Sexual Ideology', 10.
[116] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 41–2.

These sagas suggest a range of negative consequences of the elderly kings' concurrent infatuation and impotence, which combine to criticise senescent male sexuality. To begin with, their sexual incapacities dissatisfy their wives, precipitating their sexual advances towards younger men, including their respective stepsons. These women's adulterous advances could have been construed as primarily the result of the kings' incapacities, rather than their own licentious natures, an interpretation intimated by Phelpstead.[117] This notion is given explicit airing by both queens in the seduction sequences themselves. However, it is especially bolstered in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, via the statement of Hringr's senescence and its effect on the queen, quoted above. The fact that this is expressed in the narratorial voice, rather than that of a potentially unreliable character, lends its implications a combined sense of authority and neutrality. Especially considering the grammatical ambiguity noted by Phelpstead, this passage might imply that Hvít's behaviour is a logical consequence of Hringr's enfeebled state. In addition to the queens' advances towards their stepsons, *Hjálmþés saga* includes a further negative consequence that could have been interpreted to arise from the king's impotence. Soon after Ingi marries Lúða, 'maðr hvarf hverja nátt' (a man disappeared every night).[118] Though these men's fates are never explained, audiences presumably interpreted Lúða to be the cause, a notion made explicit in *Illuga saga*'s iteration of the trope.[119] Based on the fact that these disappearances are nocturnal, and considering the extreme lust that Lúða exhibits toward Hjálmþér, it is also possible that their demise was interpreted to be sexual in nature, perhaps imagined as violent assaults like those of Katla and Sunnlöð.

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[117] Phelpstead, 'Sexual Ideology', 10. Phelpstead's sympathetic interpretation of Hvít's actions goes even further than this; he later suggests that her efforts to seduce Björn are triggered not by her libido, but by her internalisation of the 'exchange of women' paradigm; Phelpstead, 'Sexual Ideology', 17.

[118] *Hjálmþés saga*, 235.

[119] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 358.

The infatuation of these kings also prevents them from recognising their wives' wicked schemes. This permits these queens to run amok, negatively impacting their husbands' families and kingdoms. In *Hjálmþés saga*, the king remains a surprisingly capable ruler in many respects; he continues to exert power and influence, including when mustering a fleet for Hjálmþér's raids.[120] However, just as his sexual dysfunction apparently precipitated Lúða's sexual misconduct and implicitly homicidal predations, Ingi's infatuation precludes his recognition of her guilt. Lúða's influence over Ingi is especially apparent in their pillow talk scene. Though she asks about Hjálmþér and explicitly indicates her intention to visit him, the king can neither recognise the adulterous motivations that O'Connor suggests are obvious, nor enact prophylactic or punitive measures against them. His blindness to his wife's wickedness has a negative impact on the kingdom: men continue to disappear, and the king fails to shield even his own son from the threat of her hypersexuality. The negative consequences of the king's concurrent infatuation and impotence are more pronounced in *Hrólfs saga*. Here, as also asserted by Ármann Jakobsson, the king's control over his kingdom *is* diminished: he becomes 'no use to [his] subjects'.[121] While he is away, Hvít governs the kingdom, which everyone but Hringr thinks deleterious.[122] This delegation of command is also intimated to be at Hvít's request: the saga describes the queen counselling Hringr about stewardship during one such excursion. She advises that Björn should assist her governance, to which the king assents despite his son's warnings.[123] This not only suggests her influence over Hringr in governmental matters, but also — as in *Hjálmþés saga* — indicates his blindness to his wife's nefarious intentions, sexual and otherwise.

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[120] *Hjálmþés saga*, 235.
[121] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Roi Chevalier', 154.
[122] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 41.
[123] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 41.

Hvít's ulterior motive is to increase her contact with Björn, thus enabling her advances towards him, something the king either cannot perceive or does nothing to prevent.

The adverse effects of King Hringr's infatuation go even further than this, extending to the murder of his own son. After Björn resists Hvít's seductions, she curses him to become a bear. Then, when Hringr returns, she insists on this creature's extermination: 'Drottning eggjaði fast at láta drepa dýrit, en þó frestaðist þat um hríð. Lætr konungr sér fátt um þetta finnast ok þykkir með undarligu móti vera.' (The queen egged strongly to have the animal killed, yet this was delayed awhile. The king is reticent [literally, he expresses little of what he thinks about the matter] and thinks that things have taken a strange turn).[124] If not his actual awareness of the bear's true identity, the contemplation, caginess, and hesitance to act that Hringr demonstrates in this passage at least intimate his hunch that these events warrant closer scrutiny. His implied suspicions make it all the more damning that he eventually succumbs to Hvít's guidance and orders his ursine son executed before his own eyes.[125]

Even if audiences did not interpret Hringr's suspicions before this tragic event, the king's ineffectiveness in the face of certain proof of the bear's identity — and Hvít's guilt in his demise — is soon presented unambiguously. First, the saga states that the king comes to this conclusion independently. However, displaying an extreme deficiency in *kvensterkleikr*, he refuses to punish Hvít or even publicly acknowledge his revelation.[126] Second, when confronted about this atrocity by Björn's lover Bera and their illegitimate son Böðvarr bjarki — his own grandson — the shameful causes and consequences of Hringr's passivity are outlined in greater detail:

> 'Hefir mik næsta grunat, at þetta mundi af hennar ráðum vera um kynstr þessi öll saman, sem hér hafa við borit, en fyrir ástar sakir við drottningu hefi ek

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[124] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 43.
[125] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 44.
[126] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 47.

> látit kyrrt vera'… Konungr kvaðst vilja bæta honum fé eptir því… ok væri henni ekki gert til meins. Böðvarr kveðst… 'Ertu svá fanginn fyrir þessum óvætti, at þú heldr varla viti þínu né réttum konungdómi.'
>
> ('I have quite suspected that it would be her scheming that caused all the strange things that have happened here, but the sake of my love for the queen I allowed things to remain quiet'… The king replied he would compensate him [Böðvarr] for that [Björn's death]… as long as she would not be harmed. Böðvarr said… 'You are so enthralled by this evil being, that you are hardly in control of your wits or your rightful kingdom').[127]

Böðvarr then kills the queen, while the king looks on, horrified yet powerless. Immediately afterwards, his adolescence is specified: 'Var Böðvarr þá átján vetra' (Böðvarr was then eighteen years old).[128] In the first excerpt, the notion that the king's inaction is related to the same infatuation that precipitated his hasty marriage is presented outright. He refuses to take vengeance against Hvít because — despite her many misdeeds, including arranging the murder of his own son — he cannot bring himself to harm her. As Björn's closest male relatives, Hringr and Böðvarr would have been understood as primary grievants in his death. In this capacity, Böðvarr epitomises a reaction often lauded in sagas: he refuses to accept monetary compensation and thus 'bera bróðir sinn í sjóði' (to bear his brother in a purse).[129] How unconscionable must it have seemed, therefore, that Hringr seeks to pacify Böðvarr in allegiance to his guilty wife over his own son, not merely accepting the notion of such shameful compensation, but actually financing it himself? Together, these excerpts also implicitly link the king's shameful inaction to his age. The fact that Böðvarr's adolescent status is explicitly stated at this moment might partially imply that killing this trollish queen — and thereby surpassing *kvensterkleikr* — is a rite of passage for him. However, it might also imply that his age is significant to his ability — and, by implication, Hringr's *in*ability — to

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[127] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 50–1.
[128] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 51.
[129] *Grettis saga*, 80.

recognise and punish her wickedness. Just like Hringr's recently matured son Björn, his adolescent grandson Böðvarr is not enthralled by Hvít's beauty: these youths are able to refuse, abuse, and even kill her. This detail might corroborate the notion that Hringr's senescence is essential to his infatuation and consequent ineffectuality.

These features of *Hrólfs saga* and *Hjálmþés saga* imply the kings' advanced ages to be instrumental in the catastrophic outcomes of their May-December marriages. They appear to support Ármann Jakobsson's claim, made in specific reference to Hringr and Hvít, that the figure of the *senex amans* is abhorred in saga literature: 'nothing good' comes from his romantic forays, especially with younger women.[130] These kings' age-sprung ineffectualities permit their own subjugation by their wives and prevent them from recognising, preventing, or punishing these women's misdeeds. However, it is also significant that the negative consequences of these May-December marriages depend on the embodiment of May by a certain kind of female: an evil troll. Hence, just like the numerous examples cited in the survey above, these episodes are not straightforward iterations of the standard *senex amans* trope. They are unlike the translated narratives found in *Strengleikar*, which lament the 'distressing fate' of maidens 'chained to' old men and ultimately vindicate the women's adultery.[131] They are also dissimilar to other medieval *senex amans* tales, like Chaucer's paradigmatic *Miller's Tale*, in which women, though admittedly lusty and duplicitous, are vivacious, entertaining, and ultimately relatable human characters.[132] In their vilification and supernatural Othering of the two queens, *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis* make these women targets of opprobrium. Though not necessarily exonerating the kings for their precipitation and facilitation of their wives' misconduct, this feature diffuses the blame apportioned to

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[130] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age', 304.
[131] Kalinke, *Bridal Quest,* 30–1.
[132] *The Miller's Tale*, 68–9.

these old men and weakens the social commentary against the senescent impotence and incapability they represent. Carl Phelpstead and Ármann Jakobsson also recognise this transfer of blame to the queen, respectively referring to her 'socially disruptive… unrestrained sexual desire', and her 'wickedness' in robbing the king of his 'good sense'.[133] Indeed, though this seems to conflict with his interpretation of the culpability of sexually active old men — and even of Hringr specifically — Ármann elsewhere asserts the totality of Hvít's guilt in similar terms to this dissertation: 'the narrative condemns these women unequivocally… their evil may be partially caused by the folly of man, but they are evil and deserve what they get'.[134]

As mentioned above, these queens' adulterous forays might indeed have been interpreted to arise from dissatisfaction at the impotence of their elderly husbands. However, other Icelandic *senex amans* narratives indicate that these women's libidinous responses to such dissatisfaction are neither inevitable nor justifiable. In the episode from *Víglundar saga* discussed above, Víglundr's uncle Helgi tests Ketilríðr by convincing her that she has genuinely entered a loveless — and sexless — marriage to the fake-Þórðr, who is really Helgi in disguise. She passes this test by resisting a tryst with Víglundr, her true paramour, thus proving herself a worthy bride for him.[135] Hence, willingness to remain faithful to an elderly, even completely impotent male partner is presented as a not only possible but also inherently positive trait in female partners.[136] Condemnation of the queens' sexual misconduct is also made explicit in both these sagas. First, the attempts of both troll-queens to seduce their stepsons are resoundingly deplored. In *Hjálmþés saga*, the queen's speech itself already undermines her position. As intimated above, she attempts to affect the persona of a helpless maiden who, like those in the *Strengleikar*

[133] Phelpstead, 'Sexual Ideology', 21; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Roi Chevalier', 161.
[134] Ármann, 'Queens of Terror', 184. See n. 130 above.
[135] *Víglundar saga*, 115–6.
[136] See also Jochens, 'Illicit Love Visit', 377.

narratives, is tragically ‘chained to’ an old man. However, her evocation of the sympathy enjoyed by those maidens is precluded by her inability to maintain her attempted veneer of victimhood and virtue. She refers to her ‘mjök breysk líf’ (very loose morals) and ‘lystugr líkami’ (lustful body), outright statements of her deviant licentiousness.[137] Moreover, in both texts, the vilification of the queens’ adulterous advances is also apparent in their stepson’s reactions: Hjálmþér states that Lúða is ‘svívirðilig’ (shameful) and, in both sagas, the boys physically strike their stepmothers as punishment for their debauchery.[138] Second, regarding Lúða’s implied spree of nocturnal — and potentially sexual — assaults, such aggressive behaviour is obviously condemnable. It suffices to reiterate that such acts are reminiscent of the trollish behaviour of night-riding witches like Katla and Sunnlöð, and could hardly be construed as a justifiable response to sexual unfulfillment.[139]

Furthermore, it also true that the kings’ senescence leads to their powerlessness against the influence of their young wives. However, the notion that a younger woman’s socio-sexual domination of her old husband would have a necessarily negative impact is further contingent on the wickedness of the woman in question. The corpus depicts numerous beneficial young wives, whose dominion over their elderly husbands is profoundly positive. For example, in the May-December union in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, the young Ingibjörg’s wise counsel prevents Gautrekr’s gullibility from triggering a war with an erstwhile companion.[140] Likewise, Vigdís from *Laxdœla saga* does more than counsel her useless old husband, to whom she is married for money. Rather, like the evil queens of these *fornaldarsögur*, she controls Þórðr’s affairs.

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[137] *Hjálmþés saga*, 134. On libidinousness as the female counterpart to *ergi*, see Chapter Two, ns. 57 and 139.
[138] *Hjálmþés saga*, 134; *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 42.
[139] On the kidnapping of humans by trolls with violent or sometimes explicitly sexual motivation, see also *Fljótsdœla saga*, 224–29, and *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 331–2.
[140] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 50–3.

However, Vigdís does this to a distinctly positive effect: she overrules Þórðr's cowardice, which was perhaps interpreted to be caused or exacerbated by his senescence, ensuring that shelter is provided to her outlawed kinsman.[141]

*Hrólfs saga* and *Hjálmþés saga* also indicate that Hringr and Ingi, despite their senescence, could reasonably have expected their second marriages to be benign and even beneficial. To begin with, both marriages are explicitly recommended by others. In *Hrólfs saga*, Hringr is advised to remarry by his counsellors and, in *Hjálmþés saga*, this instruction comes from no less a respectable source than the eponymous protagonist.[142] Such counsel is also offered to elderly widower kings elsewhere in the corpus, where it can result in unproblematic marriages.[143] This advice has a significant effect on these episodes' commentaries. It demonstrates that figures free from senescent confusion or infatuation could actively endorse male conjugal activities in old age, as well as detracting from these kings' responsibility in their ultimately ruinous marriages. On the latter point, the kings are further exonerated in the fact that, though they are comically eager to wed upon glimpsing their sexy, supernatural brides, they are not the ones to select the women for this purpose. In *Hrólfs saga*, Hringr's counsellors undertake a wooing mission on his behalf, proposition Hvít, and bring her back for the king.[144] In *Hjálmþés saga*, Lúða arrives unannounced and offers herself in marriage to Ingi.[145] It seems likely that Hvít or her compatriots were likewise considered the primary instigators of her selection as Hringr's bride. The king's courtiers stumble upon Hvít after being blown off course in an uncanny storm, a power often attributed to Finns

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[141] *Laxdæla saga*, 31–9. Also recall *Heiðarvíga saga*, 261–2.
[142] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 40; *Hjálmþés saga*, 233–4.
[143] *Gautreks saga*, 45; *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, 469–70.
[144] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 40.
[145] *Hjálmþés saga*, 324.

and/or trolls.[146] The role played by the female party in one or possibly both of these matches not only contributes to the exoneration of the king for his selection of partner, but also primes audiences to disapprove of the brides. They imply the queens' deviant activeness, based on the aforementioned expectations that only men should actively seek out partners.[147] Finally, even if the kings' assent to these matches was construed to condemn them, or if their senescence was perceived to make them vulnerable targets for such evil women, the trope of kings being catastrophically enthralled by trollish women is not limited to elderly men. There are examples of young kings being hopelessly infatuated with supernatural women, including Haraldr hárfagri, who rules for sixty years after his catastrophic bewitchment.[148]

Further diffusing the old men's responsibility for their ruinous *senex amans* marriages are the respective depictions of the kings and queens, as well as the contrasting retributions exacted upon them in the sagas. As mentioned above, each of these kings has recently lost his former wife, which is described in sympathetic terms. Their grief is stated in both texts and, in *Hjálmþés saga*, is made particularly poignant via the motif of compulsive mound-sitting.[149] Ingi's sorrow is so strong that he can do nothing but pine on his wife's grave 'nætr ok daga' (night and day).[150] On the one hand, the kings' grief contributes to the comedic effect of their exaggerated 'love at first sight', as argued above. On the other, it might have encouraged audiences to sympathise with these old kings, tempering their condemnation of the socio-sexual impotence they demonstrate in their second marriages.

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[146] Sayers, 'Power, Magic, and Sex', 61. See *Örvar-Odds saga*, 298–9, and *Sörla saga sterka*, 197.
[147] See Chapter Two, ns. 77–8.
[148] *Ágrip*, 5–6. See also *Haralds saga hárfagra*, 125–7, 135–6.
[149] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 39.
[150] *Hjálmþés saga*, 233.

Contributing to the audience's positive evaluations of these kings, they are each explicitly described as praiseworthy in matters beyond the queen's influence. In *Hrólfs saga*, even after Hringr offers to pay compensation for the death of his own son — the lowest ebb of his combined infatuation and impotence — Böðvarr responds that the king could still prove an admirable ruler, providing the queen were exiled.[151] Böðvarr's sentiments indicate that, even in the face of Hringr's egregious conduct, primary culpability rests with the queen. Similar notions are expressed in *Hjálmþés saga*, to a seemingly incongruous degree. Here, the king's depiction as an admirable ruler is not hypothetical but demonstrable, both during and after his enthrallment. As mentioned above, beyond his obliviousness to Lúða's sexual and/or homicidal misdeeds, Ingi retains control of his kingdom. His power persists throughout the episode, and continues even after Hjálmþér returns and kills Lúða. At this point, the king's infatuation with his troll-queen is completely — arguably clumsily — dropped from the narrative. Ingi is merely stated to rejoice in his son's return and to rule the kingdom without further incident until his death.[152] Indeed, considering Ingi's paralysing grief before Lúða's arrival, audiences could even have construed her net effect on this *senex amans* to have been positive, revitalising his reign for the remainder of his senescence. Hringr is not so lucky. Shortly after Böðvarr dispatches his troll-queen, he falls ill and dies, presumably from grief.[153] Though his infatuation was surely construed to have been misdirected, Hringr's death is far more likely to have evoked sympathy and mitigated his condemnation than the ones received by the two queens, as will now be enumerated.

In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, Böðvarr is enraged by his grandfather's apathy and brutally murders Hvít, blindfolding, beating, and dragging her through the streets. Not only is her

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[151] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 51.
[152] *Hjálmþés saga*, 281–2.
[153] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 51.

punishment exceptionally violent and humiliating, but also it is also endorsed by the community at large, who think it less than she deserves.[154] Particularly when compared to the king's peaceful demise, this sanctioned execution indicates the saga's primary criticism of the female figure, encouraging audience interpretations along similar lines. In *Hjálmþés saga*, following Lúða's curse forcing Hjálmþér to embark upon a perilous quest, the hero counter-curses his stepmother: 'Hamrar hávir standa niðr við skipalægit. Þar skaltu á stíga sínum fæti á hvárn hamarinn, en fjórar þrælar föður míns skulu kynda eld undir þér' (High crags stand down by the harbour. There shall you step with one foot on each crag, and four of my father's slaves shall kindle a fire beneath you).[155] Upon Hjálmþér's successful return, Lúða falls to her death in this fire.[156] Though O'Connor analyses the significance of other aspects of Hjálmþér's counter-curse, he does not expand upon this detail.[157] First, it is worth noting that the manner of Lúða's death might be paradigmatic to the motif as a whole, as it is also found in *Illuga saga*.[158] Second, the anatomical ramifications of this torture and execution bear sexual significance. As scholars have noted of Gjálp's similar pose in *Skáldskaparmál*, which directs the audience's attention — and Þórr's projectile — towards the giantess's crotch, *Hjálmþés saga* implies the burning of Lúða's genitals in the fire she straddles.[159] In a talion sense, this sexually significant punishment might have implied that it is *her* eroticism, rather than that of the king, that is reprehensible.[160] The disparity between the kings and

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[154] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 51.
[155] *Hjálmþés saga*, 252.
[156] *Hjálmþés saga*, 281.
[157] O'Connor, 'Stepmother Sagas', 12–13.
[158] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 358–9.
[159] *Skáldskaparmál*, 1.25. See McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 8, 182, and Motz, *Beauty and Hag*, 21.
[160] On talion justice in sagas, see Chapter Two, n. 122. Hvít's punishment might also have been interpreted to have a similarly sexual, talion element. Böðvarr's blindfolding of this troll, a common method of preventing the 'evil eye', might also have implied his termination of her sexual gaze. For such logic elsewhere, see *Adonias saga*, 226. On the link between the evil eye and the sexual gaze, see also *WONL*, 67.

queens' respective fates seems largely to exonerate these senescent men, levelling their sagas' condemnation at female sexual deviance in general, rather than at senescent male sexuality specifically.

I concluded based on the naturalistic survey above that Old Norse-Icelandic texts can present elderly male sexuality in a surprisingly positive light. Old men who continue to be romantically and sexually active are frequently portrayed as vigorous and admirable, while straightforward depictions of the derisible *senex amans* are rare. It is further significant, therefore, that the sagas' most formulaic supernatural depictions of this trope also seem hesitant to condemn old lovers, even when they are indisputably feeble. These old kings are indeed tragically infatuated and impotent, a combination common to *senex amans* figures, which has disastrous personal and societal consequences. However, the sagas also ensure that equal or greater blame is directed towards their evil queens.

This attention to the wickedness of the female rather than the impotent lust of the male represents a significant break from the European *senex amans* tradition.[161] Hence, it is worth speculating on possible reasons for the sagas' persistent unwillingness to condemn elderly male sexuality, whether capable or incapable. To begin with, considering the likelihood of male authorship for most sagas, it is possible that fears for the inevitability — or compensation for the present reality — of senescent impotence precipitated such sympathetic depictions.[162] Further stemming from the presumed gender of the *sögumenn*, this trend might also expose a broader misogynistic, or at least anti-misandristic, bias: whenever a man's heterosexual sexuality is deviant, it turns out that some attribute of his female partner is an exacerbating or even fundamental factor.

[161] See ns. 63–4 above.
[162] See *WONL*, 126.

However, the following examination suggests that such hypotheses are not comprehensively satisfactory. In the introduction to this chapter, I asserted the obviousness of Jón Viðar Sigurðsson's hypothesis on senescence once his premises have been sufficiently problematised: elderly males are depicted unfavourably when they are useless. However, in the following discussion, I assert that old men could also be portrayed as abhorrent — and, indeed, less desirable than their useless counterparts — precisely because they remain unnaturally active and virile into their senescence.

**… and Rapacious Revenants**

As shown in Chapter Two, one of the supernatural entities through which *sögumenn* seem to have explored disturbing sexual topics is the revenant, commonly referred to as *aptrganga*, *draugr*, or just plain *troll*/*tröll*. The following readings continue in this vein, though here focusing on the age-based symbolism of the revenant itself, rather than its victims. Specifically, I employ Ármann Jakobsson's hypothesis that this particular troll can personify senescence. Like Víga-Styrr, many of the sagas' most famous revenants are portrayed as sexual predators. When refracted through Ármann's reasoning, we might thus recognise them as unique iterations of the *senex amans*. These figures are physically dominant in their erotically motivated exploits and can even be depicted as sexually and reproductively capable. Since their predations are condemned, they can temper our understanding of the positive conceptions of active elderly male sexuality, as indicated in the portrayals of admirably virile geriatrics like Hrútr Herjólfsson and Þorgils örrabeinsstjúpr. Though referring to numerous *aptrgöngur*, this section focuses primarily on *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, in which the revenant Þormóðr's senescence and sexuality are foregrounded especially clearly. I then turn to *Völsa þáttr*. I compare its depiction of

a feeble old husband with that of Völsi, an undead horse penis, in an effort to highlight contrasting conceptions surrounding incapable and capable elderly male sexuality. Like the craven kings above, this husband is dominated by his haughty wife. However, his foibles are infinitely preferable to those of his huge and virile undead counterpart, suggesting that male socio-sexual decline was not only considered a tragic inevitability, but could also be framed as a necessary and even desirable expectation.

As Ármann Jakobsson argues, revenants can personify old age. Because their activities postdate their natural lifespans, they can symbolise the defiance of the same chronological, biological, and social precepts that cause the reduction and eventual termination of old people's involvement in worldly affairs. Some cantankerous geriatrics are depicted attempting to resist senescent decline, but revenants take this obstinacy a step further, refusing to relinquish their temporal powers even in death.[163] Ármann's reasoning may be brought to bear on revenants who perform sexually suggestive deeds. For example, Víga-Styrr's assault on Guðríðr can be seen as a *senex amans* episode. Here, the erotic advances of the symbolic old man — damp, pale, and versifying about his imminent decomposition — are undesirable and ultimately lethal to his adolescent victim. This perhaps refers to the physical danger and/or visceral loathsomeness of the sexual predations of senescent men, particularly when carried out against younger women. It is easy to see how the groping hands of this pallid corpse parallel the doddering paws of the fake-Þórðr above, each contrasted against the vivacity of the young woman in his clutches. Víga-Styrr's assault might also express some of the same abstract implications about senescent sexual partners as are found in Ketilríðr's marriage to Þórðr. Styrr's success in ensuring that Guðríðr joins him in *moldbúaheim* (soil-dweller's realm) could symbolise the perceived waste of the marriage prospects, fertility,

[163] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age', 325. See also Ármann Jakobsson, *Troll Inside*, 87.

and/or libido of nubile young women when they are under the power — sexual or marital — of old men with questionable reproductive capacities.

Though I am unaware of any substantial scholarship on their sexual significance, the depictions of numerous saga revenants — including some of the most infamous among them — feature erotic undertones.[164] For example, *Grettis saga* notes Glámr's predilection for one victim in particular: 'Var þá mest sótt bóndadóttur, ok svá fór, at hon lézk af því' (Then the farmer's daughter was sought the most, and so it went, that she died as a result).[165] Flouting any notion that he is wantonly destructive, this excerpt compels us to consider what distinguishes this woman to attract Glámr's attention. In her introduction, she is described only as 'vel á legg komin' (well come of age).[166] This implies her physical maturation to be a recent development: she is an adolescent or young woman, perhaps implicitly sexually desirable and/or marriageable. Elsewhere, Ármann Jakobsson has argued that the identities of revenants' victims are significant. His own interpretation is that their youth is an enviable trait, which these personifiers of senescence seek to destroy.[167] However, as demonstrated in Víga-Styrr's reanimation — and corroborated in numerous instances discussed below — the connection between a

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[164] The most thoroughgoing treatment is found in my own prior work, some which is expanded here: Roby, 'Excess and *Ergi*', 19–30. As with his promising but unexplored statements on night-riders as *succubi*, Ármann himself has previously referred to Icelandic revenants as *incubi* without further comment. However, his explanation of this term seems only to encompass their aggressive, parasitic, and infectious natures; see Ármann Jakobsson, 'Vampires and Watchmen', 289, 299. Additional unpublished work by Fernando Guerrero suggests the sexual motivations of Icelandic revenants, but primarily within the internal logic of the sagas, rather than in a symbolic sense; see Guerrero, 'Stranded in *Miðgarðr*', 123–33. Finally, Margaret Cormack recently alluded to their 'amorous inclin[ations]', though in a discussion focused primarily on the enigmatic Selkolla; see Margaret Cormack, 'Saints, Seals, and Demons: The Story of Selkolla', in Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen, eds., *Supernatural Encounters in Old Norse Literature and Tradition* (Turnhout, 2018), 82–3. On sexual ghosts in other medieval contexts, see Nancy Caciola, 'Wraiths, Revenants, and Ritual in Medieval Culture', *Past and Present* 152 (1996), 28.

[165] *Grettis saga*, 116.

[166] *Grettis saga*, 108.

[167] Ármann Jakobsson, *Troll Inside*, 97–8, 207, n. 193. See also Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age', 322.

revenant's harassment of a particular victim, especially of the opposite sex, and its erotic rather than merely destructive desires seems to have been a common trope. Hence, Glámr's nocturnal attacks on this nubile farmer's daughter could have been construed as efforts to derive sexual enjoyment from, rather than simply destroy, her youthful body.

Other details in Glámr's hauntings support and expand this interpretation. For example, he famously begins 'at ríða húsum á nætr' (to ride houses at night).[168] This ambiguous act is common to revenants throughout the corpus, though its significance remains largely unanalysed.[169] Nancy Caciola suggests that Glámr stamps on the roof, while William Sayers, not hazarding to speculate on the act's physical logistics, focuses on the significance of the rooftops themselves.[170] Since the hall is a 'metonym of human culture' in Old Norse-Icelandic texts, the revenant's aggression against it emphasises the severity and broad anti-social scope of his predations.[171] However, it is also conceivable that such roof-riding was also interpreted as an assertion of dominance via phallic aggression.[172] Beyond the fact that the verb *ríða* could designate copulation in Old Norse as it does in Modern Icelandic, there are physical descriptions indicating that this act could have been visualised in a suggestive manner.[173] One is found in Glámr's haunting itself: 'var þá farit upp á húsin ok riðit skálanum ok barit hælunum, svá at brakaði í hverju tré' (something had then gone up onto the house and ridden the hall and thrashed with its heels, such that every timber broke).[174] This passage's reliance on subjectless, past participle constructions ensures that the act's physical logistics remain mysterious. In part, this builds suspense for Grettir's imminent encounter with the mysterious Glámr.

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[168] *Grettis saga*, 113.
[169] See *Eyrbyggja saga*, 93, and *Svarfdæla saga*, 175.
[170] Caciola, 'Wraiths, Revenants, and Ritual', 15.
[171] Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated', 243.
[172] On phallic aggression, see Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 52–5.
[173] See Chapter One, ns. 167–9.
[174] *Grettis saga*, 119.

However, intentionally or otherwise, this ambiguity could also have facilitated interpretations of this act's sexual undercurrents. The passage does make one thing clear, however: Glámr's roof-riding is not metaphorical. It involves the revenant physically climbing upon structures and damaging them with its heels. Though this description could uphold Caciola's interpretation, since it does not preclude Glámr dancing a grotesque jig, a further example suggests otherwise. The revenant Klaufi confirms his posture: 'Sitk á húsi' (I sit on the house).[175] Just as the physical description of Sunnlöð's riding demonstrated the potential for similar attacks to be understood as physically mounting young men, Klaufi's verse indicates that roof-riding revenants could have been visualised in seated positions. Considering the damage done by Glámr's heels, this was presumably imagined as him straddling the gable and violently jerking his lower limbs.[176] He thus rides the building as if he were riding a horse or, considering the sexual symbolism of supernatural ridings elsewhere, fucking a submissive sexual object. The potential eroticism of his roof-riding characterises him as a sexual threat, strengthening the notion that his predations against the farmer's daughter were erotic in nature. Considering Sayers's comments about the metonymic significance of halls, his roof-riding also expands the scope of the sexual threat he embodies. To begin with, it might simply use this grotesque imagery to characterise Glámr's dominance over the district in terms of excessive masculinity or male sexual aggression in a general sense. This would serve as a rare criticism of these usually laudable hallmarks of manliness. However, Glámr's roof-riding might also symbolise the detrimental effects of his specifically

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[175] *Svarfdæla saga*, 175.

[176] The notion of straddling, rather than sitting 'side saddle' on the roof, is admittedly speculative. It is corroborated by the possibility that the straddling posture of horse-riding was extended to roof-riding. The shape of a gable further lends itself to this interpretation, since such a posture would provide greater stability to the imagined rider. The latter line of reasoning is borne out in yet another example, in which a group of (living) assailants ride an 'áss' (beam, pole) on a roof, the shape of which is even more conducive to a straddling posture; *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, 220.

elderly eroticism on society at large. If, as speculated above in relation to Styrr, Glámr was interpreted as a physically aggressive, dominant, but ultimately impotent old man, it might be further significant that his predations cause the literal dwindling of the region's population.[177] This desolation could represent the waste of reproductive capacity inherent in the active sexuality of elderly males, which might lead to the squandering of younger female partners.

Finally, Glámr's sexual significance is corroborated in the manner of his defeat. Like several other saga revenants, including Kárr inn gamli earlier in *Grettis saga*, Glámr is decapitated and his head translocated: '[Grettir] hjó hǫfuð af Glámi ok setti þat við þjó honum' (Grettir hewed the head off Glámr and placed it against his thighs).[178] On a basic level, this dismemberment ensures the corpse will not reanimate, as specified in *Áns saga bogsveigis*.[179] However, as Sayers asserts, the mechanism through which it was perceived to have this effect has received insufficient attention.[180] Both he and Ármann Jakobsson suggest that the positioning of the head is significant. 'Þjó' (thigh) implies proximity to the groin, and is also a common euphemism for the buttocks or anus.[181] Hence, Ármann suggests that this exorcism employs the symbolic connection between the rectum, faeces, and Hell to imply the revenant's permanent damnation.[182] Conversely, Sayers suggests that this procedure can be explained with reference to *níð*: the shaming of an individual via sexually significant slanders, gestures, or wounds. By placing Glámr's face close to his buttocks, Grettir implies the corpse's perverse homosexual or coprophagic interest in

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[177] *Grettis saga*, 116.
[178] Grettis saga, 122. See also *Grettis saga*, 58, as well as *Bárðar saga*, 168; *Fljótsdœla saga*, 229; and *Svarfdœla saga*, 174.
[179] *Áns saga bogsveigis*, 419.
[180] Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated', 244–5.
[181] Lois Bragg, *Oedipus Borealis: The Aberrant Body in Old Icelandic Myth and Saga* (Madison, 2004), 80; *Cleasby-Vigfússon*, 739.
[182] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Vampires and Watchmen', 292. See *Þorsteins þáttr skelks*, 462–4.

that area.[183] If interpreted to be placed against the anterior side of the loins — especially possible in *Áns saga*, which features 'klof' (cleft, groin) rather than 'þjó' — the ghost's implied desire to give and/or receive fellatio might also bear autoerotic or homosexual implications. Like a *níðstöng* (scorn-pole), *klámhögg* (shame-stroke), or slanderous verse, this act ostracises Glámr via public humiliation, shaming him into permanent inactivity. I concur with Sayers's reading and further suggest its retroactive characterisation of Glámr's deeds. As mentioned above in relation to Lúða, *níð* punishments can function via talion logic. They are frequently used to admonish the perversion associated with the '*ergi*-complex' — often cowardice, but also including literal sexual deviance — with commensurately sexual rebukes.[184] In the case of Kárr earlier in *Grettis saga*, for example, the anti-social deeds requiring rectification via *níð* might be his hoarding, a shameful trait associated with old men elsewhere in the corpus.[185] If Glámr's exorcism likewise spurred audiences to consider his misdeeds in terms of *ergi*, it might have indicated or confirmed the sexual nature of his crimes, including those against the farmer's daughter and the rooftops.

Considering the undead Glámr's potential to represent a senescent man, these features construct an unfavourable portrayal of active, elderly male sexuality. When old men are sexually dominating and aggressive, they are undesirable, implicitly repulsive, and physically threatening to the women they pursue. Moreover, if their sexuality was interpreted to be violent yet ultimately impotent, they might also represent a waste of the reproductive capacity of such women — especially nubile young women — and a consequent threat to the survival of kin groups and communities. However, in the following readings, I attempt to apply Ármann's reasoning of the ghost as the 'spectre of

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[183] Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated', 244–5.
[184] See Chapter Two, n. 122.
[185] *Grettis saga*, 60. Recall n. 59 above.

old age' more cautiously. Though it is plausible that Glámr was construed to represent senescence via such logic alone, there is little else — beyond his 'úlfgrár' (wolf-grey) hair — directing our attention along such lines.[186] The same is true of Víga-Styrr: though he is at least middle-aged when he dies, the sagas give no explicit indication of his senescence.[187] Hence, though these revenants' might have ancillary potential to symbolise old men, I am more confident in their capacity to represent male sexual threats more broadly. These episodes use the Monstered *aptrganga* to condemn excessive male sexuality and phallic aggression, which might otherwise be seen as expressions of laudable masculine dominance. To make surer statements linking revenants to senescence, I will henceforth only consider figures who are more explicitly connected to that life-stage. Such connections seem strongest in two scenarios: when revenants are ancient *haugbúar* (mound-dwellers), whose symbolic senescence stems from the amount of time since their interment, or when they are explicitly elderly before death.[188] The revenant on whom Ármann focuses when proposing this lens, Þórólfr bægifótr of *Eyrbyggja saga*, falls into the latter category. However, Ármann does not broach this troll's status as a sexual menace, which parallels Glámr's in numerous ways.

In addition to riding the rooftops, Þórólfr also has a predilection for a particular female victim: 'sýndisk Þórólfr opt heima á bœnum ok sótti mest at húsfreyju… henni sjálfri helt við vitfirring. Svá lauk þessu, at húsfreyja lézk af þessum sǫkum; var hon ok fœrð upp í Þórsárdal ok var dysjuð hjá Þórólfi (Þórólfr returned home to the farm often and sought the mistress of the house most… she herself lost her wits. So it came to pass that the mistress died for this reason; she was also taken up to Þórsárdalr and was interred

[186] *Grettis saga*, 110.
[187] Styrr's death occurs approximately twenty-six years after he takes control over his farm, making him around forty or older; Kålund, ed., *Heiðarvíga saga*, 4, 25.
[188] For explicit connections between long-dead *haugbúar* and senescence, see *Bárðar saga*, 167, and *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*, 276–7.

next to Þórólfr).[189] Though again bolstered by his roof-riding, the notion that Þórólfr's pursuit of this woman is sexually motivated is lent even greater credence by the pair's former relationship: they were husband and wife. The revenant seeking contact with a former partner is actually a fairly common, though hitherto overlooked, trope. Numerous ghosts literally attempt to enter the beds of their former lovers, implying their intention to continue their unfinished business in the sexual sphere. This includes the aforementioned Klaufi and, though here in pursuit of her husband's namesake, the exceptional female revenant Sigríðr.[190] These examples strengthen the likelihood that Þórólfr's predations against his wife were construed to be erotic, in addition to corroborating the similar motivations of other ghosts who target victims of the opposite sex, like Glámr and Víga-Styrr. Þórólfr's onslaught against this woman characterises his symbolically senescent marital relationship in very different terms to those of the craven kings above. It is not limited to unfulfilled infatuation, but rather constitutes his physical and implicitly sexual domination of his wife. She cannot, like the partners of any of the feeble old men discussed above, dominate her hyper-senescent husband; rather, she ultimately succumbs to his attacks, dies, and — like Guðríðr in *Heiðarvíga saga* — becomes the ghost's post-mortem partner. Þórólfr's everlasting dominion over this woman is starkly implied in the manner of her burial. In some other cases where females are threatened by their undead husbands, in implicitly or explicitly sexual terms, their families can be relied on to protect them, re-asserting their roles as the women's legal administrators.[191] Here, however, the woman is surrendered to Þórólfr as if a peace offering — with the verb

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[189] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 93.
[190] *Svarfdæla saga*, 174; *Eiríks saga rauða*, 215. See also *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, 298, on which, more below. Sigríðr's motivation for entering Þorsteinn Eiríksson's bed might have been interpreted to be the result of her confusion of namesakes, her desire for a tryst with a more eminent man, or the dying Þorsteinn's greater suitability for sexual contact with a ghost.
[191] Víga-Hrappr's post-mortem control over his wife is repudiated, as she returns to her kin; *Laxdæla saga*, 39. More explicitly, Yngvildr's brothers oust the revenant Klaufi from his marital bed; *Svarfdæla saga*, 174.

*dysja* used exclusively for hurried or irreverent burials — rather than being properly interred with her chieftainly natal kin.[192]

I mused above about the type of sexual threat such symbolically senescent revenants represent, which is instructive as to what exactly they might disparage about elderly male eroticism. Are they reproductively potent or impotent? Physically erect or flaccid? I suggested, for example, that Víga-Styrr and Glámr might represent physically indomitable but ultimately impotent and/or infertile old men. They do not produce any offspring, but rather remove women — and the reproductive potential they embody — from society. Such figures are unlike the standard *senex amans* in their vehement activeness and refusal to be subjugated by women, but like them in their fundamental sexual or reproductive inability. Hence, they are still at least partially disparaged on the basis of paradoxical strength of will and weakness of capacity: they are just more extreme and far less sympathetic embodiments of this incongruous pair of traits. However, Þórólfr bægifótr calls this notion into question, specifically via his return as the bull Glæsir, which follows the cremation of his troublesome remains. Though Ármann Jakobsson and William Sayers both analyse this episode, with Sayers defining it as a sexual act leading to impregnation, each maintains his outright denial of the procreativity of saga revenants.[193] Ármann justifies this stance by proposing that Þórólfr possesses rather than fathers this uncanny bull. However, though it is true that Glæsir shares Þórólfr's traits and motivations, which might imply him to be an extension of the old man himself rather than his offspring, the saga also makes it clear that this calf is created through sexual reproduction: 'Kýrin gekk opt ofan í fjǫruna, þar sem bálit hafði verit, ok sleikði steinana, þar sem askan hafði fokit… þá sæi þeir kúna upp í hlíðinni ok naut annat

[192] *Cleasby-Vigfússon*, 111.
[193] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age', 323; Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated', 252, 250.

apalgrátt at lit… Þeir kenndu kálf í kúnni' (The heifer went often to the shore, where the cremation had been, and licked the stones, upon which the ash had blown… then they could see the heifer up on the slope and another bull, dapple-grey in colour… they realised the heifer was with calf).[194] This passage describes two separate events and it is not clear which produces the calf; however, each would evince Þórólfr's reproductive power. First, he might have been imagined to inseminate this cow via her oral consumption of his ashes, which would necessitate the perception of some fertile power in his corporeal form.[195] Second, as Sayers suggests, this cow is 'served' by a mysterious grey bull, its colour indicating its supernatural nature.[196] It is likely that this bull — a figure of potent, muscular, masculine capital — was interpreted as another uncanny representation of this obstinate old man. In this case, Þórólfr's incarnate spirit is implied to engage in a penetrative and procreative sexual act.

These details inflect Þórólfr's significance as a *senex amans*, including in his predations against his former wife. They insist that the disparagement of this hyper-senescent sexual menace cannot be derived from his laughably incongruous infatuation and incapacity. Rather, he demonstrates not only the motivation and capacity to dominate his former wife physically, but also the defiant ability — erect and potent — to reproduce sexually, certainly with this heifer and perhaps implicitly with her. This complicates some of the conclusions drawn from the naturalistic depictions above, which seemed to suggest that sexually active old men could avoid condemnation by proving themselves to be vigorous, dominating, and ultimately procreative. Þórólfr's ghostly activities indicate that such sexuality could be denounced and, indeed, to an even greater extent than the impotent lust embodied by the craven kings above. Þórólfr is the Monstered figure here,

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[194] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 170–1.
[195] On oral insemination, see also *Bjarnar saga*, 168–9.
[196] Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated', 250. On the paleness of other uncanny bovine, see *Brandkrossa þáttr*, 186, and *Laxdœla saga*, 84.

the primary cause of havoc, and the one repeatedly punished via exhumations, translocations, and eventually cremation. The negative presentation of his senescent procreativity is heightened in the comparison of his offspring. As a younger man, Þórólfr is surprisingly capable of fathering positive characters, like his chieftainly son Arnkell and the 'good witch' Geirríðr from Chapter One. However, in his symbolic hyper-senescence, he can produce only a trollish bull, a copy of his own toxic self. Therefore, this episode seems to call capable and reproductive elderly male sexuality into question. Þórólfr's depiction might suggest an upper chronological or physiological limit, after which the active eroticism of old men can be decried regardless of its usually laudable virility, procreativity, and domineering nature. This conclusion certainly seems defensible in the case of Þórólfr, but it is not necessarily so assured in other depictions of revenants. Though all such figures seem to represent the threat of obstinate physical activeness during male senescence, including in the sexual sphere, audiences might have imagined any or all them to embody such a stance accompanied by commensurate virility and fertility, by paradoxical flaccidity and infertility, and everything in between. When considering the trope of sexually motivated revenants as a whole, there is no need to delineate the most likely specific form of eroticism they might have indicated to medieval audiences, but rather to admit their representative flexibility and to follow the cues in each individual instance.

Another instructive example can be found in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings.* This text depicts the aggressive and dominating sexuality of the elderly revenant Þormóðr, which is condemned by society and ultimately toppled by a promising youth. This little-studied saga is first attested in seventeenth-century manuscripts, though it has been speculated to have been composed in something like its extant form in the fourteenth.[197] There is

[197] Bernadine McCreesh, '*Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*', in *MSAE*, 273.

evidence for the existence of the saga's basic elements even earlier than this. The characters' names and references to one or more seemingly related stories — **Ísfirðinga saga* and **saga þeira Þorbjarnar ok Hávarðar ins halta* — appear in *Landnámabók*.[198] Elements of the extant saga, particularly its embedded verses, have been argued to be drawn directly from these, or from other early written or even oral versions of the narrative. Other features, including prose passages that cohere imperfectly with these verses or are excessively fantastical — like Þormóðr's allegedly 'gratuitous' haunting scene — are suggested to be later, fourteenth-century additions.[199] When exactly this episode was composed is impossible to discern, and notions that its fanciful nature proves its later accretion are unhelpful.[200] Based on the manuscript evidence alone, whole swathes of the narrative, fanciful and otherwise, might be from far later than even the fourteenth century. I here analyse the existing version, bearing in mind that this might not long pre-date its seventeenth-century witnesses, but also acknowledging the likelihood that it was consumed in earlier centuries — perhaps the fourteenth and even thirteenth — though with my confidence in its applicability to such contexts decreasing the further back we look.

Like *Finnboga saga* and *Bandamanna saga*, *Hávarðar saga*'s broader commentary on senescence is defiantly positive. It overturns explicit preconceptions of elderly decrepitude via the unexpected vigour of its eponymous character, Hávarðr halti (the lame).[201] However, in relation to sexuality, at least as far as Þormóðr's haunting episode is concerned, old men receive no such acclaim: the erotic sphere is closed to this old lecher as an exclusive preserve of the young. Þormóðr is first introduced as a similar

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[198] *Landnámabók*, 159, 190–1. See also McCreesh, '*Hávarðar saga*', 273, and W. van Eeden, 'Some Remarks about *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*' *Neophilologus* 34/1 (1950), 44–5.
[199] McCreesh, '*Hávarðar saga*', 273. See also van Eeden, 'Some Remarks', 46.
[200] Recall ns. 13–15 in my 'General Introduction'.
[201] *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, 314–36.

figure to Þórólfr bægifótr in his dotage. Already an old man, he is said to be unpopular, intransigent, and uncanny in his reputation as a shapeshifter.[202] The saga soon relates his death and ghostly activities in the words of his wife:

> 'Erum vér þó ekki vel við komin, því at hann vitjar hverja nótt sængr sinnar. Því vilda ek þiggja, bóndi, at þér veittuð mér nǫkkut lið'… Hávarðr svarar: 'Ek em nú af léttasta skeiði ok ekki til slíks fœrr… Þat er mitt ráð, at þú biðir Óláf, son minn, ok væri þat ungra manna at reyna sik svá at karlmennsku; myndi oss forðum slíkt gaman hafa þótt.'
>
> ('Yet things are not going well between the two of us, because he visits his bed every night. I therefore implore you, farmer, to give me some assistance' … Hávarðar replies: 'I am now of the gentlest pace [i.e. declining with age] and not fit for such things… It is my advice that you ask Óláfr, my son, and young men ought to test themselves in manliness; such would have seemed good sport to us in former times').[203]

By specifying that this revenant's unsolicited attentions towards his former wife occur in their conjugal bed, this passage emphasises his erotic motivations more clearly than in the case of Þórólfr: Þormóðr was surely interpreted as a sexual predator. Moreover, this excerpt encourages audiences to construct an age-based interpretation of the episode, as it establishes that this revenant's defeat ought to be achieved *not* by a similarly aged figure, but by a promising youth. At this point, Óláfr is 'á ungum aldri' (in his youth), not yet eighteen.[204] This passage's emphasis on the particular trait of 'karlmennsk[a]' characterises the ensuing conflict not only as a liminal moment for Óláfr's specifically masculine development, but also as a contest between the manliness — a function of socio-sexual prowess — of the young against the old. This notion could be defended in some of the aforementioned hauntings, but is usually blurred by additional considerations. Grettir's status at the peak of his development is noted by the vanquished Glámr himself, and is repeated at the conclusion of the saga, along with an instructive

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[202] *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, 292–3.
[203] *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, 298.
[204] *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, 292, 304.

statement that he was only twenty at the time.[205] However, since Glámr is a less conclusive figure of senescence, his episode seems to bear more likely significance to Grettir's development in a discrete sense than as a representation of the young overcoming the old. Likewise, as Ármann Jakobsson notes, Þórólfr bægifótr's predations are impeded by Arnkell, 'the son who represents youth'.[206] However, problematising this argument are the facts that Arnkell is a successful adult chieftain long before Þórólfr's death and — especially as it pertains to their relative suitabilities as sexual beings — that Arnkell does nothing to prevent his undead father's sexual access to, or even everlasting dominion of, his mother. In *Hávarðar saga*, there is no such obfuscation. Here, the sexual deviant is an old man and the one selected to oust him from the erotic sphere is chosen specifically because of his youth and budding manliness.

Óláfr defeats Þormóðr in two separate fights, each distinctly sexual. The first occurs at Þormóðr's homestead: 'Óláfr lá í stafnrekkju útar við dyrr… [Þormóðr] sá, at rekkja var skipuð, er ekki var vani á; var hann ekki allgestrisinn, snýr hann þangat ok þrífr í feldinn… Varð Þormóðr harðtœkr, svá at allt hljóp hold undan, þar sem hann þreif til' (Óláfr lay in a bed under the gable by the door… Þormóðr saw that a bed was occupied, which was not usually so; he was not very hospitable, he turns thither and grasps the pelt… Þormóðr became hard to deal with, such that all the flesh at which he grasped leapt/burst open).[207] This passage is highly reminiscent of Grettir's fight with Glámr, sharing the detail of the living hero lying in wait, covered with a pelt, over which the combatants have a tug-of-war.[208] If this indicates that the *Hávarðar saga* composer derived this section from the presumably older *Grettis saga*, it is relevant to our tentative identification of Glámr as a symbolic old man. It suggests that at least one individual was

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[205] *Grettis saga*, 121, 262.
[206] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age', 324,
[207] *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, 298–9.
[208] *Grettis saga*, 119–21.

spurred to create an overtly senescent revenant based on Glámr, perhaps indicating his implicit association of the latter with senescence.[209] Furthermore, audiences familiar with both episodes might have allowed the senescence of Þormóðr to influence their interpretations of Glámr. However, *Hávarðar saga* is eminently more sexual. Þormóðr's nocturnal assault begins in a bed, having already been intended to take place in one with his former wife. This setting might cast the two combatants as metaphorical bedfellows, characterising what is only a platonic tug-of-war in *Grettis saga* as an interaction in which one lover — or, indeed, sexual predator — forcibly removes the blankets from the object of his desire before penetration. Furthermore, if Óláfr's occupation of this erotically charged location was interpreted to indicate his claim to masculine sexual capital, Þormóðr's assault against him here would imply an attempt to usurp this position, with the revenant demanding exclusive right to the role of 'man of the house'.

The pair's combat soon takes them away from the bed, though its erotic significance persists. As in *Grettis saga*, they resort to wrestling, with the focus on manual clutching that Glenn Davis insists colours such scenes with innuendo.[210] In amongst this frenetic description of grasping hands and flesh that leaps or bursts to the touch — which in itself might evoke erections or ejaculations — Þormóðr is described as 'harðtœkr' (hard to deal with). Considering this encounter's erotic undercurrents, as noted above and below, this polysemy could imply not only the revenant's toughness as a combatant, but also his stiffness as a sexual partner.[211] As in Þórólfr's uncanny fathering of Glæsir the bull, the sexual tenor of this wrestling might have inflected Þormóðr's nature as a *senex amans*. He does not simply desire and physically threaten his former

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[209] *Grettis saga*'s is first attested in fifteenth-century manuscripts, though its composition is speculated to be early fourteenth-century; see Cook, '*Grettis saga*', 241–3. Since these sagas' composition dates are speculative, the reverse direction of influence is also possible, though the connection this link implies between Glámr and old age stands regardless.
[210] Davis, 'Exeter Book Riddles', 50–1.
[211] Recall Chapter One, n. 257.

wife. Rather, he might have been interpreted as retaining physiological and/or procreative sexual capability in his nocturnal predations against her. That these attacks are reviled by his wife and ultimately punished by Óláfr corroborates the notion that such senescent eroticism could be decried, regardless of its usually laudable domineering nature and perhaps even erect, procreative functionality.

If Þormóðr's vigorous attacks represent attempts at sexual dominion, Óláfr's eventual victory serves as their unequivocal repudiation. First, the revenant falls on his back, which implies sexual submission and the loss of masculine capital, as mentioned above.[212] Second, in a series of ambiguous clauses, the saga relates that the young man conquers Þormóðr, with particular focus on his offending genitalia: 'Óláfr lætr þá kné fylgja kviði, leikr þar til við Þormóðr, er hann sér fyrir honum slík ráð, er honum sýnisk' (Óláfr then lets his knee find [Þormóðr's] groin, and deals with Þormóðr there, when he sees such a course of action, which appears [appropriate] to him).[213] Óláfr first kicks Þormóðr's 'kvið[r]', which — at least for women, but perhaps also for men — can refer euphemistically to the lower abdomen and groin, including the genitals.[214] This already indicates Óláfr's punishment of these specific organs, both characterising this conquest as sexual domination and corroborating the sexual nature of Þormóðr's crimes via talion logic. The phrase 'leikr… til við' then suggests that Óláfr 'deals with' Þormóðr further, apparently in a way that is both fitting and, in a manner conducive to innuendo, left undescribed. As repeatedly mentioned above, *leika* is also a common euphemism for sexual interaction.[215] Moreover, the notion that Óláfr's 'playing' or 'dealing' is sexual is heightened by the use of the word 'þar'. If interpreted as an adverb of place rather than merely a grammatical expletive, this indicates that his actions occur in a specific

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[212] See Chapter One, ns. 211–12.
[213] *Hávarðar saga, Ísfirðings*, 299.
[214] Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature', 45–7.
[215] See Chapter One, n. 79.

location: either the spot where Þormóðr fell or — more likely, considering the proximity of 'kvið[r]' to 'þar' — the revenant's groin. This suggests some further undefined sexual domination or abuse of the senescent Þormóðr, possibly implying the kind of *níð* exorcism discussed above or, indeed, any other imaginable type of 'play' Óláfr could have between the ghost's legs. In any case, this conquest ultimately characterises the young man as the sexual dominator, who subjugates this would-be sexual menace, ousts him from the erotic sphere, and denies him the socio-sexual role of 'man of the house' he so eagerly covets.

Þormóðr is persistent, however, and returns for a second wrestling match, leading to a reprise of his sexual subjugation. This time, the pair end up tumbling down a hill: 'Eru þá ýmsir undir, þar til er þeir koma í fjǫruna. Þá bar svá til, at Þormóðr varð neðri; neytir Óláfr þá þess ok braut í sundr hrygginn í honum, bjó þá um sem honum líkaði' (Then they are alternately underneath one another, until they come to the shore. There it befell that Þormóðr was underneath; Óláfr then makes use of this and broke his back asunder, then made preparations as he wished).[216] Even more conclusively than before, this excerpt casts the pair as metaphorical sexual partners, locked in a violent embrace as each vies for the dominant position atop the other. The erotic potential of their tumble is firmly established in the diction of this excerpt, which in *Bósa saga* is used to describe literal sexual intercourse: 'Þau skemmta sér nú sem þeim líkar, ok var bóndadóttir ýmist ofan á eða undir' (They enjoy themselves now as pleases them, and the farmer's daughter was alternately on top and underneath).[217] This detail corroborates the possibility that Þormóðr was interpreted as a sexually vigorous revenant, and as carrying out sexual rather than merely physical advances against his wife. As in their previous encounter,

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[216] *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, 301.
[217] *Bósa saga*, 486.

however, Óláfr eventually attains the dominant sexual position and, as Illugi did to Sunnlöð, he breaks Þormóðr's back. Following this victory, the saga once more notes Óláfr's activities with the corpse in conspicuously allusive terms: before sinking his body into the fjord, he makes unexplained but apparently appropriate preparations with it. Considering the fact that there is no mention of Þormóðr's decapitated head in their second wrestling match, it is probable that audiences presumed that his earlier 'playing' or 'dealing with' the ghost's crotch had not actually referred to the standard *níð* exorcism found in *Grettis saga*. However, the potential for these second preparations to imply this form of shaming — once more in addition to anything else this cryptic phrase might suggest — remains. Especially considering the attention the saga has already drawn to their respective ages, the nature of Óláfr's repeated conquests of Þormóðr might indicate the repudiation of the latter's specifically senescent sexuality. Though Þormóðr's sexuality is clearly vigorous, it is depicted as undesirable and ultimately supplanted. Óláfr's identity as this usurper is also significant, implying that such active sexuality is a young man's game, in which the hyper-senescent revenant is an unwelcome participant.

A final instructive example of the use of revenants to denigrate active elderly male sexuality, particularly as it compares to the socio-sexual decline of the craven kings above, is found in *Völsa þáttr*. This episode is first attested in the fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók* version of *Óláfs saga helga*.[218] It depicts pagan Norwegians passing around and speaking verses to a severed horse penis, and has prompted a slew of scholarship defending it as an echo of genuine pre-Christian ritual.[219] While it is possible that such studies accurately identify the origins of this depiction, analyses of the relationship

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[218] Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir, '*Flateyjarbók*', in *MSAE*, 198.

[219] See, for example, Terry Gunnell, 'Mythology and Old Norse Religion', in Michael Kimmel et al., eds., *The Cultural Encyclopaedia of the Penis* (London, 2014), 126; Gardeła, 'Into Viking Minds', 66; Zoe Borovsky, 'Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature', *Journal of American Folklore* 112/1 (1999), 23–5; and Herbert Joseph, '*Völsa þáttr*: A Literary Remnant of a Phallic Cult', *Folklore* 83/3 (1972), 245.

between this text and its later medieval audiences need not be limited to such considerations. As argued above, regardless of its origins, *Völsa þáttr*'s late medieval consumers would have had little knowledge of pre-Christian ceremonial. Without this conceptual foothold, they seem just as likely to have produced literary-symbolic interpretations of this ritual, alongside or even irrespective of their belief in its historical existence. Especially considering what are obviously the text's most memorable features, it is likely that some such interpretations were sexual.

Some scholars interested in the *þáttr*'s religious origins have gestured toward such readings. For example, Herbert Joseph's essay concludes by stating that it exposes a historical ritual *and* 'deal[s] with a taboo subject', stopping shy of the questions central to this dissertation.[220] How do this *þáttr*'s references to the taboo function? Joseph Harris's admirably grounded literary analysis finds that *Völsa þáttr* presents a pro-Christian commentary, employing perverse sexuality to mock paganism.[221] Implicit in Harris's interpretation is that its depiction of sexuality is grotesque, which has implications of its own about medieval Icelandic anxieties surrounding eroticism. In the following reading, I suggest that this *þáttr* indicates the negative feelings of its audiences not only toward the vague memory of pre-Christian religion, but also toward deviant sexuality, specifically that of the grotesquely virile elderly male. Such commentaries pertain to the context of the *þáttr*'s medieval consumption in fourteenth-century Iceland, possibly earlier and certainly later. Its continued popularity is evinced in its influence on the later tale of Ásmundr flagðagæfa, to which this investigation will make occasional reference.[222]

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[220] Joseph, '*Völsa þáttr*', 252.
[221] Harris, 'Gender and Genre', 273.
[222] **Ásmundar saga flagðagæfu* shares a similarly problematic textual history to *Heiðarvíga saga*; it survives only in a late eighteenth-century summary by Eyjólfur Jónsson, apparently based on a saga known to his grandmother. See Judith Jesch, '*Ásmundar saga Flagðagæfu*', *ARV: Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore* 38 (1982), 103–4.

*Völsa þáttr* begins by introducing an elderly couple and implicitly criticising the power asymmetry between them: 'byggði… einn bóndi ok húsfreyja, nökkut öldruð… Bóndi var spakr maðr ok óhlutdeilinn, en kerling var svarkr mikill ok réð mjök fyrir hýbýlaháttum dagliga' (there lived… a certain farmer and his wife, quite old… The farmer was a thoughtful and unobtrusive man, but the old woman was very haughty and entirely ruled the day-to-day affairs).[223] As in many of the depictions of matriarchal family dynamics discussed above, this introduction already elicits favourable interpretations of the wise and unassuming old man, as well as sympathy for his domination by a less benevolent female figure. Their relative attributes also imply that, although the husband's (possibly age-sprung) lack of *kvensterkleikr* is lamentable, his overbearing wife is primarily culpable for this disparity. The *þáttr*'s criticism of this woman's power is soon confirmed in her perverse actions. These lead to the household's domination by a grotesque symbol of virile senescent masculinity, a scenario that not only criticises the figure of the matriarch, implying a preference for a patriarchy ruled by the sensible old man, but also intrinsically denounces an alternative form of hyper-senescent, hyper-sexual patriarchy.

In 'áliðnu hausti' (late autumn), the 'mjök feitr… eykhestr karls' (old man's very fat… draught horse) dies.[224] These excerpts immediately imply a connection between this animal and senescence. This link is suggested, first, by the horse's association with the old man; second, by the season in which it dies, with the year's end synonymous with senescence in many medieval texts; and, third, by the implication that it dies of natural causes, having spent sufficient time being idle and/or overfed to become fat.[225] As above, this implication is significant to the horse's symbolism once he — or, in this case, a part

[223] *Völsa þáttr*, 51–2. '[Ö]ldruð' could imply either the wife's or both partners' agedness.
[224] *Völsa þáttr*, 52.
[225] On seasonal symbolism, recall n. 12 above.

of him — becomes a revenant. While butchering this horse, a male slave attempts to discard its penis, but his master's son snatches it away to use as a prop in his bawdy flirtations. It is the son's lewd verses, as he waves this phallus at a female slave, that first direct audiences to examine it as a symbol of virile masculine sexuality:

> 'Hér meguð sjá
> heldr röskligan
> vingul…
> Þér er, ambátt,
> þessi Völsi
> allódaufligr
> innan læra.'
>
> ('Here you may see
> a rather vigorous
> dangler…
> This Völsi [phallus]
> would be far from feeble
> for you, slave woman,
> between your thighs.')[226]

Especially in the terms 'röskli g[r]' (vigorous), which Faulkes glosses as 'virile looking', and 'allódaufligr' (far from feeble), this passage might have primed audiences to interpret this phallus as a symbol of functional, erect, and/or procreative sexuality.[227]

The notion of its erect, rather than merely huge, sexual capacity is soon affirmed when the old woman transforms it into something of a revenant, whom the family call Völsi. She confiscates it from her son, chastising him for mocking this apparently useful object. She then worships the phallus, enabling it to grow and stiffen: 'Ok með fjandans krafti vex hann svá ok styrknar, at hann má standa hjá húsfreyju, ef hon vill' (And with the devil's craft it grew and strengthened, such that it could stand next to the mistress of the house, if she wants).[228] The stiffening of this penis is emphatically *not* portrayed in

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[226] *Völsa þáttr*, 52–3.
[227] *Völsa þáttr*, 129.
[228] *Völsa þáttr*, 53.

terms of general magical might or platonic phallic symbolism, but rather in a clear allusion to an erection with potential sexual utility.[229] To begin with, the notion that the old woman's prayers to Völsi are erotic is vaguely suggested. First, her adulations occur nightly and, second, her enfolding of Völsi in cloth is described using potentially suggestive diction: she 'vefr innan í einum líndúki' (wraps [it] in a certain linen cloth).[230] *Vefja* (to weave) is employed to describe sexual embracing elsewhere in the corpus, including — most instructively — later in the self-same text.[231] This term could imply the intimacy of the old woman's adorations, perhaps suggesting that Völsi is coaxed to supernatural erection by her manual genital stimulation. The notion that the phallus's tumescence is connected to the old woman's desire to excite this object manually, or even to masturbate with it, is further intimated in that Völsi's erectile state is dependent on her wishes: 'ef hon vill'.

More conclusively, the suggestive manner in which the female slave interacts with Völsi makes his sexual functionality explicit:

> Ambáttin tekr við honum mjök blíðliga, vefr hann at sér ok klappar honum ok kvað vísu:
>
> 'Víst eigi mættak
> við of bindask
> í mik keyra,
> ef vit ein lægim
> í andkætu.'
>
> (The female slave receives him very tenderly, embraces him to her and strokes him and spoke a verse:
>
> 'Certainly I would not be able
> to restrain myself from

[229] On the supposed potential of even enormous phalluses to represent power or masculine capital without carnal considerations, see Daniel Boyarin, 'On the Early History of the Phallus' in Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack, eds., *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 2003), 11.
[230] *Völsa þáttr*, 53.
[231] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 340; *Völsa þáttr*, 58.

> thrusting you inside myself,
> if we were to lie alone
> in mutual bliss.')[232]

Here, the slave-woman explicitly asserts her desire to employ Völsi for female masturbation or — considering his steps toward becoming a character in his own right — sexual intercourse. The latter possibility is substantiated in use of the term 'andkæta', implying mutual rather than purely autoerotic pleasure.[233] This detail corroborates the potential for the old woman's adulations to be interpreted sexually, as well as unambiguously demonstrating that Völsi's supernatural growth and stiffening should be understood as an erection, fit for erotic purposes.

As stated in Chapter One, the horse and its famously large penis are by-words for sexuality throughout the corpus, implying comically, threateningly, and/or enviably exaggerated masculine sexual capacity.[234] If the horse represents virility and, according to Ármann Jakobsson, the revenant represents senescence, it is surely possible that the reanimated phallus of an implicitly elderly horse might symbolise male eroticism that is both hyper-sexual *and* hyper-senescent. Arguably to a greater extent than any of the revenants analysed above, Völsi represents a functional form of senescent male sexuality, explicitly capable of providing sexual service to women. Moreover, though in some ways intrinsically passive, since he must be carried and inserted, rather than thrusting himself, into the vaginas of his sexual partners, Völsi's hyper-sexuality is also dominating. Not only does he dictate the housewife's every thought and action, but also, due to her matriarchal power, he has a knock-on effect on the entire household. Everyone, including

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[232] *Völsa þáttr*, 58.
[233] *Völsa þáttr*, 90. The notion that Völsi was interpreted as a revenant rather than just a magical object is bolstered by how he is accreted into **Ásmundar saga flagðagæfu*, where he does not just grow in size or stiffness, but literally transforms into an anthropomorphised, undead penis. Still discernibly a 'hestskökull' (horse-cock), he grows functional limbs, which he employs to run amok through the neighbourhood; **Ásmundar saga flagðagæfu*, 169.
[234] See Chapter One, n. 167.

those apathetic or opposed to Völsi, must participate in this nightly ritual, during which their enforced obeisance offers this phallus dominance over them without him actively seizing it. His stranglehold over the family's affairs is underscored in the notion that he — and the all-consuming focus on elderly male sexuality he represents — distracts from the proper management of the household. The male slave's verse implies that the Völsi rituals are wasting valuable time and resources, which would be better allocated to food production.[235]

In his sexual vigour and dominance, Völsi is contrasted with the elderly male farmer. The latter's identification as 'óhlutdeilinn' (unobtrusive) and as subjugated by his wife already demonstrates his timidity and lack of *kvensterkleikr*, which might imply his sexual as well as social impotence. The old man's detachment from eroticism is further expressed in his own contribution to the ritual:

> Bondi lét sér fátt um finnast, tók þó við ok kvað vísu:
>
> 'Mundi eigi,
> ef ek um réða,
> blæti þetta
> borit í aftan.'
>
> (The farmer was reticent, but received it and spoke a verse:
>
> 'This idol
> would not,
> if I were in charge,
> be borne in the evenings.')[236]

If the eagerness of the old woman and female slave to adore Völsi are indicative of their own erotic interests, the old man's squeamishness might indicate his distaste for such matters. Of course, as a man being asked to worship a penis, his reaction might be

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[235] *Völsa þáttr*, 57.
[236] *Völsa þáttr*, 56.

explained by his wish to avoid the taint of homosexuality or subjugation to phallic aggression. However, his son's activities, both in his earlier japes and his equally playful expressions during the ritual, problematise this interpretation.[237] The lad seems able to construe Völsi as a symbol of impressive sexuality in general and, especially in his employment of the phallus as an aid to flirtation, of his own sexuality specifically. His interactions with Völsi merely corroborate his own erotic interests and abilities. The old man, on the other hand, explicitly disapproves of these nocturnal activities and, perhaps by extension, sex acts more generally, implying his removal from that sphere, whether voluntary or mandated by senescent decline.

*Völsa þáttr* thus presents audiences with two models of elderly male sexuality: one is timid, subjugated, and either sexually impotent or uninterested, while the other is imposing, dominant, and explicitly erect and functional. The former is already generally intimated to be preferable: the old man has been described as wise beneath his faintheartedness, while the horse penis is obviously grotesque in a visceral sense and conceptually abhorrent in its centrality to a pagan ritual. However, this commentary is substantiated in other aspects of the narrative. The first is how Völsi is perceived by different members of the household. As demonstrated above, the perspectives of some members — the old woman, young son, and female slave — support the sexuality Völsi represents, conceivably directing audiences to follow suit. In particular, the willingness of the female slave to engage in sexual activities with Völsi contrasts with the horror expressed by the other women with whom revenants have erotic contact. She seems to indicate that Völsi's paradoxically decaying yet vigorous sexuality is far from threatening, but rather desirable. However, as Harris notes, *Völsa þáttr* is populated by

[237] *Völsa þáttr*, 56–7.

distinctly 'un-sagalike characters', who function as 'anonymous types'.[238] Their opinions correspond to notions commonly associated with their intersectional identifiers, and can be interpreted as positive or negative in fairly simplistic terms. Admittedly, the farmer's son represents a potentially laudable form of sexuality, corroborated by the many positive portrayals of young male sexual playfulness, activeness, and dominance explored in Chapter One. His affinity for Völsi might therefore have allowed the sexuality represented by this phallus to be construed in a positive light. However, as also intimated in Chapters One and Two, and as will be explored in the following chapter on elderly female sexuality, the two women's interest in the eroticism represented by Völsi is more suspect. Young female slaves and servants are often depicted as sexually enthusiastic and available, which — as evinced in the characterisations of Sunnlöð and the *griðkona* raped by Grettir — hardly reflects positively on their characters. Likewise, as will be discussed in the next chapter, elderly women are almost never portrayed positively when their words or actions imply their active sexuality.

So much for what Harris dubs the 'party of Völsi', but what of the 'anti-Völsi group?' Significantly, this group is comprised not only of the sensible old farmer and 'honest' male slave, but also of two unimpeachable figures: the farmer's modest, intelligent daughter and the saga's eponymous hero, Óláfr helgi.[239] The former is disgusted by the horse penis when it is used to facilitate her brother's flirtatious, and only participates in the ritual adoration of this object against her will.[240] Harris asserts that she is central to the *þáttr*'s pro-Christian commentary. She is the first to recognise the disguised Óláfr, which — in tandem with her hatred of the ritual — characterise her as a

[238] Harris, 'Gender and Genre', 273.
[239] Harris, 'Gender and Genre', 273.
[240] *Völsa þáttr*, 53, 57.

'noble heathen', in contrast to her mother, a pagan zealot.[241] Her restrained relationship to Völsi's deviant sexuality bolsters Harris's religious interpretation, but is also significant in its own right. Her reserve is reminiscent of the admirably passive young women of Chapter Two, and serves as a positive example of youthful female sexuality. Her stance on eroticism contrasts starkly against the female slave's loose morals or her mother's laughable penile fascination, which borders on the carnivalesque in its expression as vehement heathen devotion. The fact that these positively connoted characters oppose the cult of Völsi intimates the *þáttr*'s commentary against the sexuality he represents.

As a final repudiation of dominant, capable sexuality in male old age, the *þáttr* punishes Völsi and his cult directly. When it is his turn to participate in the ritual, King Óláfr throws the phallus to the floor, where it is eaten by the household dog. The family are then forced to give up their 'illa ok ómannliga' (evil and unnatural) customs, referring to their abandonment of a simultaneously pagan and sexually deviant ritual.[242] As a result of the actions of the irreproachable Óláfr, the household is implicitly returned to the power dynamic introduced at the opening of the *þáttr*. Now that the dominant figure of grotesque senescent virility has been vanquished, the old farmer's timid, perhaps even impotent sexuality is restored to its rightful place as the household's only — and therefore implicitly preferable — representative of male senescence. Contrary to the depictions of Hrútr Herjólfsson and Þorgils örrabeinsstjúpr above, *Völsa þáttr* therefore seems to insist that senescent male virility is not comprehensively laudable. Indeed, it

[241] Harris, 'Gender and Genre', 273. See also Lars Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies* 41/1 (1969), 2–4.

[242] *Völsa þáttr*, 60–1. **Ásmundar saga flagðagæfu* is once again indicative of late medieval or early modern interpretations of these events. Here, the punishment of the anthropomorphised phallus and his worshippers is even more direct, since they are defeated in literal wrestling matches with the king's party; **Ásmundar saga flagðagæfu*, 169–70.

even seems to be presented as less desirable than its alternative: the physiological and socio-sexual decline embodied by the frail husband.

This chapter has analysed two supernatural motifs in an attempt to nuance the ideologies that were presented in its introductory survey. In those naturalistic episodes, elderly male sexuality, which is so resoundingly censured via the broader European *senex amans* trope, is somewhat rehabilitated. These episodes often turn in the favour of old men, whether via these figures' demonstrations of socio-sexual dominance and capability; via the eventual admiration or love expressed towards them by other characters, including their partners; or via the revelation that they were never actually as old or decrepit as they appeared in the first place. At worst, these episodes are tentative in their condemnation of such feeble figures and, at best, they are respectful of the appropriate status of elderly men as romantic and even sexual partners.

The craven king episodes substantiate this opposition to the reproachful ideologies of the *senex amans* trope, emphatically confirming one of the features intimated in some naturalistic depictions.[243] When feeble old men fall below the benchmark of *kvensterkleikr*, the ensuing and often disastrous matriarchal power structure can more reasonably be blamed on their wicked female partners than on the men themselves. Via specular mechanisms, this might reflect an ideology that pitied the inevitability of, though did not decry, elderly male socio-sexual deterioration. In addition, these sagas might have had dialogic influences, encouraging more forgiving perceptions of feeble old men.

The second motif of rapacious revenants constructs a unique form of the condemnable *senex amans*, and one that has received little attention in either medieval Icelandic or broader European literature. Coherent with the limited criticism of the socio-

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[243] Recall *Ragnars saga loðbókar*, 97.

sexually *incapable* old man noted above, these episodes suggest that *sögumenn* and audiences might have perceived his alternative — the excessively *capable* old man — as grotesque and undesirable. My survey of naturalistic depictions identified numerous positive depictions of everlasting male sexual prowess, which might have assuaged their male composers' anxieties about their impending decline. However, perhaps due to the distance from everyday reality provided by the revenant, these supernatural episodes permit a much harsher ageist and misandristic commentary. They criticise the powerful sexuality of old men and indicate not merely an acceptance, but rather an endorsement of their senescent decline in socio-sexual capacity.

Gareth Evans, Ásdís Egilsdóttir, and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir have all considered instances in which it is inappropriate for men to embody the supremacy, activeness, and domination so thoroughly vindicated throughout the saga corpus.[244] These revenants seem to represent another such instance, here relating to the obligatory decline of the socio-sexual prowess of elderly men. These sagas acknowledge that this decline was not only inevitable, but also a necessary and even appropriate occurrence, as well as a prerequisite for the smooth transition of power between generations. As *Völsa þáttr* and the craven king episodes demonstrate, this decline might initially make room for the equally undesirable power of wicked females. However, as shown in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, their socio-sexual power is ultimately and justly eclipsed by promising young men. These youngsters rise to meet their senescent forebears as they cross respectively out of and back into the 'rainbow coalition', temporarily entering the sphere of sovereign male adulthood before they too repeat this cycle of shifting socio-sexual power.

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[244] Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 107–44; Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 'Masculinity and/or Peace?', 115–18; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Gender, Humour, and Power', 223.

# Chapter Four

## Female Senescence: Menopausal Marvels and Fondling Foster-Mothers

Female senescence, like female adolescence, has received less scholarly attention than its male counterpart, both in the medieval Icelandic and broader European contexts. This has been attributed to the broadly masculinist focus of the available evidence.[1] Furthermore, in the scholarship that has been completed on female ageing, we find some of the same questionable assumptions about medieval senescence that were discussed in the previous chapter. For example, Margaret Wade Labarge suggests that women in the Middle Ages were considered old in their forties or even thirties.[2] Additionally, Gillian Overing asserts a 'persistent… profound, and profoundly negative' stigma surrounding old women in medieval Iceland.[3] This chapter aims to nuance such interpretations.

As above, I begin with a survey of references to old women in primarily naturalistic episodes and non-literary sources, first in general and then in the sexual sphere. This overview already implies the presence of extremely elderly women in the minds — and perhaps worlds — of medieval Icelandic *sögumenn* and audiences. Furthermore, it suggests a similar conceptual diversity surrounding old women to that found in the case of old men. Finally, this survey indicates the critical significance of sexuality both to the identification of women as old and to the value judgements constructed around them. I then outline how elderly female sexuality is frequently depicted — and implicitly denounced — using supernatural figures, before presenting this chapter's close readings. These examine the uncanny tribulations of Þórgunna in

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[1] Lewis-Simpson, 'Challenges of Quantifying', 6, 13.
[2] Margaret Wade Labarge, 'Three Medieval Widows and a Second Career', in Michael Sheehan, ed., *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe* (Toronto, 1990), 159.
[3] Overing, 'Body in Question', 219–21.

*Eyrbyggja saga*, as well as depictions of elderly troll foster-mothers from throughout the corpus. The first reading substantiates and expands the conclusions of this chapter's survey: female characters are portrayed as highly suspect when expressing active sexuality into their post-menopausal senescence. However, the second reading identifies an exception to this otherwise consistent censure. The active sexuality of old women can be portrayed favourably, providing it is carried out by a supernatural foster-mother figure and is pursued not for carnal satisfaction, but rather for the benefit of the male ward's socio-sexual capital.

Like their male counterparts, old women are often depicted as physically incapable in the sagas. *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands* describes music as so sweet that even the feeblest old women dragged themselves out of bed to listen, employing this demographic as the epitome of decrepitude.[4] As such, old women are often described as dependent, requiring physical assistance from the able-bodied population and material support from householders.[5] Regarding the latter, householders were required to maintain dependents of all types, including old men, as well as younger people of both sexes who were impoverished or otherwise incapable.[6] However, various legal, religious, and literary sources use senescent women as particular touchstones of such neediness.[7] Though their gender had always problematised their involvement in combat, the incapacities of old women also make them less appropriate martial targets than young women or, for that matter, the old men recently re-admitted to the 'rainbow coalition'. Although elderly people of both sexes are often depicted receiving immunity during attacks, this grace is sometimes only offered to old women.[8] Likewise, accounts of the

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[4] *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands*, 147.
[5] See *Grœnlendinga þáttr*, 275, and *Fóstbræðra saga*, 197.
[6] See *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók)*, 99–100, 137.
[7] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Becoming Old', 239. See also *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók)*, 146,
[8] *Adonias saga*, 176. See also Chapter Three, n. 53.

aforementioned botched raid in *Íslendinga saga* emphasise the identity of only one of its numerous casualties — the frail Þorbjörg ysja — to emphasise its ignominy.[9] The old woman is therefore a paragon of vulnerability: harming her can be seen as shameful, while protecting and supporting her can be lauded as benevolent.

Such stereotypes prompt not only the assistance and protection of old women, but also their marginalisation, apparently to an even greater extent than useless old men.[10] Their perceived insignificance is implicit in their relative absence from the sagas, but is also bolstered in depictions of their presence that hinge on the prevalence of misogynistic ageism. Consider, for example, Þóroddr's unnamed foster-mother in *Eyrbyggja saga* and Sæunn in *Njáls saga*. These women's benevolent — not to mention potentially life-saving — counsels are ignored with specific reference to their senescence.[11] Hence, like the surprising vigour of Ófeigr and Finnbogi above, these episodes ultimately encourage greater respect for elderly women. However, they also imply the *sögumenn*'s impression of the currency of the opposite stereotype, exposing what Ármann considers the 'typical' medieval Icelandic conception of the old woman: a figure of extreme insignificance and uselessness.[12] Such conceptions are also apparent in a conversion episode from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. Though the baptisms of two old ladies have ultimately positive effects on their lives and afterlives, it is significant that they are used as guinea pigs to prove the safety of this sacrament: these figures are eminently expendable.[13]

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[9] *Íslendinga saga*, 329–32. See Chapter One, n. 49.
[10] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age', 306; Overing, 'Body in Question', 214–21. On the broader European context, see Shahar, *Growing Old*, 2.
[11] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 171; *Njáls saga*, 320.
[12] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age', 306–7.
[13] *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar (Flateyjarbók)*, 470–1. See also Ármann Jakobsson, 'Two Old Ladies at Þváttá and "History from Below" in the Fourteenth Century', in Rudolf Simek and Judith Meurer, eds., *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: Papers of The Twelfth International Saga Conference* (Bonn, 2003), 10.

However, as above, more varied conceptions emerge when we consider spheres in which elderly females might demonstrate commendable functionality. To begin with, the sagas sometimes imply the productive value of even unambiguously dependent old women, albeit in a manner commensurate with their declining faculties. In the two aforecited depictions of old women requiring assistance and maintenance, both characters are gainfully occupied, including in the (admittedly light) task of carding wool.[14] Moreover, as will be investigated further below, Þórgunna refuses to be considered such a dependent, engaging in more onerous farmwork into her fifties, a choice that the saga seems — at least initially — to support.[15]

Other areas in which old women are portrayed as admirably functional parallel those available to old men, including non-physical spheres like the devotional. Though excluded from high ecclesiastical office, numerous women are celebrated as senescent nuns. *Grágás* clearly indicates the potential for younger women to take holy orders, but it is significant that many prominent examples from the sagas only do so once they are elderly.[16] Some of these women — including Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir — enjoy lives of temporal authority, impetuousness, and immoderation before taking holy orders. Hence, being an old woman might have been construed to suit the religious life of the mind in a manner that being youthful does not, perhaps implying the same perceived value of greater experience, wisdom, and serenity that was noted of elderly clergymen. The reduced physical and temporal activeness of such nuns does not necessitate a reduction in their power, however. Contrary to Thomas Morcom's assertion of Guðrún's monastic passivity, I concur with Ármann Jakobsson that she remains influential until her death.[17]

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[14] See n. 5 above. See also *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, 313.
[15] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 138–40.
[16] *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók)*, 156. For elderly nuns, see *Laxdœla saga*, 223–9; *Grettis saga*, 286–9; *Grœnlendinga saga*, 269; *Jarlmanns saga*, 65–6; and *Sigurðar saga þögla*, 101.
[17] Morcom, 'After Adulthood', 42–3; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age', 306.

A trailblazer by nature, Guðrún cannot help but epitomise laudable activeness even in this new sphere, being the first Icelandic woman to memorise the psalter and, later, to become an anchorite. Her vigour is particularly emphasised when the corpse of a pagan *völva*, though apparently undisturbed by the presence of a church over her grave, is driven to distraction when Guðrún starts to pray in it.[18] As with old men, the wisdom associated with female senescence is not limited to Christian religious learning, but is also depicted in more general, as well as specifically pagan, spheres.[19]

Like their male counterparts, senescent women can also be portrayed as capable and commendable in the sphere of socio-political authority, as exemplified by the matriarch and 'superwoman' Unnr/Auðr djúpuðga.[20] She leads a daring escape mission from Scotland to Iceland, arranging the marriages of two kinswomen along the way. Upon her arrival, she apportions land to her male followers and rules her own household throughout her senescence.[21] As with Guðrún, Morcom asserts that Unnr's increasing immobility and somnolence imply her senescent regression from power.[22] However, though her physical capacity certainly wanes, Unnr's influence clearly endures through her edicts and instructions, which are respected until her dying day. Moreover, as Ármann also notes, her erect death pose denotes 'command' rather than stasis.[23] Indeed, this stance evokes that of numerous proud male characters, for whom it symbolises defiant vigour — sometimes foreshadowing their return as *aptrgöngur* — even in death.[24]

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[18] *Laxdæla saga*, 223–228.
[19] See n. 11 above, as well as *Íslendinga saga*, 327.
[20] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age', 306.
[21] *Laxdæla saga*, 7–13. See also *Eiríks saga rauða*, 196–7; *Eyrbyggja saga*, 11; and *Grettis saga*, 23–5.
[22] Morcom, 'After Adulthood', 31.
[23] Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Patriarch', 270; Morcom, 'After Adulthood', 31. See *Laxdæla saga*, 13.
[24] *Egils saga*, 174; *Eyrbyggja saga*, 91–2; *Vatnsdæla saga*, 62.

The old patriarchs above simply continued to inhabit positions from which their gender had never excluded them, but Unnr attains a degree of power in her senescence that few, if any, female characters achieve at earlier stages in life. Hence, we ought to consider what — beyond personal exceptionalism and/or fanciful literary embellishment — medieval audiences construed to justify her sovereignty. To begin with, her exceptional status might arise more from the absence of appropriate male legal administrators than from any attribute of Unnr's, including her age. Indeed, although she is a grandmother when she commands her seaborne expedition, Unnr's senescence is not actually specified until long after this point. Rather, she assumes this leadership role once the men most likely to have guardianship over her die: her husband, father, and son. Moreover, Unnr seems conscious that her leadership might be usurped if she were to acquire new male administrators, with Jochens recognising the significance of her choice of specifically island-bound grandsons-in-law as she arranges marriages on the way to Iceland.[25] Other saga matriarchs corroborate the notion that such power requires not only — or not even — senescence, but rather the absence of male administrators. These include a certain Þorgríma, whose senescent sovereignty is stated in the same sentence as her recent widowhood, and the indomitable Þorbjörg digra, who still has a husband, but rules the roost 'þegar Vermundr var eigi heima' (when Vermundr was not home).[26] Moreover, though they might lose this power in remarriage, the sagas indicate that younger women could also become independent householders once widowed or divorced.[27] Indeed, as numerous scholars assert, widows of all ages seem to have enjoyed greater control, including over financial and marital self-determination, than at any other

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[25] *WONS*, 62.
[26] See *Harðar saga*, 8, and *Grettis saga*, 169, respectively.
[27] *Harðar saga*, 28, 52; *Njáls saga*, 52, 70.

point in their lives.[28] Ármann Jakobsson intimates the significance of these concepts to Unnr's position. Reminiscent of Clover's interpretation of *meykonungar* as temporary sons, he suggests that she is a 'surrogate patriarch', bridging the gap between appropriate male figureheads.[29]

However, such matriarchal sovereignty also seems attributable to another factor, and one underpinned by senescence: the relative movements of old men and women in relation to the 'rainbow coalition'. As shown in the previous chapter, depictions of dominant matriarchs are not limited to those lacking husbands as legal administrators. In *Völsa þáttr*, as well as *Heiðarvíga saga* and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, the weakening position of old men as they re-enter this 'coalition' makes room for their sometimes equally senescent wives to step into the breach, whether for good or ill.[30] This concept also seems relevant to Þorbjörg digra. Although she maintains the pretence that her husband, Vermundr inn mjóvi, is in command, she continues to assert her will through him once he returns home.[31] Indeed, it is tempting to suggest that their relative epithets — 'digra' (stout) and 'mjóvi' (slender) — reflect their senescent power dynamic, with the matronly Þorbjörg puppeteering the chieftainship of her scrawny husband. In addition to the decline of old men into the 'rainbow coalition', Jochens argues that women's identities might also have shifted in senescence. She notes that they become somewhat less gendered or even un-gendered, being described using terms like *drengr* (a worthy, specifically manly individual).[32] Whether ageing women were perceived as increasingly androgynous in a discrete sense, or whether this results only from senescent male socio-

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[28] See Ricketts, *High-Ranking Widows*, 68–79, 129; Ricketts, 'Spoiling them Rotten?', 184–7; and *WONS*, 61–3. On widows' exceptional powers elsewhere in medieval Europe, see Labarge, 'Three Medieval Widows', 159.
[29] Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Patriarch', 269. See Chapter Two, ns. 152–4.
[30] See Chapter Three, ns. 223, 59, 83, respectively.
[31] *Grettis saga*, 170.
[32] *WONS*, 61. See *Njáls saga*, 57.

sexual decline, the gendered playing field certainly seems to become somewhat levelled during senescence. In their old age, men and women seem to have been apportioned similar levels of socio-sexual capital. Hence, old women might have been considered capable of the same duties as their male counterparts, including as independent householders. This might account for instances of widowed matriarchs who *do* have potential male administrators who are not themselves senescent, including Unnr djúpuðga. Like Brennu-Njáll, she has kinsmen who might justifiably vie for her position, including her brothers and future heir, Óláfr. However, the saga explicitly states that none chooses to do so. They respect Unnr's leadership perhaps because, in her senescence, she is the socio-sexual equivalent of a patriarch like Njáll.[33]

In this vein, it is worth mentioning another (in)famous saga character who enjoys matriarchal power despite the presence of ostensibly superior, non-senescent males. Gunnhildr konungamóðir had always counselled her husband Eiríkr, a role she continues to play into her senescence by advising her son Haraldr.[34] Though he is officially in charge, Haraldr even defers to Gunnhildr in the public forum of his court.[35] Furthermore, this aged matriarch repeatedly takes matters into her own hands, including when she nefariously orders the capture of the infant Óláfr Tryggvason.[36] Here, however, Gunnhildr's infamous wickedness might problematise rather than vindicate the notion of power held by individuals embodying her range of intersectional identifiers. These include not only her senescence and femininity, but also her mysterious Northern origins and, as I will expound below, her active sexuality and supernatural abilities.[37]

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[33] *Laxdæla saga*, 11–13.
[34] *Egils saga*, 123. See *WONL*, 82–4.
[35] *Njáls saga*, 15.
[36] *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar (Heimskringla)*, 227.
[37] On Gunnhildr's ethno-cultural symbolism, see Sayers, 'Power, Magic, and Sex', 60.

Before I advance to those spheres, a final prevalent role associated with female senescence must be acknowledged. Stephan Grundy asserts that the majority of elderly female saga characters are foster-mothers.[38] As Anna Hansen explains, such roles are identified using consistent terminology — *fóstr* (fosterage) and *fóstri*/*fóstra* (male/female foster-kin) — but actually encompass a variety of positions.[39] First, independent matriarchs, such as Esja from *Kjalnesinga saga*, might formally foster children from other respectable households, providing material support, protection, and instruction.[40] Second, the sagas contain many elderly nanny-type foster-mothers, often household servants, who likewise nurture and protect the young. As indicated above, some such nannies are marginalised and ignored.[41] However, the love shown to some of these women by their wards ensures their favourable portrayals, including when they are debilitatingly old.[42] As with the matriarchs, old nannies can also be portrayed as malevolent. One example is Þuríðr, whose magic facilitates the demise of Grettir Ásmundarson.[43] Even here, though, Þuríðr might have been interpreted as providing loyal support to her *fóstri* Þorbjörn öngull, with her antagonistic status primarily occasioned by the saga's bias towards Grettir.[44] Third, old women sometimes provide more incidental *fóstra*-type protection for characters in danger, including children who are left to die by exposure. In some cases, they facilitate the survival of youths who go on to become the sagas' protagonists.[45] All these roles — nuns, matriarchs, and foster-

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[38] Stephan Grundy, 'The Viking's Mother: Relations between Mothers and their Grown Sons in Icelandic Sagas', in John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, eds., *Medieval Mothering* (New York, 1996), 233.
[39] Hansen, 'Fosterage and Dependency, 74–6.
[40] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 9. See also *Íslendinga saga*, 239 and *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, 312–13.
[41] See n. 11 above.
[42] *Egils saga*, 101–2; *Heiðarvíga saga*, 280–2; *Laxdæla saga*, 58–9.
[43] *Grettis saga*, 245–64.
[44] See Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Women's Weapons', 430.
[45] *Finnboga saga*, 256–7; *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, 344–9.

mothers — surely demonstrate that senescent women could be considered active, influential, and often, though not always, beneficial.

Sexuality was critical to medieval European conceptions of senescence for both sexes; however, it was arguably more definitive for women. As noted regarding adolescence, while men could circumscribe their identities in multiple spheres, women's identities were more comprehensively limited to conjugal and reproductive roles.[46] The shift in women's biological functionality was also more conclusive than any counterpart for men. At menopause, traditionally acknowledged to occur around fifty and evinced in the cessation of menstruation, women made a decisive shift from procreative ability to inability; this was widely considered the point at which they became 'old'.[47] As Shahar notes, the demonstrability of this transition was even employed in broader definitions of senescence, with Vincent de Beauvais citing female menopause at the age of fifty as the threshold of old age for both sexes.[48] As also mentioned in the previous chapter, expectations of declining libido and prohibitions against sexual activity were some of the most prevalent in medieval European writings on senescence.[49] Considering their more comprehensively significant and definitively demarcated obsolescence in this sphere, these proscriptions seem to have applied especially strictly to women. The menopausal cessation of their fertility seems to have had an immediate and irreversible impact on women's status, particularly as romantic and sexual partners.[50]

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[46] Youngs, *Life Cycle*, 23, 166–7; Shahar, *Growing Old*, 151.

[47] Youngs, *Life Cycle*, 19, 166. See also Shahar, 'Who Were Old?', 333; and Darrell Amundsen and Carol Diers, 'The Age of Menopause in Medieval Europe', *Human Biology* 45/4 (1973), 610. Though fifty was the age of menopause cited in most medieval texts, the age at which women experienced this transition would have been more variable, presumably in their forties and fifties; Shahar, *Growing Old*, 18. Moreover, while definitive in the sense that menstruation does eventually cease, the process of menopause, then as now, was also more a protracted period than a single milestone; Lynnette Sievert, *Menopause: A Biocultural Perspective* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2006), 5–10.

[48] Shahar, *Growing Old*, 18. See *Speculum Naturale*, L. 31, c. 75, col. 2348.

[49] See Chapter Three, n. 62.

[50] Brundage, 'Sex and Canon Law', 37.

Similar ideologies prevailed in medieval Iceland, where Overing suggests that menopause was central to women's identification as old.[51] Substantiating the immediate impact of this transition, Ricketts finds that not one widow from the *samtíðarsögur* remarries beyond childbearing age.[52] Ageism in relation to menopause and female romantic potential is also presented anecdotally. When Hjörvarðr jarl's wife dies in *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, he courts the widowed queen Hildigunnr. In an exceptional specification of adult female age, the narrator defends her eligibility: 'Hon var þá enn ekki meir en fertug kona at aldri… ok eigi langar, áðr en þau áttu dóttur' (She was then not yet more than a forty-year-old woman in age… and it was not long before they had a daughter).[53] This 'enn ekki meir' construction indicates precisely which assumption the *sögumaðr* strives to pre-empt: as a widow with a mature daughter, Hildigunnr might have been presumed to be older than her forties and, implicitly, an inappropriate marital prospect. That this presumption was connected to her questionable fertility is substantiated in the second part of this excerpt, which confirms her pre-menopausal status. In this and other similar cases, the marriages of older women are implicitly presented as dubious. However, such nuptials can be justified on the basis that the women are demonstrably fertile and/or younger than initially assumed.[54] Hence, as was the case with men, fertility seems to be one of the attributes that determined whether sexually active older women could be portrayed positively. However, this would have made elderly female sexuality more strictly regulated than its male counterpart. While Þorgils örrabeinsstjúpr could prove his virility and commensurate eligibility at fifty-five,

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[51] Overing, 'Body in Question', 211.
[52] Ricketts, *High-Ranking Widows*, 159. See also *WONS*, 54, 61.
[53] *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, 469–70. As mentioned above, although the specification of children's or adolescents' ages is relatively common in sagas, statements of adults' ages are rare. Exceptions tend to occur in the case of extremely advanced or otherwise 'sagaworthy' ages. See Miller, 'Beating Up', 759, and Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood', 50.
[54] For similar episodes, see *Fljótsdœla saga*, 291–2, and *Vatnsdœla saga*, 100.

and Hrútr Herjólfsson at sixty-eight, women became inappropriate romantic partners ubiquitously and irreversibly around the age of fifty.

The sagas also contain harsher expressions of these ideologies, rebuking unattached elderly women who attempt to engage in sexual activities. In Chapter Two, I cited a verse that demonstrates medieval Icelandic considerations of inappropriately youthful female sexuality.[55] In *Hallfreðar saga*, this verse portrays a second, elderly figure:

> 'Ek skal ok', kvað kerling,
> 'með Ingólfi ganga,
> meðan mér tvær of tolla
> tenner í efra gómi'
>
> ('I will also', said the old woman,
> 'go with Ingólfr,
> while two teeth
> cling to my upper gum.')[56]

As Hansen notes, these verses emphasise Ingólfr's eligibility by implying his attractiveness to two 'asexual' figures: the child and the crone.[57] As mentioned above, the little maiden is spared the ignominy of her inappropriate desires, since she recognises that her age precludes their actualisation. The old woman is not so fortunate. She unashamedly seeks sexual interactions with Ingólfr, oblivious to the romantic impropriety implied by her age — and emphasised in the grotesqueness of her toothless maw — making her a figure of mockery rather than pity.

An even harsher criticism is found in the depiction of a libidinous old woman in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*. Incidentally, she is referred to as both 'kerling' (old woman) and 'fóstra' (foster-mother).[58] Since she has no discernible connection to fosterage, it

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[55] See Chapter Two, n. 33.
[56] *Hallfreðar saga*, 142.
[57] Hansen, 'Representations of Childhood', 128.
[58] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 123.

seems that such vocabulary could also be used to make figurative, 'patronisingly ironic' references to female senescence — perhaps best translated as 'dearie' — underlining the strong connection between these two concepts.[59] This old woman begs Hrólfr to protect her daughter from an unwelcome suitor; however, Hrólfr's companion Ásmundr suspects that she might be the true root of the problem. This is soon confirmed. A youth has indeed been frequenting the house, but Hrólfr judges him to be a promising, amicable man, who agrees to cease his visits and become the king's retainer. The saga then implies that the old woman had been driven more by jealousy than protectiveness. She requests a cure for old age and, when Ásmundr pretends to oblige, she excitedly asks how it will be administered: 'Hún kveðst þat gjarna vilja, — "eða hvárt gerir þú þat í hvílu?"' (She said she earnestly wishes that, — 'will you do that in bed or elsewhere?').[60] Her question, which insinuates her hope that the cure will involve sexual contact or intercourse, doubly demonstrates her libidinousness. First, it indicates her eagerness to engage in sexual acts in her current senescent state and, second, it implies that her desire for youth is underpinned by her wish to return to the nubile state currently enjoyed by her daughter. Rather than administering the cure in bed, Ásmundr instructs her to kneel before him, to which she gladly assents. The saga notes that she thinks he will whisper into her ear, but a bawdy yet equally plausible interpretation might have been that she hoped the cure involved fellatio. Ásmundr then decapitates her, remarking, 'Nú lyfjaða ek þér elli' (Now I cured your old age).[61] The saga grants Hrólfr plausible deniability; he neither foresees nor condones his companion's violent act. However, even after Hrólfr apologises to the local monarch for this deed, the latter's dismissive response permits audiences to perceive the old woman as a deserving victim, and to enjoy the episode's broad

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[59] See also Straubhaar, 'Nasty, Brutish, and Large', 112.
[60] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 124.
[61] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 124.

humour.[62] In its persistent focus on the woman's senescence, her sexual motivations to reverse it, and their brutal yet carnivalesque rebuttal, this episode derides the old woman in specific reference to the disjunction between her age and libido.

There are exceptions to this pervasive condemnation of elderly female sexuality, though it must be emphasised that they are much rarer than in the case of old men, for whom it is difficult to find an unproblematically damning instance. For one, despite the pervasive evidence implying the inappropriate nature of post-menopausal marriages for women, *Grágás* actually indicates the *increased* freedom for such individuals to wed. Because they would be unable to produce dependents, such women are exempt from the minimum property requirements for matrimony.[63] There are also a few exceptional literary episodes in which older women are portrayed commencing romantic relationships in a guardedly positive light. In *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr*, a poor Icelander enjoys the implicitly sexual favours of Ása, a rich and 'ekki ung' (not young) woman.[64] Ása's kinsmen disapprove, but Þórðr eventually wins their favour and — in some versions, supposedly closer to the original — he marries her with full familial and royal endorsement.[65] This demonstrates the potential for female senescent courtship and even marriage to be presented favourably. However, since she is only ambiguously described as 'ekki ung', it is possible that Ása was interpreted to be pre-menopausal in age. Her marriage could therefore have been justified along the same lines as that of Hildigunnr above. It is further significant that, in some supposedly derivative versions, Þórðr is a 'stafkar[l]' (old man with a cane), and the pair do not marry.[66] These emendations might imply that *sögumenn* and audiences were more comfortable with romantic relationships

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[62] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 121–5.
[63] *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 2.38.
[64] *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr*, 340.
[65] *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr*, 339–49. See also Joseph Harris, '*Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr*', in *MSAE*, 249.
[66] *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr*, 344, 349. See also Harris, '*Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr*', 249.

between figures who were *both* senescent than those in which one partner — and, based on the numerous positive instances of the opposite dynamic, especially the woman — was substantially older. Moreover, even when they are similarly aged, audiences seem to have considered marriages that took place during the female partner's senescence somewhat problematic.

Other guardedly positive portrayals occur in *Finnboga saga* and *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, in which it is implied that two women, Syrpa and Þórgunna, marry when problematically aged. Having already been one of the implicitly senescent nanny-type *fóstrur*, Syrpa (dirty woman) — whose name already implies her ugliness if not her age — is dismissed by her grown-up ward's husband and married off to a man named Gestr. Some time later, Syrpa's age-based infertility is stated repeatedly and unambiguously.[67] Likewise, Þórgunna is implied to be senescent and infertile throughout her relationship with Krummr. This woman's 'roskin' (mature) nature is further problematised by the 'miseldri mikit' (great age difference) between these partners, a disparity emphasised by the man's epithet: 'inn yngri' (the young).[68] As was presumably considered consistent with the absolute and/or relative senescence of these women, the sagas describe them as undesirable partners. Þórgunna is 'meðallagi vinsæl, mjök margkunnandi, ekki fríð… heldr harðlynd ok þó órskiptamaðr' (middlingly popular, very knowledgeable [i.e. skilled in sorcery], not beautiful… rather harsh-tempered and yet unpredictable in mood), while Syrpa is 'hverju kykvendi… leiðiligri at sjá' (uglier to see… than any creature).[69] However, though these unions are hardly presented positively in and of themselves, their narrative roles prove somewhat rehabilitating. These women serve as incidental *fóstrur*, rescuing their respective sagas' protagonists from exposure as infants.[70] All three of these

[67] *Finnboga saga*, 255–7.
[68] *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, 344–5.
[69] *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, 344–5; *Finnboga saga*, 255.
[70] *Finnboga saga*, 256–7; *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, 349.

examples indicate that matches involving elderly women could be sanctioned or, even when disparaged, could have emphatically positive results. However, in their exceeding rarity, and in certain details in — or emendations to — these exceptions themselves, they hardly demonstrate the prevalence of such notions. Indeed, these episodes all uphold the implication that elderly female sexuality is problematic, especially when unattached women begin courtship after senescence and/or their male paramours are considerably younger.

The importance of menopause as a major milestone of female senescence, as well as the prevailing sentiments against sexual activeness beyond this threshold, might further elucidate portrayals of old women in the three spheres outlined above. First, the pious turn of senescent nuns might have been related to their post-sexual status. As Jochens notes, for as long as Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is fertile, she maintains her socio-sexual power through repeated re-marriage, with her final union occurring in her late forties.[71] However, once widowed in her post-menopausal senescence, she seeks esteem instead in the emphatically non-sexual sphere of monasticism.[72] It is possible that this transition was considered to be not only necessitated by, but also congruent with Guðrún's post-sexual status: free from sexual urges, she could direct her attention more wholly to God. This link between the beneficial calming of older women's sexual urges and devotion is presented cogently in the case of Spes. She tells her husband, in direct reference to their senescence, that they must abandon the earthly urges that have hitherto governed their actions and turn to eremitism.[73] Similar concepts have been noted in the European tradition of female devotion more broadly. For example, Christine de Pizan

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[71] *WONS*, 62, 200, n. 151. Although there is some ambiguity on the matter, the *Íslenzk fornrit* chronology actually indicates that this marriage takes place when she is around thirty-four; see *Laxdœla saga*, lix.
[72] *Laxdœla saga*, 199–228. According to the *Íslenzk fornrit* chronology, Guðrún is around fifty-two when widowed for the last time; see *Laxdœla saga*, lix.
[73] *Grettis saga*, 286–9.

specifies the importance of her widowing and the end of her sexual life to her greater mental and spiritual acumen.[74] Incidentally, the example of Spes also implies that the elderly might have been expected to shirk their sexual activeness even when in a pre-existing marriage, a prescription specified in the fourteenth-century statutes of Bishop Árni Einarsson.[75]

Second, though this will be problematised below, expectations of sexual decline might also explain the frequency of senescent women as foster-mothers throughout the corpus. As Deborah Youngs notes, such figures might have been considered well suited to this role, owing to the reduced threat of sexual interactions between guardians and wards.[76]

Third, and finally, expectations of decreased sexual abilities and behaviours might also illuminate the positive depictions of elderly matriarchs. In a practical sense, post-menopausal widows could wield stabler power once they became independent householders, since their authority could never be threatened by remarriage. On a more conceptual level, their post-menopausal status might have been connected to their senescent un-gendering, as speculated upon above.[77] Old women might have been considered less feminine following the decline of their sexual and reproductive capacities, which had hitherto been integral to their gender identities.[78] In their post-sexual state, being closer to masculinity or — at least — further from femininity, women might have been considered more capable leaders. Additionally, as Jochens argues, they might have been less intimidating or prone to inducing desire or jealousy among men,

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[74] *L'Avision Christine*, 181. See Angela Weisl, 'The Widow as Virgin: Desexualised Narrative in Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la Cité des Dames*', in Cindy Carlson and Angela Weisl, eds., *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* (London, 1999), 50–9. See also Shahar, *Growing Old*, 4, 78.
[75] Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity*, 120.
[76] Youngs, *Life Cycle*, 172.
[77] See n. 32 above.
[78] See n. 46 above.

developments that would have made their adoption of matriarchal roles more permissible.[79]

With many laudable matriarchs, including the widowed Unnr djúpuðga and the senescent yet married Þorbjörn digra, the connection between their admirable authority and their waning sexuality is only implicit, based on the absence of references to their erotic pursuits.[80] However, it is surely significant that, when an elderly matriarch *is* explicitly described as sexually active, she tends to be one of the malevolent examples, such as Gunnhildr konungamóðir or Gríma from *Ragnars saga*. It has been noted of medieval European literature more broadly that the female counterpart to the *senex amans* — the *anus amans* (lecherous old woman) — is far less common. When she does appear, she is usually wealthy and functions to deride the greed of her (often younger) male lover, rather than her own sexual appetites.[81] This trend is generally reversed in medieval Icelandic literature. As demonstrated above, uncomplicated expressions of the traditional *senex amans* are rare. Conversely, as Jochens notes, the *anus amans* is a common trope, and one that is frequently employed to criticise the female party, rather than the male.[82] The trope is found in the *kerlingar* of the Ingólfr verse and *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* above, but is perhaps embodied most famously by Gunnhildr konungamóðir. Her senescent sexuality is demonstrated most clearly in her jealous desire for the young Hrútr Herjólfsson.[83] William Sayers identifies her as a 'sexual predator' in this episode, with her attraction towards Hrútr clearly framed in a negative light.[84] In her

[79] *WONS*, 61.
[80] On Unnr's implicit asexuality, see also Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love*, 46–7.
[81] See Shahar, *Growing Old*, 77–81, and Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 156. Though this does not necessarily discount the validity of these scholars' observations, it is important to note the prevalence of the 'loathly lady' trope in numerous other medieval cultures. This figure often embodies elderliness, ugliness, and sexuality. See S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter, eds., *The English 'Loathly Lady' Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs* (Kalamazoo, 2007).
[82] Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality', 378; Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze', 5, 24, n. 11.
[83] *Njáls saga*, 13–21.
[84] Sayers, 'Power, Magic, and Sex', 66.

active sexuality, Gunnhildr embodies a very different set of associations to the explicitly or implicitly post-sexual nuns and matriarchs above. She is the epitome of the 'lustful and fickle' senescent widow figure, threatening due to her uncommitted marital status, lack of controlling male figures, and access to a lifetime of 'sexual secrets'.[85] I do not suggest that Gunnhildr's status as an evil matriarch is precipitated only by her active senescent sexuality; her non-sexual deeds are enough to condemn her. However, her eroticism surely contributes to, and is congruent with, her nexus of negative traits.

Gríma's sexuality in *Ragnars saga* functions in a similar manner. Her homicidal greed exists within an equivalent complex of negative attributes, which includes her explicitly sexual power over her husband.[86] The denunciation of Gríma's sexuality that results from this mutually stigmatising nexus is perhaps further instructive on the sexual expectations for senescent women who are already married. Elderly women might not only have been considered inappropriate participants in new courtships, but also have been expected to reduce their erotic activities in pre-existing marriages. On this point, it also seems significant that Bergþóra and Njáll's saintly death in bed — surely a powerful symbol of their undying conjugal bond — is made emphatically platonic by Bergþóra's placement of their juvenile grandchild between them.[87] Their esteem as an elderly couple is therefore untainted by notions of their sexuality.

I turn now to supernatural depictions of female senescence and sexuality, which — due to their distance from reality — might offer further insight into to the conclusions indicated above. However, before embarking upon this chapter's close readings on the

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[85] See Rebecca Hayward, 'Between the Living and the Dead: Widows as Heroines of Medieval Romances', in Cindy Carlson and Angela Weisl, eds., *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* (London, 1999), 221–2, and Alicia Nitecki, 'Figures of Old Age in Fourteenth-Century English Literature', in Michael Sheehan, ed., *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe* (Toronto, 1990), 112, respectively.
[86] *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, 97.
[87] *Njáls saga*, 330–1.

subject, it is necessary to acknowledge how plentiful such depictions are. The Old Norse-Icelandic corpus contains a far greater body of supernatural episodes pertaining to elderly women, including their sexuality specifically, than to any of the other intersectional identities in this dissertation. As many scholars have noted, there are strong connections between female senescence and magic in the medieval Icelandic and broader European imagination.[88] Though often evil, elderly female witches are not ubiquitously abhorred in the sagas.[89] They frequently appear as helpful seeresses, in which guise they corroborate the aforementioned link between wisdom and female senescence.[90] Such supernatural females can also demonstrate martial prowess, providing a platform to imagine the vigour of elderly women if their physical capabilities could match their indomitable wills, for good or evil.[91] Finally, witches also appear as nurturing *fóstrur*: many of the elderly female carers above — including the matriarchal Esja, the nanny-type Álǫf Kjannǫk, and the rescuer Þórgunna — employ supernatural powers to assist their wards.[92]

Considering the conceptual overlap among trollish entities, it is unsurprising that the sagas, especially the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*, also feature many elderly female trolls of the misshapen, often mountain-dwelling type, who assimilate neither visually nor socially in human society.[93] Though such trolls come in all shapes, sizes, and intersectional identities, they are very often elderly women, identified as 'fóstra[r]' or

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[88] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Two Wise Women', 51–2; Miller, 'Beating Up', 761. On broader European trends, see Michael Bailey, 'The Feminisation of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Late Middle Ages', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19 (2002), 120; Shahar, *Growing Old*, 151–2; and Youngs, *Life Cycle*, 166–7.
[89] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Women's Weapons', 410.
[90] See Þorbjǫrg lítilvǫlva, as well as the ignored seeresses mentioned above; *Eiríks saga rauða*, 413, and n. 11 above. Indeed, it is to an impossibly ancient woman that even the learned Óðinn turns for wisdom; see *Vǫluspá*, 291–2.
[91] See *Bósa saga*, 479–80, 495; *Harðar saga*, 95; and *Þorskfirðinga saga*, 216–17.
[92] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 11–25; *Heiðarvíga saga*, 280–2; *Þorsteina þáttr uxafóts*, 344–5.
[93] See *WONL*, 60.

'kerling[ar]'.[94] Indeed, as Margaret Cormack suggests, the association between such figures and female senescence was so pervasive that *kerling* seems to have been a byword for troll-woman.[95] These trollish figures also provide a platform for elderly women to be imagined as supernatural active, again for good or ill, whether through magical or martial means.[96]

Some saga depictions of elderly female trolls also constitute another apparent break from broader European trends. Shahar notes that medieval texts tend to avoid depictions of the senescent female body as grotesque, evincing greater reticence than when describing old men.[97] As with the frequency of the *anus amans*, Jochens has already noted the opposite trend in Icelandic literature.[98] However, saga portrayals of old troll-women go far beyond the statements of senescent female ugliness found in naturalistic depictions.[99] To begin with, some anthropomorphic witches are explicitly hideous, including the magical foster-mothers Syrpa and Þórgunna mentioned above.[100] But it is the non-human examples who fare worst. Þorbjörg, sister of the ancient King Rudent, takes the aforementioned connection between female senescence and a matronly physique to exaggerated proportions. She is so enormous that she can pull a hall on a chain behind her, and is also stated to be sexually repugnant.[101] Likewise, the old troll-woman Arinnefja, who is also extremely libidinous, is crooked-nosed, toothless, half bald, and burnt all over.[102] By virtue of their supernatural distance, such non-human

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[94] See, for example, *Egils saga einhenda*, 161–2; *Ketils saga hængs*, 259–60; and *Valdimars saga*, 63.
[95] Cormack, 'Saints, Seals, and Demons', 81.
[96] See *Sörla saga sterka*, 197–8, and *Valdimars saga*, 75.
[97] Shahar, *Growing Old*, 47–51. Recall my reservations about such statements, in reference to the 'loathly lady' trope; n. 81 above.
[98] Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze', 19.
[99] *WONL*, 63–4. For ugliness in naturalistic depictions, recall the verse above; *Hallfreðar saga*, 142.
[100] *Finnboga saga*, 255–6; *Þortsiens þáttr* uxafóts, 344–5.
[101] *Jarlmanns saga*, 50, 62.
[102] *Egils saga einhenda*, 175–8.

figures seem to permit the expression of elderly female ugliness in exaggerated terms. However, such figures, like the witches above, are not ubiquitously malevolent. Despite their visual and in some cases explicitly sexual repulsiveness — not to mention activeness — many become nurturing foster-mothers to their sagas' protagonists, cognates to the magical human *fóstrur* more common to the *Íslendingasögur*.[103]

The surprisingly benevolent nature of such sexually active old troll-women will be discussed below. It is first important to note the more predictable connection between trollishness and *malevolent* elderly female sexuality. When senescent female characters embody the mutually stigmatising nexus of wickedness and active sexuality, like Gunnhildr konungamóðir, they are also very often supernaturally Othered. The magical abilities of Gunnhildr herself appear in multiple texts, but are most clearly connected to her sexual deviance in *Njáls saga*.[104] Here, she curses Hrútr with uncanny hyper-tumescence, preventing his intercourse with his fiancée Unnr.[105] As Sayers notes, Gunnhildr's sorcery adds another layer to her complex of negative traits, with her malevolent magic further indicating the undesirable nature of her senescent sexuality.[106]

The supernatural deeds of such malevolent elderly women are sometimes even more inextricably linked to active sexuality. Such is the case with a ritual that Terry Gunnell notes three times in the corpus, which he calls 'magical mooning'.[107] In each instance, an elderly female witch — one of whom is literally named Kerling — lifts up her skirts and scuttles backwards with her head between her legs, which is intended to have a malignant supernatural effect.[108] Gunnell is curiously confident that this rite could

[103] See *Egils saga einhenda* 180, and *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, 68.
[104] See *Egils saga*, 176, 183.
[105] *Njáls saga*, 20–4.
[106] See Sayers, 'Power, Magic, and Sex', 71.
[107] Gunnell, Terry, '"Magical Mooning" and the "Goatskin Twirl": "Other" Kinds of Female Magical Practices in Early Iceland', in Timothy Tangherlini, ed., *Nordic Mythologies: Interpretations, Intersections, and Institutions* (Berkeley, 2014), 134–5.
[108] *Þorskfirðinga saga*, 216; *Landnámabók*, 222; *Vatnsdæla saga*, 69–70.

not have been created imaginatively by *sögumenn*, asserting that it must be the literary echo of genuine pre-Christian practices.[109] However, as argued above, even if this is the case, audiences could surely also have recognised this act's symbolic connotations. To begin with, I admit the possibility that platonic notions of inversion might have directed such responses, based on the fact that these witches' faces are both upside-down and close to the ground.[110] However, the proximity of their faces to their groins could also have borne sexual significance. This interpretation is bolstered by the nakedness of these witches. By lifting their skirts, they are exhibiting, and placing their faces in close proximity to, their bare anuses and genitals. These witches' erotically charged activities are performative: rather than merely being connected to a sexually malevolent figure or having a sexual effect, as is the case with Gunnhildr's spoken curse, they literally require a sexualised action to function. This constructs a particularly potent criticism of elderly female sexuality, emphasising both its visual grotesqueness and apparent malevolence. Moreover, in *Vatnsdæla saga*, the old woman Ljót admits that the intention of her 'magical mooning' had been to cause her enemies to 'œrðizk' (go wild), a term which is used elsewhere to denote overwhelming lust.[111] Considering the fact that her spell fails to cause such madness, this particular episode could express the additional, perhaps laughable notion that Ljót believes in the irresistible power of her own sexuality. However, presumably due to her nexus of negative traits, including her senescence and ugliness, Ljót's uncanny exhibitionism has no such effect on her male onlookers.[112]

Other female figures who have been discussed throughout this dissertation embody the same nexus of senescence, malevolence, hyper-sexuality, and supernatural

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[109] Gunnell, 'Magical Mooning', 133, 141.
[110] Gunnell, 'Magical Mooning', 145; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Women's Weapons', 419.
[111] *Vatnsdæla saga*, 70. See *Skírnismál*, 387, and *Hyndluljóð*, 468–9. See also McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 89, 159, and Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 29, 123.
[112] On this episode, see also Roby, 'Excess and *Ergi*', 10–14.

Otherness. For example, the riding episode from *Eyrbyggja saga* also serves to rebuke the violent sexuality of the aged Katla, perhaps especially in light of the age gap between her and Gunnlaugr. Jochens names this woman when asserting the frequency of the *anus amans* in saga literature, and much of the prior work on that episode concentrates on her age.[113] Katla's jealous hyper-sexuality is presented in direct reference to her senescence during the conversation in which she criticises Gunnlaugr's magical tutelage with Geirríðr. Katla scoffs at their allegedly erotic activities using an unflattering phrase, the barb of which relies on the implied loathsomeness of stroking 'kerlingar nár[i]nn' (the crone's groin), and invites the lad to spend time with her instead.[114] Gunnlaugr refuses, and retorts that Katla shares the same apparently repulsive senescence of which she has just accused Geirríðr. It is such refusals — and implicit assertions of her senescent sexual undesirability — that ultimately trigger Katla's pernicious assault. This attack, which employs the supernatural riding trope to present the unsettling subject of male rape, is not merely connected to Katla's sexuality in terms of motivation, however. Rather, like the 'magical mooning' trope, it relies on an act of symbolic sexual violence to function. Her riding thus presents the abominable nature of her jealous, senescent sexuality in especially grisly terms.

Lúða from *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis* might also contribute to these commentaries. As stated above, this troll-woman is introduced as beautiful and implicitly youthful, though later details imply her ancient status.[115] First, Hjálmþér eventually sees Lúða in her true trollish form, which is hideous, though not explicitly senescent.[116] Second, the saga later reveals this is not the first time she has carried out the procedure of marriage to

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[113] See n. 82 above. See also Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature', 49, and Scott, 'Woman Who Knows', 231–2.
[114] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 28.
[115] *Hjálmþés saga*, 234.
[116] *Hjálmþés saga*, 252.

and domination of an elderly king.[117] This revelation, coupled with her ability to disguise her hideous form, permits the implication that Lúða has wandered the north eternally, seducing and abusing old kings on a perpetual loop. Even without this presumption, however, it is clear that Lúða is much older than she initially appeared, adding implied senescence to the range of traits that are condemned by association with her character. Moreover, since her magical ruse relies on her adoption of a sexually desirable, implicitly youthful visage, Lúða might further embody another aspect of female senescence that was commonly criticised in medieval Europe: the threat of old women tricking people into sexual relationships by disguising their age with sumptuous clothing or makeup.[118]

Finally, *Völsa þáttr* could also be interpreted to vilify the erotic interests of its old matriarch. Jochens justifiably notes the old woman's centrality in this episode: it is she who transforms Völsi into a revenant in the first place, as well as coercing the rest of the household into worshipping him.[119] In contrast with the old man's admirable reticence in the Völsi ritual — and, implicitly, in sexual matters more broadly — the old woman's ludicrous enthusiasm in this penile ceremony might symbolise her hyper-sexuality. Via the implicitly grotesque nature of her deeds in creating and worshipping this undead phallus, and via the ultimate prohibition of these acts by the unimpeachable King Óláfr, this old woman's exaggerated interest in the sexual sphere criticised.

This survey of naturalistic and supernatural depictions indicates a number of preliminary conclusions. Female senescence, which seems to have been primarily demarcated by menopause, is generally portrayed as something that ought to inhibit sexual and romantic activities. This seems especially true in cases where old women seek

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[117] *Hjálmþés saga*, 280.
[118] Youngs, *Life Cycle*, 169. See also Minois, *History of Old Age*, 163.
[119] Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 47.

sexual interactions with new partners, especially younger men, but can also apply to pre-existing marriages. There are a few exceptions to this conclusion, though they are much rarer and more complicated than in the case of elderly male sexuality. I now turn to this chapter's close readings, which expand upon and nuance these notions. The first examines Þórgunna from *Eyrbyggja saga*, whose depiction seems to cohere with these conclusions. However, the second, which gestures to numerous positive portrayals of elderly foster-mothers who engage in sexualised interactions with their wards, precludes the comprehensive validity of such hypotheses. These episodes demonstrate the potential for elderly female sexuality to be presented favourably, provided that it occurs within the bonds of supernatural fosterage, and that its primary motivation is to benefit the socio-sexual prowess of the male.

**Menopausal Marvels…**

The following close reading returns to *Eyrbyggja saga*, a text that has already expressed an interest in — and thoroughgoing rejection of — elderly female sexuality, via Katla's symbolic rape of Gunnlaugr. This reading focuses the enigmatic Þórgunna, a central figure in the *Fróðárundur* (Wonders at Fróðá), whose portrayal expands and nuances this polemic. The episode also presents its commentaries via supernatural symbols, including a blood rain, a half-moon apparition, and a series of hauntings by human and non-human revenants. The sheer density and variety of these marvels have led numerous scholars to conclude the impenetrable mystery or randomness of certain components. However, I assert that many — if not all — of the wonders can be interpreted to construct a consistent commentary, when Þórgunna's explicit senescence and implicit loss of fertility are views as the episode's thematic epicentres. The *Fróðárundur* rebuke this woman's

defiant, arguably desperate attempts to cling on to her status as a socio-sexually functional adult, with especial reference to her absolute age as a peri- or post-menopausal woman, as well as her relative age in comparison to Kjartan, the object of her affections.[120]

The *Fróðárundur* are a prime example of prior scholarly dismissal of supernatural subjects, particularly because they appear in a so-called classical *Íslendingasaga*. Paul Schach and Lee Hollander dismiss the episode as overlong, tangential, and 'grisly' padding.[121] However, even since supernatural depictions have received wider scholarly acceptance, readings of the *Fróðárundur* have sometimes proved inadequate. Both Forrest Scott and Gillian Overing surrender to the episode's impenetrability, respectively suggesting that 'all is kept effectively mysterious' and calling the wonders 'mayhem', without further interpretation, once they become more numerous and bizarre.[122] More confident readings have been completed, however. Knut Odner suggests that the *Fróðárundur* have a mythic quality and ought to yield fruitful interpretations not only when read symbolically, but also when their many components are treated as a cogent whole.[123] Odner himself asserts that their significance hinges on series of lofty binaries: male and female, living and dead, *miðgarðr* and *útgarðr*.[124] Closer to my aims, Kirsi Kanerva presents a reading related to deviant sexuality, though she focuses more on Þuríðr, the adulterous housewife at Fróðá, than Þórgunna.[125]

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[120] In addition to having been presented at numerous conferences, the substance of this section also appears in Matthew Roby, 'Menopausal Marvels: Elderly Female Sexuality in the *Fróðárundur* of *Eyrbyggja saga*', *Saga-Book*, forthcoming.
[121] Schach, ed. and tr., *Eyrbyggja saga*, xvi; Lee Hollander, 'The Structure of *Eyrbyggja Saga*', *JEGP* 58/2 (1959), 222.
[122] Scott, 'Woman Who Knows', 235; Overing, 'Body in Question', 220.
[123] Knut Odner, 'Þórgunna's Testament: A Myth for Moral Contemplation and Social Apathy', in Gísli Pálsson, ed., *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (Middlesex, 1992), 129.
[124] Odner, 'Þórgunna's Testament, 136–9.
[125] Kanerva, 'Role of the Dead', 35–7.

However, though a great many scholars have noted the centrality of Þórgunna's sexuality to the episode, with respect to both her old age and the age gap between her and Kjartan, none has yet presented a symbolic interpretation of the marvels in relation to these features.[126] As I indicate below, some have come close, but — due to what seems to be bashfulness surrounding senescent sexuality and menopause — they have neglected to examine how such symbols function or interact.

Audiences are encouraged to focus on Þórgunna's age in her opening description: 'þat var áhugi manna, at Þórgunna myndi sótt hafa inn sétta tøg' (that was people's opinion that Þórgunna would be in her fifties).[127] As mentioned above, chronological specifications of adults' ages are rare in sagas, unless they are extremely advanced or otherwise 'sagaworthy'.[128] Moreover, though relaying communal sentiment is a common method of circumventing the sagas' conventional narratorial restraint, it arguably bears greater significance here.[129] First, it indicates that Þórgunna's age is a topic of discussion, corroborating that it is sagaworthy and compelling audiences to ask why. Second, it suggests that, despite the apparent prevalence of such speculation, Þórgunna never offers clarification, perhaps implying that this is a sensitive topic. The subject is intimated to be either discussed only behind her back or, if she is imagined to be present, one on which she refuses to comment.[130] As mentioned above, the age of fifty and the concomitant implication of menopause were central to medieval Icelandic conceptions of female

[126] See Kanerva, 'Role of the Dead', 38, 44; Scott, 'Woman Who Knows', 235; Overing, 'Body in Question', 219; Grundy, 'Viking's Mother', 233; Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated', 248; Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality', 378; Odner, 'Þórgunna's Testament', 134; and Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze', 5.
[127] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 139.
[128] See n. 53 above.
[129] See O'Donoghue, *Narrative in the Icelandic Sagas*, forthcoming.
[130] Not a saga scholar, though surely an insightful reader, R.L. Stevenson's retelling describes Þórgunna's prickly response when young men inadvertently imply her senescence; *The Waif Woman*, 14. Indeed, corroborating my reading as a whole, Stevenson interprets Þórgunna's vain attempts to cling onto youth and sexual desirability as central to the narrative.

senescence. Indeed, numerous scholars have already indicated that this excerpt might imply Þórgunna's questionable fertility.[131] Her chronological and biological liminality might also have been interpreted as congruent with her unfavourable physical portrait, which describes Þórgunna's coarse, portly features and implicit romantic undesirability.

This statement of her age is immediately qualified: 'var hon þó kona in ernasta' (yet she was the most vigorous woman).[132] This 'þó' construction substantiates the notion that Þórgunna's age entails expectations of senescent decline. However, this caveat also suggests that Þórgunna is resisting — so far successfully — these stereotypes. She does this in at least two spheres, the first being that of work. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, she demands to be treated as an ordinary member of Fróðá's workforce: 'en vita skaltu þat, at ek nenni lítt at gefa fyrir mik, því at ek em vel verkfœr; er mér ok verkit óleitt, en þó vil ek engi vásverk vinna' (but you should know that I am hardly inclined to pay for my keep, because I am well able to work; and work is not disagreeable to me, yet I do not wish to do wet-work).[133] In addition to foreshadowing the first marvel, this excerpt characterises Þórgunna as both conscious and defiant of the presumption of her senescent infirmity. Her statements are conspicuously repetitive, twice affirming her manual capability. This might emphasise the vehemence of Þórgunna's defensiveness of her occupational status and, by implication, the strength or ubiquity of expectations to the contrary. Þórgunna's defensiveness of her manual capacity is soon substantiated further, to an arguably uncanny extent: she has a special hay-rake made exclusively for her, and she refuses its use to others.[134]

[131] Kanerva, 'Role of the Dead', 33; Odner, 'Þórgunna's Testament', 134; Kjartan Óttosson, *Fróðárundur í Eyrbyggju* (Reykjavík, 1983), 52.
[132] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 139.
[133] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 138.
[134] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 139.

A second sphere in which Þórgunna asserts her adult functionality is the erotic. Her proud sexuality is first indicated in her possession of fine 'kvenbúnað[r]' (women's attire) and, even more significantly, 'rekkjuklæði' (bedclothes), which are so sumptuous that nobody at Fróðá has seen the like.[135] The *sögumaðr* employs many terms to describe her bedclothes — including 'silkikult' (silken quilt), 'rekkjurefil[l]' (bed curtain), 'ársal[r]' (bed hangings), and even 'rekkjutjald' (bed-tent or canopy) — all of which convey the lavish ornamentation of Þórgunna's sleeping place.[136] Like the decadent bowers of maidens and princesses more common to the *fornaldarsögur* or *riddarasögur*, Þórgunna's bedclothes are implicit symbols of her imposing sexual capital.[137] This symbolism is corroborated in the fact that these objects are coveted by the housewife Þuríðr, whom the saga has already characterised as a figure of active eroticism via her recurring infidelities.[138] Though independently consistent with this housewife's jealous and showy character, Þuríðr's repeated attempts to acquire these fabrics might also represent her implication that they are no longer appropriate for the ageing Þórgunna. This inference might draw Þórgunna into the same complex of notions mentioned with respect to Lúða above.[139] In keeping with a common medieval criticism of lustful old women, Þórgunna might have been interpreted as attempting to hide her encroaching senescence with the aid of sumptuous clothing. However, Þórgunna's biting responses to Þuríðr's requests characterise her as defensive of her vulnerable status in this sphere also: like her rake, Þórgunna demands exclusive use of these items.

Þórgunna's efforts to remain active in the erotic sphere are soon stated more directly: 'Kjartan, sonr bónda, var þar svá manna, at Þórgunna vildi flest við eiga, ok

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[135] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 137–9.
[136] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 138, 142.
[137] See *Helga þáttr Þórissonar*, 422, and *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, 56.
[138] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 77.
[139] See n. 118 above.

elskaði hon hann mjǫk, en hann var heldr fár við hana, ok varð hon opt af því skapstygg. Kjartan var þá þrettán vetra eða fjórtán' (Kjartan, the farmer's son, was the one with whom Þórgunna most wished to interact of all the people there, and she loved him greatly, but he was rather reserved with her, and so she often became irritable. Kjartan was then thirteen or fourteen years old).[140] This passage further implies Þórgunna's intense investment in the amorous dimension of her persona, as Kjartan's snubs are enough to sour her generally 'háttagóð' (well-mannered) demeanour.[141] Considering the fact that this excerpt occurs in close proximity to the implication of Þórgunna's senescence, its statement of the boy's age is also significant. Though it is admittedly more common for sagas to note the chronological age of youths, the proximity of these two details emphasises Þórgunna's status as an *anus amans*. While she is on the cusp of female senescence, with her sexual functionality becoming increasingly questionable, the object of her affections is at precisely the opposite end of the parabolic life-course, poised to accede to socio-sexual manhood. Their respective ages might also have been construed to explain their amorous discord. As Jochens notes, the connected attributes of her unattractive physical appearance and her menopausal age were presumably interpreted to justify Kjartan's indifference to her advances: she is too old and/or ugly to interest him.[142] Like the implied expectation that Þórgunna is too old to maintain her occupational status, this inference would have further characterised her sexuality as defiant, flouting what seem to be prevailing expectations surrounding her old age.

The first wonder to intersect with these notions is the blood rain, which occurs while the farmhands are raking hay. Despite his explicit intention to interrogate each of

[140] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 139.
[141] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 139.
[142] See Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze', 5.

the *Fróðárundur* symbolically, Odner suggests only that this is an ill omen, pushing his interpretation no further than the preliminary survey of medieval blood rains undertaken by John Tatlock.[143] However, this deluge and Þórgunna's reaction to it can be interpreted to correspond directly to her defiant status as a functional adult:

> En er mjǫk leið at nóni, kom skýflóki svartr… ok dró skjótt yfir himin ok þangat beint yfir bœinn… Þóroddr bað menn raka upp heyit, en Þórgunna rifjaði þá sem óðast sitt hey, tók hon eigi at raka upp, þótt þat vaeri mælt. Skýflókann dró skjótt yfir… sá menn, at blóði hafði rignt í skúrinni. Um kveldit gerði þerri góðan, ok þornaði blóðit skjótt á heyvinu ǫllu ǫðru en því, er Þórgunna þurrkaði; þat þornaði eigi, ok aldri þornaði hrífan, er hon hafði haldit á.
>
> (But very soon after noon, a black cloud appeared… and it drew swiftly across the sky and thither directly over the farm… Þóroddr instructed people to rake up the hay, but then Þórgunna tossed her hay wildly; she did not take to raking it up, though that had been ordered. The cloud drew swiftly over… men saw that blood had rained in the storm. In the evening the weather turned good, and the blood dried quickly on all the hay other than that which Þórgunna had dried; that did not dry, nor ever did the rake that she had held.)[144]

This cloud uncannily targets Fróðá, while the rain itself has an equally uncanny affinity for Þórgunna. This affirms the marvel's specific significance to her character. Because it precipitates an immediate — and ultimately terminal — end to her farmwork, the rain can be seen as a threat to her occupational activeness, which the proud Þórgunna initially attempts to defy. Despite being ordered to cease her labours, she continues to toss her hay wildly. The phrase used to describe this refusal to down tools — 'sem óðast' (literally, as if overcome with madness) — now characterises Þórgunna's manual activeness as desperate, rather than merely defiant. Beyond the already established notion that her senescence is incongruent with her status as a farm labourer, numerous features

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[143] Odner, 'Þórgunna's Testament', 132; John Tatlock, 'Some Medieval Cases of Blood Rain', *Classical Philology* 9/4 (1914), 446–7.

[144] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 140.

of this storm might connect Þórgunna's enforced retirement with her age. First, it occurs on an autumn afternoon, which is both seasonally and diurnally evocative of being beyond the prime of life, as demonstrated in numerous *Aetates hominis* texts.[145] Second, as has been suggested of the logic of some Old English riddles, the colour of a raincloud might evoke grey hair, thus signifying old age.[146]

On a further symbolic level, this blood rain might represent the cosmic repudiation of Þórgunna's sexual activeness. Considering the implication of Þórgunna's menopausal age, it is possible that this bloody deluge was interpreted as a menstrual metaphor. As intimated above, I am not the first to acknowledge this possibility. In two separate publications, which demonstrates his choice to distance himself from this hypothesis even after more than a decade of reflection, Scott notes, 'it has also been suggested to me that the shower of blood is relevant here. Though such is a not infrequent portent of death, it may be that its descent here figuratively signifies menstrual blood and hence denial of (desired) fertility.'[147] Scott essentially disowns this hypothesis here and, by not naming his source, intimates that nobody would care to own it. Such reticence, presumably stemming from bashfulness and reminiscent of the use of 'scare quotes' to imply the sexuality of Katla's riding, is unhelpful. It admittedly serves to log the notion in the scholarly record, albeit obliquely. However, it fails to provide the space properly to analyse this symbolism, including how it intersects with the other wonders.

In medieval Scandinavian mythological texts, as well as in mythic sources more broadly, scholars assert a pervasive symbolic connection between environmental waters

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[145] Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 12, 36, 56.
[146] See Thomas Klein et al., 'Resolving Exeter Book Riddles 74 and 33: Stormy Allomorphs of Water', *Quidditas* 35 (2014), 35.
[147] Scott, 'Woman Who Knows', 235. See also Forrest Scott, 'The Woman Who Knows: Female Characters of *Eyrbyggja Saga*', *Parergon* 3 (1985), 84. Unless otherwise noted, all citations of this article refer to its 2002 publication.

and female 'effluvia'.[148] Uli Linke notes that the repetitive nature of liquid cycles — such as tides and variations in rainfall — might 'circumscribe the periodicity of menstrual bleeding'.[149] A commonly cited example of such symbolism is the troll-woman Gjálp's attempt to impede Þórr's river-crossing in *Þórsdrápa*. Here, the swelling waters are implied to emanate from between Gjálp's legs, which scholars interpret to refer to her urine or menstrual blood.[150] Linke further notes that the potential to construe ecological deluges as menstrually symbolic is strengthened when the liquid is expressly stated to be blood, as it is in Þórgunna's case.[151] Indeed, such a connection seems to be upheld in the saga trope of blood rain more broadly, which is very commonly associated with supernatural female figures.[152] Many such episodes imply women to be the sources of bloody precipitation, whether they cause it by weaving on a bloody loom, sprinkle it from a cloth as they ride through the sky, or pour it over the earth from a great trough.[153] Two troll-women in *Sturlunga saga* even ambiguously rock together in a house, while blood pours in through the roof, which seems to draw this trope into association with potentially suggestive female activities.[154] However, the potential to see blood rains as not merely associated with females, but rather with female genital blood in particular, is most convincingly substantiated in *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*. Here, a troupe of troll-women perform handstands with their legs apart, while their companions whip their

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[148] Margaret Clunies Ross, 'An Interpretation of the Myth of Þórr's Encounter with Geirrøðr and his Daughters', in Ursula Dronke et al., eds., *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre* (Odense, 1981), 373.
[149] Uli Linke, 'The Theft of Blood, The Birth of Men: Cultural Constructions of Gender in Medieval Iceland', in Gísli Pálsson, ed., *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (Middlesex, 1992), 270.
[150] McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 8, 182; Motz, *Beauty and Hag*, 21, 82; Clunies Ross, 'Interpretation of the Myth', 377; Vilhelm Kiil, 'Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 71 (1956), 106. See *Skáldskaparmál* 1.25.
[151] Linke, 'Theft of Blood', 278–9.
[152] See Odner, 'Þórgunna's Testament', 132, and Hilda Ellis-Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Manchester, 1988), 94–5.
[153] *Njáls saga*, 454–9; *Íslendinga saga*, 403; *Víga-Glúms saga*, 71.
[154] *Íslendinga saga*, 251.

exposed 'klof' (crotches) with wet goatskins. They then dip these goatskins into blood falling from an aerial naumachia and proceed to flail them around, perhaps in the same sadomasochistic manner, creating a gory drizzle.[155] Though this blood nominally derives from the battle above them, audiences could hardly have forgotten the excruciating genital wounds these wet goatskins recently dealt, which were perhaps also construed to draw blood, implying a connection between the rain and the groins of these troll-women.

As demonstrated in the figures of Gjálp and these sadistic troll-women, there are instances in which supernatural deluges might have been interpreted as female genital blood from both before and after the composition of *Eyrbyggja saga*. Such episodes establish the general basis for similar interpretations of blood rain elsewhere in the corpus. However, Þórgunna's explicit amorous proclivities and implicit menopausal status substantiate the extension of such interpretations to the *Fróðárundur* in particular. Since menopause was definitively demarcated by the cessation of menstrual bleeding, a rain of blood — particularly in a culture already prone to associate such liquid with females and their genital effluvia — could surely have been interpreted to pertain to Þórgunna's recent or current experience of this transition. First, since regular menstruation indicates fertility, her rain of blood could have been seen, as Scott cursorily intimates, as a mocking expression of the fecundity now beyond Þórgunna's reach. Second, though the actual experience of female menopause can be prolonged and feature variable cessations, reductions, and even increases in menstrual flow, Þórgunna's blood rain could be a dramatic representation of her own theoretical final menstruation.[156] Finally, peri- and post-menopausal women might have recognised Þórgunna's extreme

[155] *Jarlmanns saga*, 51–3.
[156] Sievert, *Menopause*, 5–10.

and persistent wetness as symbolic of some specific features of this transition, including hot flushes or menorrhagia, better known as menopausal flooding.[157]

Considering the rain's possible menstrual significance, Þórgunna's attempts to ignore it and continue raking her hay might not merely symbolise this woman's desperate defence of her manual capability. They might also represent her fervent desire to cling on to her adult sexual functionality, in the face of its permanent withdrawal in menopause. Contributing to this reading, it is further significant that the phrase *sem óðast* — the one used to describe her frantic hay tossing — is derived from the related terms *óðr* and *æði*. As mentioned above, these terms have connotations of specifically sexual madness, including excruciating lust in the absence of relief.[158] However, once the storm abates, Þórgunna seems to surrender. She returns to the farmstead and takes off her wet work clothes. In this act, Þórgunna might be interpreted as shedding the trappings of not only her occupational status, but also, since they are now covered in symbolic menstrual blood, her reproductive capacity. Þórgunna then retires to bed and utters a potentially significant phrase: 'Hon kvazk… at hon myndi eigi taka fleiri sóttir' (She said… that she would never again be ill).[159] This is a stock euphemism for imminent death, and can refer to male as well as female characters.[160] However, it is also polysemous, and some of its additional meanings seem significant here. First, in a general sense, period pains could be described as sickness, in which case Þórgunna's utterance could refer to the cessation of menstruation. Second, particularly in the Old-Norse Icelandic linguistic context, this phrase could further imply her post-menopausal state, since terms for sickness —

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[157] See Karen Astrup et al., 'Menstrual Bleeding Patterns in Pre- and Perimenopausal Women: A Population-Based Prospective Diary Study', *Acta Obstetricia et Gynecologica Scandinavica* 83 (2004), 200–2.
[158] See n. 111 above.
[159] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 141.
[160] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, 55; *Króka-Refs saga*, 121.

including *sótt* — are commonly used to denote pregnancy and labour pains.[161] Indeed, as shown in *Örvar-Odds saga*'s exclusive use of such euphemisms to indicate Lopthæna's pregnancy, they were prevalent enough to be recognised even in the absence of more direct statements, presumably based on the gender and sexual identity of the character in question.[162] Considering Þórgunna's gender, amorous proclivities, and sexually significant age, it seems plausible that medieval Icelandic audiences would have recognised this valence here, strengthening interpretations of the menopausal significance of the blood rain. Following this deluge, Þórgunna will never experience pregnancy.

The more conventional meaning of her polysemous prophecy soon comes true: shortly after this menstrual marvel, Þórgunna dies. Considering the prosperous, post-sexual lives of the many female characters noted above — who thrive as nuns, matriarchs, and foster-mothers — menopause was hardly considered fatal in medieval Iceland, or presented as such in the sagas. Admittedly, complications such as acute menorrhagia could conceivably have been fatal in a context without appropriate medical intervention.[163] However, I suggest that Þórgunna's immediate death following this menopausal marvel is more symbolic than realistic. It serves to emphasise the importance of adult functionality to this woman, especially in the sexual sphere. As noted in the previous chapter, I disagree with Jón Viðar Sigurðsson that old age was universally deprecated in medieval Iceland, or that an old person who had outlasted his/her function was considered 'socially dead'.[164] However, I do not doubt the currency of that ideology as part of a diverse range of conceptions, including those that praised the continued or even newfound utility of the elderly. In her death following the blood rain, Þórgunna

[161] Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', 211.
[162] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 284.
[163] Astrup et al., 'Menstrual Bleeding', 200.
[164] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Becoming Old', 242.

represents the tragic embodiment of the negative conception of old age hypothesised by Jón Viðar. According to her own vehement, defiant, and even desperate self-concept as a sexually desirable woman, this menopausal marvel might as well signify her death. Considering the aforementioned significance of sexual, reproductive, and marital to women's gender identities, Þórgunna's emotional turmoil might also have been recognised or shared by pre-, peri-, and post-menopausal women in the audience.

However, though Þórgunna admits her impending demise, tacitly accepting the loss of her status as a functional female adult, this woman's other deathbed prophecies imply that her protectiveness over her sexual capital is far from over. Þórgunna demands that her bedclothes be burned, an imperative that becomes central to the *Fróðárundur*.[165] Þuríðr greedily rescues these lavish furnishings from destruction, triggering several of the ensuing marvels, while their ultimate incineration contributes to a composite exorcism that brings the wonders to a close. Scholars have noted that the centrality of the bedclothes to this episode is exceptional in the corpus.[166] Hence, especially considering Odner's demand for holistic interpretations, it seems essential that their significance be taken into account in any compelling interpretation of the *Fróðárundur*. Scott offers one persuasive suggestion, albeit cursorily, which could exist alongside my sexual reading: Þórgunna's bloodied bedclothes might constitute a pre-germ theory symbol of contagion.[167] This interpretation is bolstered in that one of the ensuing marvels is a plague of sickness, death, and haunting. This plague passes from person to person, sometimes explicitly via physical contact with one of the spectres, who are equally compelling symbols of disease vectors.[168] Further corroborating this interpretation, the

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[165] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 142.
[166] Kanerva, 'Role of the Dead', 28–9; Torfi Tulinius, 'Revenants in Medieval Icelandic Literature', *Caietele Echinox* 21 (2011), 71–2; Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated', 248.
[167] Scott, 'Woman Who Knows', 234.
[168] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 146–7.

literary and legal corpora contain many directives to avoid, replace, or destroy objects associated with illness or death, which in *Egils saga* even refers to a sickbed.[169]

However, Scott further notes the possibility that Þórgunna's directive relates to her 'unfulfilled sexual feeling', which is more closely aligned with my primary interpretation.[170] As noted above, Þórgunna's lavish trappings were conceivably interpreted as the physical manifestations of her proud sexual capital. Hence, her instruction that they not be used following her death, particularly by the sexually active Þuríðr, might imply her persistent, spiteful protectiveness of her erotic status. Þórgunna's repeated refusals to allow Þuríðr the use or ownership of these items during her lifetime were explicitly related to her own continued enjoyment of them and, by extension, of the sexual capital they conferred.[171] This precedent could surely have primed audiences to interpret Þórgunna's deathbed request as similarly motivated, despite her explicit statement to the contrary.[172] Admittedly, Þórgunna's choice to bequeath her 'skarlatsskikkj[a]' to Þuríðr could be interpreted as her relinquishment of some of this coveted sexual capital to the younger woman. Such coloured clothing is a frequent marker of status and, as demonstrated in its repeated use by Hallgerðr when attracting matrimonial attention, a tacit statement of erotic desirability.[173] However, Þórgunna explicitly makes this concession only to facilitate the uncontested burning of the bedclothes, which are surely the most critical symbols of her erotic persona.[174] Þórgunna's deathbed prophecy also comes with a warning: if her wishes are disregarded,

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[169] *Egils saga*, 229. See also *Egils þáttr Síðu-Hallssonar*, 379–84; *Grænlendinga þáttr*, 277; *Þorsteins þáttr Tjaldstæðings* 430–1; *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 1.12; and *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók)*, 397.
[170] Scott, 'Woman Who Knows', 234.
[171] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 139.
[172] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 142.
[173] *Njáls saga*, 44, 85. See also Anna Zanchi, '"Melius Abundare Quam Deficere": Scarlet Clothing in *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njáls Saga*', in Robin Netherton and Gale Owen-Crocker, eds., *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, vol. 4 (Woodbridge, 2008), 34.
[174] *Erybyggja saga*, 142.

people will suffer 'mikit þyngsl af mér' (great affliction on account of me).[175] Þórgunna claims not to desire this scenario herself, which might suggest that she warns of a curse that she cannot prevent. However, it is also plausible that this *af mér* construction implies a punishment that will emanate not 'on account of' but rather directly 'from' her, a threat or curse that she will carry out from beyond the grave, underpinned by her own personal — perhaps jealous or spiteful — conviction that these items must not be used after her death.

The scene of Þuríðr's refusal to have the bedding burned supports this interpretation. In order to convince her husband to disobey Þórgunna's dying wishes, 'lagði hon hendr yfir háls honum' (she laid her hands around his neck).[176] This action — which appears throughout the corpus to denote female seduction, often with an ulterior motive — reminds audiences of Þuríðr's ongoing sexual activeness.[177] This reaffirms that her desire for the bedclothes is sexually motivated, rather than just non-sexually acquisitive or stemming from her desire for Þórgunna's uncanny knowledge, as has been speculated elsewhere.[178] This inference bolsters the sense that Þórgunna's deathbed consternation arises from the thought of their employment to erotic ends by other characters, especially this 'skartskona' (showy woman).[179] Moreover, Þuríðr's verbal pleas even suggest Þórgunna's spiteful covetousness of the bedclothes outright: 'unni hon engum manni at njóta' (she wished that nobody might enjoy [them]).[180] The verb 'njóta' (enjoy), a common sexual euphemism, might have corroborated interpretations that the jealousy of which Þórgunna is accused is sexual.[181] Though Þuríðr's status as a

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[175] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 142.
[176] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 143.
[177] See *Gísla saga*, 31; *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, 296; and *Njáls saga*, 47.
[178] Kanerva, 'Role of the Dead', 40; Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated', 248–9; Odner, 'Þórgunna's Testament', 140.
[179] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 137.
[180] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 143.
[181] Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality', 372. See *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar*, 50.

reliable speaker is questionable, her version of events still gets reported and — as is often the case with conflicting testimonies in the naratorially unmediated *Íslendingasögur* — has the undeniable opportunity to influence audience interpretations.[182] Indeed, hers remains one of only two evaluations of Þórgunna's motivations provided by the saga, the other belonging to the dead woman herself, whose uncanny characteristics and behaviours make her far from infallible. Hence, based on her own explicit motivations in life, and Þuríðr's interpretation of them in death, it seems plausible that Þórgunna's directive to burn the bedclothes was construed to be underpinned by destructive sexual jealousy: if she couldn't have them, no one could.

A further interpretation might have been that Þórgunna insists that the bedclothes be burned in order to access them — and their sexual capital — after death. This hypothesis admittedly rests on the notion of Þórgunna's ambiguous connection to paganism, asserted especially by Odner.[183] This notion is substantially undermined by the churchgoing piety noted in her initial portrait, as well as her ability to foresee Skálholt's episcopal importance and her insistence on Christian burial there.[184] However, it is also true that Þórgunna shares some characteristics with heathen witches, including her Hebridean origins and, as Odner interprets it, her later return in seal form.[185] I am not entirely convinced by Odner's assessment. However, if contemporary audiences did construe these elements to suggest a contradictory aura of paganism around Þórgunna, it is possible that they also interpreted her desire to enjoy these objects following their cremation. As noted in Chapter Two, medieval audiences would have been familiar with many pagan characters who are supposedly able to access objects and even other people

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[182] See O'Donoghue, *Narrative in the Icelandic Sagas*, forthcoming.
[183] Odner, 'Þórgunna's Testament', 133–4
[184] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 139, 141.
[185] Odner, 'Þórgunna's Testament', 133. On associations between Hebridean extraction and witchcraft, see *Laxdœla saga*, 95. On her return as a seal, see below.

with whom they are interred or cremated after death.[186] Consequently, such audiences might have interpreted Þórgunna's intention not only to rob younger characters of these symbols of sexual capital, but also to continue to enjoy them in the afterlife. This would again demonstrate her unwillingness to submit to post-sexual status in her senescence, this time even in death, a concept that will be further discussed below.

The next wonder is Þórgunna's own appearance as a human revenant. The first of her appearances in this form occurs in the larder of a house that has refused hospitality to her pallbearers. To a greater extent even than with the blood rain, Odner's interpretation of this episode contravenes his own edict to examine the wonders symbolically and holistically. He throws up his hands, suggesting that it 'only [has] entertainment value. Not much can be made out of Þórgunna's nakedness when she prepared the meal for the pallbearers… alive, fat, naked, and rambling along with pots and pans.'[187] Conversely, I argue that this haunting pertains directly to Þórgunna's unwilling transition into senescence. Once her pallbearers have taken unauthorised shelter at this farm, the inhospitable householders are awoken by a clattering in the kitchen: 'ok er menn kómu til búrsins, var þar sén kona mikil; hon var nǫkvið, svá at hon hafði engan hlut á sér; hon starfaði at matseld' (and when the people came to the larder, a large woman was seen there; she was naked, such that she had not a thing on her; she was preparing food).[188] The undead Þórgunna then serves a meal for her entourage, a terrifying spectacle that prompts the householders to recant their stinginess.[189] On the one hand, like the bedclothes symbolising a disease vector, this episode could certainly present a discrete commentary alongside the sexual one outlined here. The most obvious is the saga's defence of *greiði* (hospitality), the provision of which *Grágás* notes to be obligatory in

[186] See Chapter Two, n. 121.
[187] Odner, 'Þórgunna's Testament', 146.
[188] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 144.
[189] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 144–5.

the case of funeral journeys.[190] Indeed, beyond his offhand dismissal, this is Odner's only suggestion regarding the episode's significance, and has been repeated elsewhere.[191] However, even this interpretation seems to have bearing on Þórgunna's characterisation as a figure exceptionally proud of her socio-sexual prominence. Beyond a general argument about providing *greiði* to travellers or even specifically to pallbearers, Þórgunna's actions might have been interpreted as assertions of her own particular worthiness to receive respectful hospitality, befitting her grand self-image.

Moreover, Þórgunna's defiant catering resembles her previous attempts to retain the status of a functional adult, this time in a profoundly gendered sense. Just as she vehemently defended the exclusive use of her rake and bedclothes, she here attempts to hold onto the trappings of functional adult femininity in the face of their withdrawal. Moreover, again employing Ármann Jakobsson's logic about revenants personifying old age, this demonstration of her functionality defies expectations of decline based not only on her literal senescence as a woman in her fifties, but also on her symbolic hyper-senescence as an undead old woman.[192] As indicated in sources throughout the medieval Scandinavian and broader Germanic worlds, the serving of food and drink was central to one of the conventional images of the female: the cupbearer.[193] Presumably more relevant to the saga's medieval Icelandic audiences, *Grágás* also defines the *búr* as 'þat er *konor* hafa matreiðo í' (the place where *women* prepare food).[194] Numerous female saga characters take advantage of this role, employing the alimentary avenues available to women to circumvent their exclusion from public power. For example, some present unusual fare to their male kin, such as stones or impossibly large portions, to remind

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[190] *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, 1.8.
[191] Odner, 'Þórgunna's Testament', 146. See also John Martin, 'Law and the (Un)Dead in *Eyrbyggja saga*', *Saga-Book* 29 (2005), 76, and Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated', 248.
[192] See Chapter Three, n. 163.
[193] *WONS*, 107, 125–9. See, for example, *Gylfaginning*, 30.
[194] *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók)*, 260, emphasis mine.

them of their duties of vengeance.[195] As stated above, the lesson Þórgunna's meal teaches seems related to the provision of *greiði*, perhaps especially in light of her grand self-image. However, in her case, the lesson is not as important as the fact that, and the manner in which, she teaches it. By serving this meal, a quintessentially feminine task, Þórgunna defies her senescence — and, in un-death, her symbolic hyper-senescence — to assert her continued status as a viable adult woman.

However, there are yet more layers to the pertinence of this haunting to Þórgunna's defiant adult status, particularly in the sexual sphere. The analysis above omits a crucial aspect of this episode: Þórgunna is explicitly naked. Indeed, by Jochens's reckoning, she is the only female character in the *Íslendinagsögur* to be explicitly described as such.[196] Within the saga's internal logic, the deceased Þórgunna has no control over her sartorial state. Like Víga-Styrr, she was presumably interpreted to have been placed unclothed into her shroud, in accordance with Christian custom.[197] Nonetheless, especially since its extreme rarity would have made audiences pay attention to it, Þórgunna's nakedness might have lent an undercurrent of sexuality to this episode.[198] The saga's audiences might have added their own meaning to her exposed state: that she can be looked upon sexually, or perhaps even that her nakedness implicitly invites an assessment of — or arousal at — her naked form. Hence, while participating in an activity that defiantly asserts her functional, adult womanhood, her nakedness could also have been interpreted as an expression of her vehement sexuality, which she asserts after both her literal and then symbolic ageing. Moreover, because she is a decomposing revenant making an implicitly sexualised display to the living, further use of Ármann's

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[195] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 277; *Guðmundar saga dyra*, 195. See also Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', 214.
[196] Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality', 372; Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze', 5.
[197] See Chapter Two, ns. 109–10.
[198] See Clunies Ross, 'Interpretation of the Myth', 378.

line of reasoning might characterise this as yet another depiction of the attempted sexual interactions of this *anus amans* with younger individuals. By virtue of their living status, her onlookers become representatives of the sexually active adult population, a group no longer accessible to the aged Þórgunna.

If Þórgunna's implicit exhibitionism was interpreted as a sexual advance towards these figures, their response — like Kjartan's earlier coolness — serves as its emphatic repudiation. These involuntary voyeurs 'urðu svá hræddir, at þeir þorðu hvergi nær at koma' (became so afraid, that they dared not come near).[199] Jochens has twice noted that, since 'saga people were used to revenants, it was Þórgunna's nakedness, not her ghostly presence, that was fearsome'.[200] Based on her analyses of the same episode elsewhere, it seems that Jochens here refers to Þórgunna's old age and implicitly correlated ugliness, which she suggests scuppered her sex appeal during life.[201] Jochens's statement seems inaccurate, since elsewhere in *Eyrbyggja saga* — including in the *Fróðárundur* — fully clothed revenants elicit understandable dread.[202] However, the substance of Jochens's implication is much the same as my own. In addition to their fear of Þórgunna as a revenant, the onlookers' horror might have been interpreted as their repulsion at her naked, explicitly senescent and — in its bloated, decomposing state — symbolically hyper-senescent form. This episode thus suggests the loathsomeness of the undead Þórgunna's sexuality and, by extension, that of elderly females more broadly.

In a variant of *Eyrbyggja saga*, Þórgunna reanimates once more in human form, this time during her burial. This episode is found in AM 445 a 4to, a seventeenth-century paper manuscript belonging to the *Melabók* tradition of the saga.[203] Since this manuscript

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[199] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 144.
[200] *WONS*, 76–7. See also Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality', 372.
[201] Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze', 5.
[202] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 93, 149.
[203] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 145. See also Forrest Scott, ed., *Eyrbyggja saga: The Vellum Tradition* (Copenhagen, 2003), 248.

has no single exemplar of which we are aware, but rather seems to amalgamate components from numerous prior versions, it is possible that this variant has medieval origins, no longer extant.[204] However, even if it does represent an early modern addition, its contents surely reflect plausible — and arguably sexual — re-interpretations of the *Fróðárundur* among *sögumenn* and readers around the time of its, and perhaps before, its seventeenth-century redaction. In this reanimation, Þórgunna complains of the coldness of her new grave-mate:

> 'Kalt á fótum,
> Mána Ljótur.'
>
> Var þá svarað:
>
> 'Það gerir, [að] fáir unna,
> Þórgunna.'
>
> ('Cold at feet,
> Mána-Ljótur.'
>
> Then came the reply:
>
> 'So it goes, that few love,
> Þórgunna.')[205]

Her lament, which implies her wish not to be interred next to this man's corpse, has profound sexual connotations. As was also stated in relation to Víga-Styrr, the grave and the conjugal bed are elided in many Old Norse-Icelandic portrayals of pre-Christian characters, for whom mutual interment symbolises undying romantic union.[206] Hence, as with the notion that Þórgunna intends to enjoy her burnt bedclothes in the afterlife, this interpretation is bolstered by, but this time certainly does not require, audience speculations of her affinity with paganism. The horizontality and physical proximity of

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[204] Exemplars include AM 447 4to and several variants derived from *Melabók* (AM 445 b 4to). See Scott, ed., *Eyrbyggja saga: The Vellum Tradition*, 124*.
[205] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 145, n. 2. Emendation in edition.
[206] See Chapter Two, n. 121.

two bodies in a grave could surely have allowed such a pair to be interpreted as metaphorical bedfellows even in an entirely Christian context. As mentioned above, the Christian Njáll and Bergþóra's choice to die together in bed symbolises their continued union in death.[207] Moreover, in the episode of Spes from *Grettis saga*, though this devout couple enter eremitic cells that are adjacent but explicitly *un*connected to one another, the notion that they will enjoy one another's company in a Christian afterlife is stated explicitly.[208] However, unlike these couples, as well as the many pagan characters from the Eddas and *fornaldarsögur* who seek post-mortem companionship with their erstwhile lovers, Þórgunna's words imply her rejection of her new partner.

Based on his name alone, Þórgunna's sexually connoted rejection of this male corpse might simply reflect her high standards for romantic partners. As a self-styled figure of erotic desirability, she might consider this man too '[l]jótur' (ugly). However, it also seems plausible that her rejection of Mána-Ljótur is once more underpinned by her status as an *anus amans*, only desiring partnership with younger men. Employing Ármann's reasoning once more, Mána-Ljótur could conceivably represent a figure of male senescence based only on his status as a decomposing revenant, making him *and* Þórgunna similarly aged in a symbolic sense. Furthermore, Ljótur's connection to male senescence is strengthened by the specific attribute Þórgunna identifies as unappealing: his cold feet. Kanerva translates Þórgunna's verse as 'it is cold at the feet of Mána-Ljótur', which, based on the non-oblique declension of Ljótur's name, cannot be literally accurate.[209] If Ljótur's name is rendered in the vocative — which seems likely, since Þórgunna's name is also rendered non-obliquely, despite her being more clearly the grammatical object of the verb *unna* — the sense of Kanerva's translation is possible: '[it

[207] *Njáls saga*, 330–1.
[208] *Grettis saga*, 289.
[209] Kanerva, 'Role of the Dead', 30.

is] cold at [your] feet, Mána-Ljótur'. But other meanings are also possible, including '[you have] cold feet, Mána-Ljótur' or, if his name is simply rendered in the nominative, 'Mána-Ljótur [has] cold feet'.[210] The potential for Ljótur to be understood as the one with cold feet is significant. The same feature is noted of the sagas' most famous old man, Egill Skalla-Grímsson, about whom it is expressed using identical diction: he becomes 'kalt á fótum', leading him to loiter around the fireside.[211] Mána-Ljótur may thus be interpreted as an even more compelling symbol of a hyper-aged man than his revenant status alone suggests. Hence, Þórgunna's lament about Ljótur's cold feet might not merely be a captivatingly timeless complaint about the unwanted touch of a lover's icy limbs in bed.[212] She might also be upset at the implied root cause of this coldness: his literal and symbolic ancientness. Þórgunna's snubbing of Ljótur is then criticised in the utterance of her new bedfellow: *this* is why few love Þórgunna. If my reading of Ljótur's significance as an embodiment of male senescence is plausible, his own couplet might thus suggest that Þórgunna would be more likeable if she curtailed her desire for younger men — whether literally young like Kjartan, or now symbolically young like the living — and adhered to the sexual expectations more befitting her aged status. Her forced placement into the grave alongside Ljótur might symbolise some such expectations: her romantic interactions should either cease, or be limited only to those with other senescent figures, as was speculated regarding the emendation to *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr* above.

The *Fróðárundur* include a further marvel that dovetails with this commentary. There is an elderly couple lodging at *Fróðá* during the summer of Þórgunna's residence

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[210] As my examiners noted, the semantic flexibility of these verses also make it possible that Þórgunna complains of *her own* cold feet. This interpretation can also be fruitfully synthesised with my reading. As she did while alive, Þórgunna might here demand intimate contact with Ljótur, expressed in her desire to have him warm her feet. This would corroborate her incorrigible sexuality, which is once more repudiated in Ljótur's response.

[211] *Egils saga*, 145.

[212] Recall *Gísla saga*, 53.

there: Þórir viðleggr and Þorgríma galdrakinn. The saga describes animosity between Þórgunna and this couple, but its cause remains a mystery.[213] Scholars have proposed several theories, including the opposition between Þórgríma's heathendom and Þórgunna's Christianity.[214] Alternatively, the couple's resentment toward Kjartan, whose real father killed their sons in an earlier episode, might make them Þórgunna's enemy based on her love for the boy.[215] However, when it comes to Þórgunna's repeated literal and symbolic refusals to surrender either her sexual activeness in general or her desire for younger partners specifically, another possibility comes to the fore. Þorgríma and Þórir become foils to Þórgunna as positive representations of love in old age.

The senescence of this married couple in life is not the only feature that might facilitate such an interpretation: it is further bolstered in their own undead rovings. During the plague at Fróðá, they are the only two named individuals to die, after which they are seen walking together at night: 'tók sótt Þorgríma galdrakinn, kona Þóris viðleggs… it sama kveld, sem hon var jǫrðuð, sásk hon í liði með Þóri, bónda sínum' (Þorgríma galdrakinn, the wife of Þórir viðlegg, took sick… the same evening that she was buried, she was seen in the host with Þórir, her husband).[216] This excerpt draws seemingly superfluous attention to their married status, which perhaps guided audiences to consider their temporally proximate deaths and post-mortem walks in reference to their conjugal relationship: they were united in life, die and are buried around the same time, and continue to share each other's company in death. Moreover, although this excerpt draws especial attention to the presence of this named couple in the undead company, it is important to note that Þórir's host also contains the other unnamed victims of this plague. The presence of these figures alongside this married couple might serve a

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[213] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 139.
[214] Scott, 'Woman Who Knows', 85; Odner, 'Þórgunna's Testament', 139.
[215] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 79. See Kanerva, 'Role of the Dead', 41.
[216] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 150.

similar symbolic function to Njáll and Bergþóra's grandson, lying between them in their deathbed. Though they do not detract from the sense of this senescent couple's everlasting union, they might imply its reduced emphasis on private, implicitly carnal intimacy. Hence, Þórir and Þorgríma serve to underline some of the commentaries already presented negatively in the character of Þórgunna. Unattached old women should not be sexually covetous, especially of partnerships with younger men, though their romantic relations can be justified if expressed within the confines of a pre-existing marriage. However, even in such a partnership, the nature of their relationship should shift in old age. The intimacy implied in Þórir and Þorgríma's earlier procreation of sons should be re-directed into a union that remains close — strong enough to persist even in death — but becomes more social and less sexual.

Another marvel occurs on the night the pallbearers return, and one that substantiates the link between the *Fróðárundur* and female fertility: 'þá sá men á veggþili hússins, at komit var tungl hálft… Þessi tiðendi bar þar við viku alla (then people saw on the wall of the house that a half-moon had come… This happening occurred there for a whole week).[217] As with the centrality of the bedclothes, this wonder is considered exceptional in the corpus, though interpretations of its significance have not gone beyond the general interpretation of foreboding presented explicitly in the saga itself.[218] However, features of this wonder facilitate its interpretation as an additional menstrual marvel. For one, because it renews itself on a monthly cycle, the moon has cross-cultural significance as a menstrual symbol, a meaning defended in the medieval Icelandic context by Ásdís Egilsdóttir.[219] Moreover, this marvel lasts for a week, the

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[217] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 145–6.
[218] Tulinius, 'Revenants in Medieval Icelandic Literature', 71–2; Kanerva, 'Role of the Dead', 30.
[219] Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 'St. Margaret, Patroness of Childbirth', in Rudolf Simek and Wilhelm Heizmann, eds., *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz* (Vienna, 2002), 321–2.

approximate duration of menstruation.[220] The possible menstrual symbolism of this marvel corroborates the similar significance of the other wonders, especially the blood rain, substantiating my reading of the episode as a whole.

The remaining wonders are all obliquely linked to the ones analysed above, since the deaths and reanimations of other characters at Fróðá are implied to be caused by the rescuing of Þórgunna's bedclothes, and are also partially terminated by their eventual incineration. If interpreted as manifestations of Þórgunna's deathbed warnings, these wonders heighten the sense of this woman's consternation at the continued use of these items, further emphasising her spiteful covetousness regarding her sexual capital. However, a final marvel must be examined in greater detail for its connection to Þórgunna, her proud defence of these manifestations of her sexuality, and her ongoing weakness for younger men. This is the seal apparition or revenant, which rises from the fire-pit at Fróðá and resists attempts by two unnamed servants to subdue it, before its eventual defeat by Kjartan: '[hann] gekk upp við hǫggit ok gægðisk upp á ársalinn Þórgunnu… Þá hljóp til sveininn Kjartan ok tók upp járndrepsleggju… hann barði þar til, at selrinn gekk… niðr… ok svá fór jafnan um vetrinn, at allir fyrirburðir óttuðusk mest Kjartan' (it reared up at the blow and stared at Þórgunna's bedclothes… Then the boy Kjartan leapt there and took up a sledgehammer… he struck until the seal went… down… and so it went that way all winter, that all the spectres feared Kjartan most).[221] Numerous scholars have noted this seal's connection to Þórgunna, whether as her *fylgja*, a disembodied expression of her will, or her revenant self in bestial form.[222] However, her ambiguous association with this beast, rather than its precise nature, is sufficient for

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[220] C. Wood et al., 'Duration of Menstruation', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 19 (1979), 216–19.
[221] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 147.
[222] Odner, 'Þórgunna's Testament', 131; Kanerva, 'Role of the Dead', 31; Scott, 'Woman Who Knows', 83.

this reading. Due to their amphibious nature and uncannily human faces, seals have been identified as symbols of liminality.[223] Þórgunna's connection to this seal thus contributes to her characterisation as transitional, perhaps referring to her position on the threshold between life and death, but perhaps also that between adulthood and old age, or between youthful fecundity and menopausal infertility. Indeed, Kanerva and Bragg both note the seal's potential to denote sexual liminalities in particular, including a disjunction between desire and ability.[224] The seal spectre is explicitly interested in the bedclothes, which is one of the primary features connecting it to Þórgunna. The verb 'gæg[ja]' (to stare intently, agog) implies the intensity of the this beast's emotional — perhaps specifically lustful — investment in these objects, with the same term being used to describe the ogling of the (also elderly) Þráinn at the nubile Þorgerðr during her mother's wedding.[225] The Þórgunna seal's extreme interest in the bedclothes could relate to this woman's eagerness to re-acquire them in death, or to her continued spitefulness that these objects are being used by people other than herself. In either case, the fact that her intense emotional connection to these objects seems to persist beyond her death confirms and heightens the sense of Þórgunna's intense sexual defensiveness and jealousy.

The identity of the figure able to conquer the seal is further significant to Þórgunna's status as an *anus amans*. It seems no accident that the saga relates that first a woman and then a man are unable to subdue this beast. It is perhaps unsurprising that the woman could not defeat Þórgunna, who demonstrated considerable authority when arguing with Þuríðr and, as an explicitly heterosexual woman, could not be swayed by sexual attraction toward such a figure. However, with reference both to men's and women's respective positions in relation to the 'rainbow coalition', and to an adult

[223] Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated', 244; Odner 'Þórgunna's Testament', 135.
[224] Kanerva, 'Role of the Dead', 38–40; Bragg, *Oedipus Borealis*, 101, 186.
[225] *Njáls saga*, 89.

male's status as a potential sexual partner for Þórgunna, it seems more significant that the man could not hammer this seal back into the fire-pit. The Þórgunna seal is susceptible only to Kjartan. It is likely that this selective vulnerability was interpreted to stem from her amorous affection for him and, especially since this excerpt reminds us of his juvenility as 'sveinninn' (the boy), perhaps his youthful appeal in particular. This detail compounds Þórgunna's status as an irredeemable *anus amans*, who exclusively, inappropriately, and now self-defeatingly desires this young man. Her desire for Kjartan's affection is so strong that it ultimately precludes its own satiation, since — unlike the sexual predator Katla — Þórgunna cannot override the rejections of her would-be paramour. As a living woman, she is bitter but ultimately tolerant of Kjartan's coldness; as an undead woman somehow expressing herself through this seal, she once more capitulates to his will. Hence, though her senescent sexuality is surely criticised throughout the *Fróðárundur*, it must be noted that Þórgunna's adoption of the *anus amans* mantle is more tragic and even pitiful than Katla's. This excerpt also confirms the relationship between Þórgunna and all the other spectres. Not only are their reanimations caused by the disobedience of her wishes, but also their actions are somehow governed by her sexual proclivities; they apparently *all* capitulate to Kjartan's will. Hence, they too become symbolic of the tragic futility of the defiant sexuality personified by Þórgunna, who is unwilling or unable to surrender her erotic persona in the face of her chronological, biological, and socio-sexual senescence, but is not sufficiently malicious to force the issue.

It is ultimately Kjartan who brings the wonders to a close. Not only is he able to defeat the seal and terrify the other spectres, but he also burns the bedclothes and leads

the legislative action against the other human revenants.[226] The episode even ends with a sycophantic statement of his assumption of adult male roles, which primes audiences to prioritise the episode's impact on him: 'tók Kjartan sér hjón ok bjó at Fróðá lengi síðan ok varð inn mesti garpr' (Kjartan took upon himself the establishment of the household and lived at Fróðá long afterwards and became the greatest of champions).[227] Hence, in addition to describing Þórgunna's unwilling transition into post-sexual life, the *Fróðárundur* also serve as an initiatory episode for this boy, charting his rise out of the 'rainbow coalition'. The detail of Kjartan setting up 'hjón' might not only refer to his control at Fróðá, but also imply — by virtue of the most commonplace meaning of this term — his establishment of a household in the conjugal sense: securing a wife and starting a family. This implication would serve as a final repudiation of Þórgunna's wishes, suggesting that Kjartan finds a more appropriate partner, implicitly younger and more fertile, as a component of his accession to socio-sexual manhood. Though Þórgunna never poses a physical threat to Kjartan in the manner of the wicked Katla, the *Fróðárundur* therefore become a complementary example to that episode. The wonders demonstrate how more promising young men can evade the perils of inappropriately libidinous old women, demonstrate their *kvensterkleikr* through the social, legislative, and even figuratively martial dominance of such figures — if only Gunnlaugr had remembered his sledgehammer! — and become sovereign adult males. The *Fróðárundur* thus constitute this saga's second repudiation of the *anus amans* figure, this time not only with respect to her inappropriate interest in younger men, but also with rich, symbolic indications of the centrality of menopause to her sexual ineligibility. The episode thus

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[226] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 151–2. This court scene might uphold yet another discrete commentary, this time about the importance of law to medieval Icelanders, including as it defines appropriate legal channels of inheritance between the living and the dead. See Tulinius, 'Revenants in Medieval Icelandic Literature', 62–70, and Martin, 'Law and the (Un)Dead', 80–1.

[227] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 152.

confirms and expands some of the conclusions noted above: post-menopausal women should curtail their sexual pursuits and submit gracefully to their non-procreative twilight years.

**… and Fondling Foster-Mothers**

Considering what I have outlined to be the saga corpus's comprehensive repudiation of active elderly female sexuality, it is unsurprising that such eroticism tends to be embodied by evil, often supernatural Others. These characters, like Katla and Gunnhildr, are malevolent mirrors to the sagas' more admirable elderly female figures, such as the explicitly chaste nun, or the implicitly post-sexual matriarch. It is therefore fascinating and extremely significant that elderly female sexuality *is* sometimes extolled, when depicted in the figure of the benevolent, supernatural foster-mother. The magical rituals of these aged and often hideous trolls, especially the trope of palpating the bodies of their male wards, can be portrayed in unambiguously erotic terms. As demonstrated in the males' contentment with these procedures and their overtly beneficial effects, these supernatural episodes establish a space for the favourable presentation of elderly female sexual activities, even when carried out with much younger male partners. Beyond the few guarded exceptions noted in the survey above, such positive portrayals are unique in the corpus. They demonstrate that elderly female sexuality could be favourably construed — at least in the imaginations, if not in the mentalities or enacted behaviours of medieval Icelanders — providing it was carried out within bonds of fosterage and was primary intended to benefit the ward's socio-sexual prowess.

The notion that the foster-mother and sexual partner are often elided in the medieval Icelandic corpus, specifically in the figure of the non-human troll-woman, is

well-attested in the scholarship.[228] Examples include, but are not limited to, some of the 'temporary troll lover' episodes discussed above, in which the sexual *fóstra* can be a young and even beautiful troll-woman. The most commonly cited episodes include that of Hildigunnr, whose sexual relationship with Örvar-Oddr begins with her believing him to be an infant and nursing him as such.[229] Also frequently cited is Brana, whom McKinnell suggests is a paradigmatic example of this elision. A similarly youthful troll-woman, she begins by embodying a mixture of helper and lover traits. However, especially once she begins to orchestrate Hálfdan's marriage to a human princess, her role as his romantically disinterested foster-mother becomes more exclusive.[230]

However, the elision of these roles has prompted insufficient scholarship on sexual connotations of fosterage in general, as well as fosterage by elderly female figures in particular, in the medieval Icelandic imagination. This may result from the questionable judgement of some eminent and even recent scholars that the sagas emphasise these figures' nurturing roles over their erotic ones. Sexuality is 'not her primary function', writes Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, though it is difficult to discern the role of Hildigunnr, for example, if this is the case.[231] Such scholars seem to presume that audiences either overlooked the explicit sex between these *fóstrur* and their wards, or were at least able to compartmentalise their characterisations into these two discrete roles and weigh one as more significant than the other. A further reason for the paucity of such analyses, especially with respect to senescence, is the notion that this elision is found only in young — and therefore implicitly attractive — troll-women, as asserted by McKinnell. He likewise suggests that the helpful *fóstra* role is the more important and

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[228] *WONL*, 73; Gallo, 'Giantess as Foster-Mother', 1; McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 190–6; Ellis-Davidson, 'Fostering by Giants', 71.
[229] *Örvar-Odds saga*, 339–40. See *WONL*, 75, and McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 191.
[230] *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 331–7. See *WONL*, 76, and McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 192.
[231] *WONL*, 73–4. See also Ellis-Davidson, 'Fostering by Giants', 71.

appropriate one for trolls. However, specifically young troll-women 'lac[k] the intellectual sense to direct [their] mothering instinct appropriately' and end up having sex with their wards, a pattern that the *sögumenn* exploit for comedy or the masculine aggrandisement of the hero.[232]

However, as Lorenzo Lozzi Gallo notes, there *are* several elderly troll foster-mothers who interact sexually with their wards, and not always in unfavourable terms. These include some whose desires never evolve into active advances, such as Gríðr from *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra* and Arinnefja from *Egils saga einhenda*.[233] The restraint of such figures would support the notion that their sexuality was considered inappropriate, perhaps due to their senescence and/or concomitant ugliness. Indeed, as Gallo notes, Gríðr immediately negates her own sexuality in the moment of its expression, suggesting that Illugi would prefer her beautiful daughter instead.[234] This justifies Gríðr's self-conscious undesirability on implicitly age-based grounds. However, Gallo identifies other senescent examples, including Mána from *Sörla saga sterka* and Heiðr from *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, whose beneficial interactions with their sagas' protagonists are more actively sexual.[235] Since Gallo's article is primarily a survey of instances, he explores few of the ramifications of these episodes to medieval Icelandic considerations of sexualised fosterage relationships, senescent or otherwise. Nevertheless, his examples contravene McKinnell's assertion that the elision of lover and helper traits is only found in young troll-women, which demands further attention.

[232] McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 191–2.
[233] *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 356; *Egils saga einhenda*, 162. Gríðr is complicated in this respect, since she turns out to be a mature yet still marriageable human princess, cursed with a senescent and hideous troll form; however, at this point, her true identity remains unknown.
[234] Gallo, 'Giantess as Foster-Mother', 10–12.
[235] Gallo, 'Giantess as Foster-Mother', 8–10. See *Sörla saga sterka*, 197–200, and *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, 68.

As noted in Chapter One, McKinnell suggests that the 'incongruous' elision of eroticism and nurturing in the figure of the troll *fóstra* results from the merging of two mythic story patterns. One features an Óðinn-type hero who seduces and then abandons a sexually desirable, implicitly youthful troll-woman. The other portrays a Þórr-type hero receiving non-sexual assistance from a troll foster-mother, who may therefore be older and less sexualised.[236] As also conceded above, McKinnell's hypothesis offers a plausible stemmatic explanation as to how these seemingly contradictory attributes coalesced in the characters of these troll-women. However, this dissertation seeks to analyse how the extant iterations of such a curious elision were interpreted by late medieval Icelandic audiences, regardless of its possible origins. In Chapter One, I suggested that audiences might have attended to the protagonists' juvenility, in addition to their transition from submissiveness to domination, to explain this trope. This interpretation renders the trolls as pre-marital mistresses, who provide the heroes with sexual rites of passage. Similarly, in this chapter I aim to examine these episodes in their extant forms — featuring the explicitly desirable and beneficial sexuality of *elderly* foster-mothers — and to explore potential, late medieval interpretations.

An especially detailed portrayal of the beneficial sexuality of an elderly troll *fóstra* is found in *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, first attested in the late fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók* version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*.[237] In this episode, King Haraldr hárfagri sends Haukr on an errand, but advises him first to seek Haraldr's *fóstra*, Heiðr. The king suspects that Haukr will encounter supernatural resistance instigated by a rival monarch, Eiríkr of Sweden, which he hopes Heiðr will counteract. This *fóstra* is explicitly old, referred to as 'kerlin[g]' throughout.[238] However, it is in a conversation

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[236] McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 172–96.
[237] Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir, '*Flateyjarbók*', 198.
[238] *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, 68–9.

before her appearance that Heiðr's extreme senescence is most pointedly emphasised. Lýtir, the supernatural mercenary King Eiríkr hires to thwart Haraldr's plans, says that his last trip north was hindered by '"mikit tröll… en gamalt var þá ok eigi munda ek þar koma, ef ek vissa, at þat lifði, ok væntir mik, at nú muni dautt vera". Konungr segir, at svá mun vera' ('a great troll… but it was old then and I would not go there if I knew that it lived, and I expect that now it will be dead'. The king says that would be so).[239] Lýtir does not describe this troll in detail, which might have facilitated interpretations that he refers to someone other than Heiðr. For instance, audiences might have presumed his reference to Dofri, Haraldr's famous troll foster-father, who features heavily in the preceding *þáttr* of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*.[240] However, following Heiðr's successful intervention, Lýtir concludes the episode by lamenting the power of 'hi[tt] mikla tröl[l]', verifying that his identification of this notably ancient being — so old that both he and Eiríkr presume her dead — had referred to her.[241]

As Gallo notes, Heiðr's interactions with Haukr are characterised by 'unrestrained sexuality'.[242] Following her receipt of gifts that establish Haukr's connection to King Haraldr and, by extension, his status as her proxy fosterling, she agrees to assist him. She begins by palpating his body: 'Hon færði Hauk ór klæðunum ok þreifaði um hann ok mælti: "Þú ert þrekliga ok hamingjusamligr"' (She got Haukr out of his clothes and touched about him and said: 'You are strongly [built] and lucky-looking').[243] As others have noted, the trope in which figures of medical, spiritual, or supernatural authority provide assistance by 'laying hands' on people is common, and is sometimes described with no discernible sexual undercurrent.[244] Beyond the many

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[239] *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, 67.
[240] See *Hálfdanar þáttr svarta*, 50–2.
[241] *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, 69.
[242] Gallo, 'Giantess as Foster-Mother', 8.
[243] *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, 68.
[244] *WONL*, 55; Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 122; Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', 214.

instances of its perfunctory description when carried out by supernatural women for good or ill, its non-sexual potential is most clearly demonstrated in its performance by the saintly Guðmundr Arason.[245] However, the trope is unmistakeably erotic in *Hauks þáttr*. First, Haukr is unclothed, which arguably transforms Heiðr's grasping into groping and her visual examination into voyeurism. Second, Heiðr follows this palpation with an instruction to kiss her, to which Haukr willingly assents.[246] This kiss is a more clearly erotic act. It is not obfuscated by the uncanny but possibly platonic associations of the supernatural palpation ritual and, hence, lends clearer suggestive potential to the episode. After this procedure, Heiðr furnishes her new *fóstri* with 'mýla[r] tv[eir]' (two balls), which allow him to defeat Eiríkr and Lýtir's forces in a sea battle. Considering the eroticism of the whole scene, it does not seem farfetched to suggest that the number and shape of these objects facilitate their interpretation as symbolic testicles.[247]

Beyond Haukr's contentment to participate in these activities, as well as their ultimate efficacy, the emphatic positivity of this presentation of elderly female sexuality is corroborated in the contrasting behaviour and fate of Vígharðr, Haukr's companion. Upon being asked to undress, Vígharðr hesitates, acquiescing only after pressure from Haukr. His reluctance might substantiate the notion that Heiðr's palpation ritual was not perceived to be merely conventional, non-sexual magic. Of course, numerous characters refuse to engage in magic due only to its associations with femininity and/or cowardice.[248] However, it seems especially plausible in this context, with its naked groping and kissing, that Vígharðr is specifically averse to its sexual implications: he

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[245] *Þórðar saga kakala*, 47–8. See also *Fóstbræðra saga*, 162–4; *Þorskfirðinga saga*, 184; *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, 299; *Reykdæla saga*, 167; and *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, 353.
[246] *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, 68.
[247] For this interpretation of similar gifts in *Heiðarvíga saga*, see Robin Waugh, 'The Foster-Mother's Language: Anti-Representation, Pseudo-Feminization, and Other Consequences of a Mistake of Gender Charm in *Heiðarvíga saga*', *Scandinavian Studies* 83/3 (2011), 330. On this episode, see more below.
[248] See Chapter One, ns. 142–9.

does not want to have sexual contact with this elderly troll. As she did with Haukr, Heiðr then appraises Vígharðr's naked body and requests a kiss. However, Vígharðr refuses: 'Hann biðr öll troll kyssa hana. Hon svarar: "Meir mun þér gefit vænleikr", — ok segir honum munu meira mein at verða en sér' (He says all trolls should kiss her [i.e., 'to hell with your kisses!']. She replies: 'More beauty could have been given to you' [i.e., you're not so beautiful yourself!], — and says more harm would come to him than from her).[249] Heiðr's response implies that Vígharðr's apparently unremarkable attractiveness should make him less fussy about the women he kisses. This corroborates the notion that his refusals stem from visceral revulsion at her physical ugliness, rather than conceptual opposition to the potentially non-sexual connotations of her magic. Heiðr is indeed hideous in a manner pertinent to romantic interactions, including kisses. She is 'munnljót' (mouth-ugly), with her deformed lips spreading from her nose to her chest.[250] However, especially considering the extent to which the audience's attention has been drawn to Heiðr's extreme senescence, as well as the implicit link between her age and ugliness, it is also possible that Vígharðr's revulsion was interpreted to reflect his disgust at this feature too. Indeed, it is tempting to interpret Vígharðr as an embodiment of the opposition to elderly female sexuality that is repeated almost without challenge throughout the corpus. He represents the every(hu)man, whose perspective on this ugly old troll-woman's sexual undesirability was presumably predicted and shared by much of the audience.[251] However, such opposition is portrayed to be inappropriate and detrimental in this particular literary scenario.

During the subsequent sea battle, prospects initially seem grim for these two heroes. Significantly, it is only *after* Vígharðr is slain that Haukr is able to recall Heiðr's

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[249] *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, 68.
[250] *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, 68.
[251] On audience avatars, see Ármann Jakobsson, '*Bergbúa þáttr*', 24–6.

spheres. These balls explode once he throws them overboard, facilitating Haukr's escape.[252] Implicit in these events is that Heiðr's assistance is not extended to Vígharðr because of his refusal to participate in her sexual ritual. The man's demise therefore compels audiences to recognise the old troll-woman's sexual activities, rather than merely her symbolically sexually gifts, as essential to the functioning of her supernatural succour. It is admittedly possible that audiences interpreted Heiðr as having actively cursed Vígharðr for rejecting her. In such a scenario, the magical rites that protect or doom these respective heroes might have been construed to be performed 'offstage', based on whether the men impressed or satisfied her during their sexualised evaluation. This interpretation might characterise her sexual requests as underpinned by personal investment, possibly including the old woman's pride or libido. However, considering the fact that Heiðr is initially hesitant to provide sexualised aid to either man, only acquiescing once their status as proxy-fosterlings is confirmed, interpretations of her own personal and sexual investment seem less likely. She performs these acts not for her own ends, but rather to assist the heroes. Moreover, considering her statement that the harm Vígharðr's refusals precipitate will come from a source other than her, it seems more plausible that Heiðr's sexual activities were interpreted as performative. Her acts of groping and kissing confer magical protection in and of themselves. Hence, without her wards' willing participation, she is unable to provide assistance. In either case, the episode describes a scenario in which elderly female sexuality is construed positively: it is gladly accepted by the protagonist and is effective in saving his life. Moreover, if contemporary audiences shared my interpretation of the 'mýla[r] tv[eir]', this otherwise abominably senescent eroticism is also implied to bestow specifically sexual capital upon the men who accept it. As with the younger 'temporary troll lovers' above, erotic activity

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[252] *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, 68.

with this elderly troll *fóstra* facilitates her ward's accession to adult prowess in a general sense — here in martial victory — but this prowess is expressed through thinly veiled imagery of augmented sexual power. His sexual interactions with her give him bigger balls, literally and figuratively.

As mentioned above, Gallo follows numerous scholars in acknowledging the centrality of sexuality to the figure of the troll foster-mother. However, the crux of his own contribution is that depictions of fosterage by human sorceresses share many of the features of fosterage by non-human trolls. Curiously, though, Gallo neglects to examine or even mention the corresponding prevalence of sexuality in the former episodes also.[253] Numerous instances of fosterage by elderly human witches do exhibit similar 'unrestrained sexuality'. Esja from *Kjalnesinga saga* is introduced as an independent widow even before the birth of Búi, her eventual ward.[254] This intimates her senescence from the outset, an attribute expressly confirmed soon after her sexualised rituals with the boy.[255] These activities occur on the eve of Búi's duel with Kolfiðr: 'Esja mælti: "Þar er harðfengr maðr, er Kolfiðr er, ok fjörmikill; en hér verð ek nú at sofa í nótt hjá þér." Hon gerði honum þá laug ok strauk hvert bein á honum. Síðan klæddi hon hann um morguninn sem henni líkaði' (Esja said: 'That Kolfiðr is a tough and powerful man; and I will now sleep here beside you tonight.' She then gave him a bath and stroked every bone of him. Afterwards she dressed him as she wanted in the morning).[256] Ásdís Egilsdóttir has considered this episode in relation to Búi's masculine development, though she does not comment on its sexual undertones, stating only the frequency of its constituent tasks as preparation for battle.[257] However, this excerpt shares and even

[253] Gallo, 'Giantess as Foster-Mother', 12–17.
[254] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 5.
[255] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 25.
[256] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 22–3.
[257] Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 'Esja's Cave', 124–7.

expands upon some of the suggestive activities found in *Hauks þáttr*. First, the young man is again naked, which emphasises the sexual nature of Esja's palpations. The verb used to describe her groping — *strjúka* (to stroke) — bears even greater erotic potential than *þreifa*, implying a delicacy or even intimacy of contact. More speculatively, Esja stroking 'hvert bein' (every bone) could have elicited further sexual interpretations, not only that she touches his penis, but even that Búi has an erection during this process. The conceptual connection between bones and erect penises is most famously demonstrated in the figure of Ívarr inn beinlausi (the boneless), whose epithet is in some texts implicitly connected to his possession of neither 'girnd né ást' (lust nor love), perhaps suggesting his asexuality or erectile dysfunction.[258] Other features of Esja's ritual expand its sexual potential. Her stroking occurs in a hot spring and she also sleeps beside her ward, who remains implicitly naked throughout; she only re-clothes him the morning after. The partial or complete nakedness associated with bathing in hot springs makes them hubs of flirtation elsewhere in the corpus. Indeed, they are the setting for the sagas' most famous burgeoning romance, between Guðrún and Kjartan.[259] Moreover, as Jochens notes, a woman washing parts of the male body — usually the hair — is indicative of sexual or romantic union.[260] This sense is surely heightened when Esja washes the entirety of Búi's naked form. Likewise, sleeping together bears obvious erotic implications, with the specific phrase used here — *sofa hjá* — a possible euphemism for sexual intercourse, drawing on the same connotations as the more common *liggja hjá*.[261] Indeed, *sofa* is a byword for sex later in the same saga, during Búi's tryst with Fríðr.[262] The magical rites of the elderly Esja are thus depicted in highly sexual terms.

[258] *Þáttr af Ragnars sonum*, 160.
[259] *Laxdœla saga*, 112.
[260] Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality', 374.
[261] See *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, 336, and *Ketils saga hængs*, 252.
[262] *Kjalnsesinga saga*, 31. See also *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, 357.

As with Heiðr, Esja's actions are presented in an emphatically positive light. Not only is the old woman's intimate contact unquestioningly accepted by Búi, but it also ensures his victory against Kolfiðr.[263] However, Esja's rituals are even more clearly motivated than Heiðr's by a will to assist her ward, rather than her own libido. First, the proximity of Esja's statement about the strength of Búi's opponent to that of her intention to sleep with him implies their causal connection. Though she has been his *fóstra* for many years, she only seeks to complete this ritual now, as if the impending duel obliges her to do so. Second, Esja has already expressed her hope that Búi will marry Ólof in væna and has taken steps to facilitate this match.[264] Indeed, the sexualised ritual itself is completed with this aim in mind, since the duel is fought over the exclusive right to court Ólof.[265] Hence, like the 'temporary troll lover' Brana, Esja does not consider herself Búi's permanent romantic match, and willingly orchestrates her own disqualification from this role. Though these details do not preclude the possibility that her erotic activities were interpreted as motivated by her own libido, which she might satisfy through a fling with her adolescent ward, they certainly temper such interpretations, once more inviting audiences to consider her sexualised ritual as performative. Whether motivated by sexual desire or the platonic will to nurture Búi, her erotic activities are necessary because they themselves constitute her wound-proofing spell. Like those of Brana, therefore, Esja's sexual acts with her ward seem selfless. They are more about benefitting his socio-sexual prowess — and even his romantic future with another woman — than her own romantic ambitions.

A similar dynamic is presented in *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, a saga attested in multiple fifteenth-century manuscripts, though thought to have been composed in the

[263] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 23.
[264] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 17.
[265] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 22.

fourteenth.[266] Here, the elderly and blear-eyed Véfreyja also 'strýkr' (strokes) the young protagonist's naked body and 'ligg[r]… hjá' (lies beside) him overnight.[267] As above, these actions are explicitly endorsed by the young man, who willingly returns for presumably similar treatment later in the saga. They also offer effective protection in his subsequent martial exploits on both occasions.[268] However, interpretations of Véfreyja's libidinous intentions towards Sturlaugr are explicitly negated. To begin with, she is appalled when he rushes into her house uninvited, embraces and kisses her, and refers to her as 'kerling mín' (my dear old lady).[269] Her consternation is no doubt partially justified by surprise, or — especially for modern audiences, though possibly also for medieval ones — by the notion that such a greeting would be disrespectful from any stranger, no matter how eligible. However, it might also have characterised her as more generally averse to romantic intimacy with Sturlaugr. Medieval audiences would hardly expect such a hostile response from the *kerling* in the verse from *Hallfreðar saga* if similarly approached by Ingólfr, or from the one in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* if kissed by Ásmundr. Like Heiðr, the elderly Véfreyja is initially aloof, uninterested in further interactions with Sturlaugr, sexual or otherwise. However, she agrees to perform the sexualised rituals of the supernatural *fóstra* once Sturlaugr establishes his relationship as her proxy-fosterling. Sturlaugr is the new husband of Ása, Véfreyja's foster-daughter, and asks for assistance in his duel on her behalf. However, before commencing her night in bed with him, she places a log between them and implies her determination to avoid adulterous contact: 'en eigi skal ek heldr svíkja Ásu mína' (but I shall not betray my Ása).[270] This detail is highly significant. First, the fact that Véfreyja must defend their

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[266] Otto Zitzelsberger, '*Sturlaugs saga starfsama*', in *MSAE*, 614.
[267] *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, 321–2.
[268] *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, 321–6.
[269] *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, 321.
[270] *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, 322.

sleeping together as not involving literal sexual contact demonstrates that this ritual could be interpreted as erotic in the first place, both here and in other sagas. Second, it verifies that, at least in this text, the sexualised ritual of the supernatural foster-mother is not motivated by her desire for erotic pleasure. Rather, the physical acts of stroking Sturlaugr's body and lying beside him — which remains suggestive even if explicitly not entailing intercourse — literally constitute her supernatural aid in a performative sense, corroborating similar notions in other iterations of this motif. Véfreyja is obliged to carry out these suggestive rites, regardless of her lack of personal investment in doing so, for the socio-sexual benefit of her ward.

The substantial sexual undercurrent of these three episodes demonstrates that medieval Icelandic audiences recognised the erotic potential of the trope of physical touching or palpation by magical foster-mothers, regardless of their senescence. This might have extended to other, less obviously suggestive iterations throughout the corpus, including any of the cursory descriptions of the trope throughout the corpus.[271] It is especially instructive in corroborating the erotic potential of a few specific instances that feature greater — albeit ambiguous — detail. These include two episodes whose sexual nature has already been tentatively postulated by Robin Waugh, who then negates the validity of these conclusions in specific reference to the senescence of the *fóstrur* in question. The first is the palpation of Barði by the bedridden Ólǫf kjannǫk in *Heiðarvíga saga*. Waugh identifies many features of this scene that substantiate its erotic nature. These include its bedroom setting; Ólǫf's explicit feeling of Barði's entire body, presumably including his genitals; and her gift of a large stone necklace, which she affixes while embracing his explicitly thick, muscular neck with her fragile arms.[272] As

[271] See ns. 244–5 above.
[272] Waugh, 'Foster-Mother's Language', 325–6. See *Heiðarvíga saga*, 280–2.

Waugh notes, especially considering the fact that they join a strap-knife already hanging around Barði's neck, these stones bear blatant testicular symbolism.[273] Just like Heiðr's 'mýla[r] tv[eir]', this necklace couches the augmented martial power Barði derives from this ritual in sexual terms. As with most cases above, Ólǫf's ritual is happily accepted by Barði — here apparently 'því at hann unni henni mikit' (because he loved her greatly) — and the sexualised power it provides brings him protection in battle, where one of his symbolic testes deflects a potentially fatal blow.[274]

A second episode to whose sexual undercurrent Waugh briefly alludes is that of Þórdís in *Kormáks saga*. Here, Kormákr reluctantly seeks this woman's assistance for an impending duel. While sleeping at her house, he awakes to find Þórdís's hands groping under the blanket.[275] This scene is highly reminiscent of *Gísla saga*'s 'murder in [the] marital bed', which has been repeatedly discussed as sexually significant.[276] However, beyond Waugh's article, Kormákr's episode has received no such treatment.[277] In addition to her mysterious chemistry involving goose blood, Þórdís's groping is intended not only to provide wound-proofing, but also to facilitate Kormákr's romantic relationship with his estranged paramour, Steingerðr. First, the impending duel is to be fought against Þorvaldr tinteinn, Steingerðr's current husband, and could thus conceivably bring about Kormákr's reconciliation with the woman. Second, Þórdís hopes to remove the hex placed upon their relationship by another sorceress, Þorveig. Therefore, like Esja, her suggestive activities are unlikely to have been interpreted as

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[273] Waugh, 'Foster-Mother's Language', 330.
[274] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 281, 302.
[275] *Kormáks saga*, 282–3.
[276] See David Clark, 'Sexual Themes and the Heroic Past', *JEGP*, 106/4 (2007), 504–7, and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Murder in Marital Bed: An Attempt at Understanding a Crucial Scene in *Gísla saga*', tr. Judith Jesch, in John Lindow et al., eds., *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism* (Odense, 1986), 250.
[277] Waugh, 'Foster-Mother's Language', 353.

motivated by the old woman's libido. Rather, they are performative acts intended primarily to benefit the ward in martial and sexual spheres. Unfortunately, Kormákr is more reminiscent of Vígharðr than the acquiescent heroes above. Though he grudgingly seeks the latter's assistance, he loathes the sorceresses of his saga — Þorveig and Þórdís — and distrusts magic in general.[278] Nominally spurred by this general distaste, as well as his bewilderment at her activities, Kormákr thwarts Þórdís's sexual and anserine rituals by refusing to remain still or quiet in bed. His resulting observation of her surreptitious deeds apparently breaks the spell. However, it is also possible that contemporary audiences interpreted Kormákr's non-compliance — like that of Vígharðr above — to have been triggered by his confusion, anxiety, or shame about his intimate contact with this senescent sorceress. As in *Hauks þáttr*, his unwillingness to accept her sexualised assistance proves his undoing: he seems to be successfully wound-proofed, but his romantic aspirations with Steingerðr are never fulfilled.

As in the sagas above, the implicit sexuality of these two elderly foster-mothers is portrayed favourably. However, Waugh negates the significance of this conclusion. Referring to Ólǫf kjannǫk — but also presumably to the 'older woman' Þórdís — he notes: 'were [she] a young woman, the necklace gift would have all the appearances of a love-token'.[279] Considering the quantity of evidence he identifies in these episodes, Waugh's statement smacks of a foregone conclusion presuming the absence of favourable depictions of senescent female sexuality.[280] However, the less ambiguous examples in the three texts above demand a re-evaluation of Waugh's conclusion. They imply the willingness of medieval Icelandic *sögumenn* and audiences to interpret such

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[278] *Kormáks saga*, 233, 285. See also Heather O'Donoghue, *Genesis of a Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in 'Kormáks saga'* (Oxford, 1991), 138.
[279] Waugh, 'Foster-Mother's Language', 353, 327.
[280] Consider Bredsdorff's similar conclusion, as well as O'Donoghue's rebuttal; Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love*, 46–7, and Heather O'Donoghue, review of Thomas Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love: The Philosophy of the Icelandic Family Sagas*, in *Saga-Book* 28 (2004), 144.

scenes as advantageously sexual, regardless of the old age of the women in question. If we recognise portrayals of favourable sexuality in a demographic not commonly associated with such behaviour, it is germane to examine their potential significance, rather than to downplay, deny, or explain them away.

To begin with, the sheer prevalence of this trope — especially if we admit that the many more cursory episodes might have been interpreted along similar lines — leaves open the possibility that other forms of beneficial magical fosterage were likewise interpreted as sexual. As mentioned in Chapter One, magic was construed to be inherently feminised and feminising among medieval audiences. As I noted there, this might account for the fact that male characters tend only to receive magical tutelage in their proto-gendered youth, as well as the aversion of some especially macho children to the practice.[281] However, it now seems possible that these concerns also arose from the performatively sexual nature of such sorcery. Certainly the wound-proofing palpations of supernatural foster-parents, but perhaps also their general magical tutelage and other forms of assistance, might have been interpreted as involving sexual contact. Bearing this in mind, Katla might not merely be accidentally exposing her jealousy when she accuses Gunnlaugr of stroking Geirríðr's crotch.[282] She might be voicing a speculation shared by some audience members that the boy's tutelage with this sorceress *does* involve erotic activities.[283]

Though this extension into all forms of supernatural fosterage is admittedly speculative, the readings above certainly demonstrate that some depictions of this relationship present elderly female sexuality in a positive light. There need not be one comprehensive explanation as to how such episodes were interpreted by *sögumenn* or

[281] See Chapter One, ns. 139–49.
[282] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 28.
[283] Scott also intimates the sexual nature of Geirríðr's interest in Gunnlaugr; Scott, 'Woman Who Knows', 231.

audiences, nor how they might have reflected or influenced medieval Icelandic mentalities. Hence, I will now consider a number of possibilities. The first relates to medieval Icelandic considerations of the actual sexual desirability of old women. To begin with, the distanced figure of the supernatural *fóstra* might have facilitated expressions of the genuine allure of such figures. I noted above that some naturalistic episodes vindicate the eligibility of women into their forties.[284] Is it not possible that supernatural depictions might have permitted such a defence into women's post-menopausal senescence? Though their specific ages are not provided, this initially seems a possibility for Katla, who is described as 'fríð' (beautiful), as well as for Gunnhildr konungamóðir, whose sexual attentions Hrútr is content to enjoy for at least two weeks.[285] However, Gunnlaugr's patent lack of sexual interest in the former, in addition to the eventually ruinous magical behaviours of both these women, ultimately characterise their alluring eroticism as inappropriate. Nevertheless, the welcome and beneficial palpations of the magical *fóstrur* analysed above could surely represent the use of supernatural motifs to express the sexual desirability of such women — whom society seems to have deemed too old for eroticism — in wholly favourable terms. This is especially plausible in the case of Esja, whose lack of a physical portrait permits interpretations of her physical attractiveness. However, it is problematised in the majority of the episodes above, which describe the unattractiveness of the foster-mothers in question.

On the latter point, the trope might also have been interpreted as an ironic rebuke of the hypothetical sexual activeness and desirability of these senescent figures. When discussing what he supposes to be the trope's exclusive association with young troll-

[284] See ns. 53–4 above.
[285] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 28; *Njáls saga*, 15.

women, McKinnell notes that adding the maternal to the youthful and sexual permits 'some comedy of incongruity'.[286] Surely the addition of the sexual to the elderly and maternal could produce a similar effect. Audiences might have been amused at the heroes' implausible willingness to engage in sexual activities with such women — huge-lipped or blear-eyed as they are — a comedic effect that does not overturn but rather relies on notions of their erotic undesirability. Moreover, it also seems possible that the trope functions as a trial for the hero. Like a monster that must be slain, or a raging river forded, sexual interactions with these hideous women might represent obstacles — whether interpreted as comedic or serious — that the heroes must overcome to achieve their goals. Such logic is expressed more overtly elsewhere in the corpus, in the appearance of the 'loathly lady' trope in texts such as *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*. In each of these, the reluctant hero's acquiescence to kiss what seems to be hideous troll-woman triggers a positive outcome: the rescue of the hero, his acquisition of a certain object, and/or the transformation of the monstrous female into a beautiful maiden.[287] In the episodes analysed above, such an interpretation would again emphasise the sexual undesirability of the elderly woman: submitting to it is a price worth paying for a supernatural reward. This interpretation is strengthened by the responses of Vígharðr and Kormákr, which smack of the reluctance expressed by Grímr, Hjálmþér, and Þorsteinn. However, the idea that these sexualised rituals are a challenge or sacrifice is undercut in most instances by the gladness of the male wards to participate in them.

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[286] McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 192.

[287] *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, 274–5; *Hjálmþés saga*, 248–9, 279; *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, 226–7. Indeed, in addition to the stemmatic hypothesis advanced by McKinnell, it is possible that the supernatural foster-mothers analysed above, like these more paradigmatic 'loathly ladies', were influenced by the 'sovereignty figure' of medieval Insular literature; see Passmore and Carter, *English 'Loathly Lady' Tales*, and Motz, *Beauty and Hag*, 62.

Whether beautiful or hideous, desirable or undesirable, the sexual activities of these old women might also have been interpreted simply to aggrandise their male wards, implying their uncanny ability to find themselves in non-committal erotic trysts. Particularly in *Hauks þáttr*, in which interpretations of the old woman's libidinous interest in her wards are more plausible, this trope could characterise the men as irresistible. Indeed, as mentioned above, this is the primary meaning of the *Hallfreðar saga* verse about Ingólfr, whose exceptional eligibility is emphasised by his ability to attract the attentions of even supposedly 'asexual' individuals, including toothless old women.[288] However, since many of these *fóstrur*, Heiðr included, seem reluctant to engage in sexual interactions with these men before bonds of fosterage are definitively established, interpretations of their inability to resist these men are somewhat undermined. Since it is the establishment of fosterage that permits these activities, we should consider interpretations pertaining to that specific relationship.

These episodes might reveal medieval Icelandic considerations of sexual activities within the actual bonds of fosterage in their society. Indeed, sexual attractions, tensions, and even relationships *are* found in naturalistic portrayals of fosterage. When portraying such relations between an older foster-parent figure — usually male — and his fosterling, this relationship is depicted as inappropriate or detrimental. Such is the case in *Fljótsdæla saga*, in which Spak-Bersi develops apparently sexual desire for Helga, the daughter of his friend Þorbjörn. Though she is not officially his ward, his treatment of the girl might have spurred audiences to consider him in this role: he gives her gifts when visiting her biological father. When Bersi's official fosterling, the young Helgi Droplaugarson, begins to court Helga, Bersi is confronted about his feelings towards this woman. At this point, he vehemently denies any sexual attraction, indicating

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[288] See above, n. 57.

their inappropriate, perhaps shameful nature.[289] A similar dynamic lurks in the hyper-protective bond between Þjóstólfr and his official fosterling Hallgerðr in *Njála*, which the narrator affirms to be 'engi skapbœtir Hallgerði' (not to the betterment of Hallgerðr's character/fate).[290] Unlike those of Bersi, Þjóstólfr's feelings are never specified to be amorous. However, they are intense enough to lead him to commit multiple homicides on her behalf: he kills two of Hallgerðr's husbands, whom Þjóstólfr might envy for reasons of his own.[291] Neither of these *fóstrar* are explicitly senescent, so their pertinence to concepts of male elderly sexuality is questionable. However, the implicit criticism of their desires might stem from the broad age gaps between the characters, or from the notion that the twisting of fosterly relations to suit the erotic whims of predatory older men was considered inappropriate. Nevertheless, when it is to the advantage of promising younger male characters, it seems that sexuality within bonds of fosterage can be presented more favourably. When there is no need for concern regarding age gaps, the positive development of romantic intimacy between foster-kin may even be depicted in naturalistic and explicit terms, as in the love between the foster-siblings Víglundr and Ketilríðr.[292] Similarly, as mentioned in Chapter One, the 'temporary troll lover' episodes might expose considerations or fantasies about sexual interactions between foster-sons and their foster-mothers, particularly when the latter are only slightly older than the former.[293] By the same token, it seems possible that the elderly troll *fóstrur* above might represent the contemplation of similarly desirable interactions between young men and much older foster-mothers, whether real or imagined.

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[289] *Fljótsdœla saga*, 249–56.
[290] *Njáls saga*, 29.
[291] *Njáls saga*, 29–52. See also Keens, 'Scenes of a Sexual Nature', 46.
[292] *Víglundar saga*, 74–6. See also *Friðþjófs saga*, 250. On sexual interactions between foster-siblings — including the Westermarck hypothesis, which apparently precludes such activities — see Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters*, 43.
[293] See Chapter One, ns. 290–1.

Alternatively, as expressed briefly by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, the beneficial sexualities of these supernatural *fóstrur* might indicate the distanced consideration of the incestuous drives of the Oedipal complex.[294] As has been noted of both the Old Norse-Icelandic and broader medieval contexts, sexuality between mothers and sons is a distinctly disturbing subject.[295] Bearing this in mind, it seems significant that, in the initial description of Véfreyja, the saga intimates that she only teaches magic to her *fóstri*, even though she has biological children.[296] If my hypothesis that magical tutelage was interpreted to encompass an undercurrent of sexuality is valid, this detail might correspond to that speculated uneasiness: the *sögumaðr* reassures audiences that this benevolent *fóstra* is not committing incest. Indeed, contrary to Jochens's statements, magical support and tutelage are almost never depicted between biological parents and children.[297] When they are thus portrayed — such as the case of Ljót and her son Hrolleifr — they tend to be in depictions of *malevolent* magical practitioners, which might align their evil with the taboo of incest.[298] However, if Oedipal drives can truly be speculated to extend beyond the context of Freud's own work and influence — a premise for which I claim no confidence or expertise — it seems possible that these portrayals of quasi-maternal sexuality might constitute the literary presentation of such urges and activities.[299] The positive expression of such interactions is made safe by the distance between naturalistic, biological mothers and supernatural foster-mothers.

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[294] *WONL*, 74–75.
[295] Linke, 'Theft of Blood', 278; Paul Acker, 'Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*', *PMLA* 121/3 (2006), 703–8.
[296] *Sturluags saga starfsama*, 312–13.
[297] Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', 215, 221, n. 4. For a rare exception, see *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds*, 216.
[298] *Vatnsdæla saga*, 50–70.
[299] See Richard Klein, review of George Stambolian and Elaine Marks, *Homosexualities in French Literature: Cultural Contexts, Critical Texts*, in *MLN* 95/4 (1980), 1077. See also Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in James Strachey and Anna Freud, eds., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 10 vols. (London 2001), 7.144–7.

Finally, as argued above, several instances of this trope minimise or even explicitly negate the libidinous motivations of these elderly troll foster-mothers. Instead, they emphasise these women's duties to use sexualised touching to protect and endow their wards with augmented socio-sexual capital, over and above any personal, potentially libidinous investment. Hence, it seems a compelling possibility that this trope does not actually defend the self-interested sexual activeness of old women at all. Such behaviour can only be positively construed when it is primarily intended to benefit the masculine prowess of young men. It surely remains fascinating, even in the case of such an interpretation, that this results in the corollary expression of elderly female sexuality that is overtly welcome and beneficial. This might have been interpreted according to any of the avenues hypothesised above and beyond. However, audience attentions might also have been more squarely fixed on the accession of young male heroes, rather than the means by which they are thus assisted. Indeed, it even seems possible that the sexual valences of these episodes were interpreted to bear greater symbolic than literally erotic charge. As has been repeatedly argued regarding the Old Norse-Icelandic *ergi*-complex, no matter what form of deviance is actually being censured, reprimands of apparently perverse saga characters tend to be couched in sexual metaphors of castration or penetration.[300] Perhaps it is also the case that prowess — Clover's *hvatleikr*, the *kvensterkleikr* discussed throughout this dissertation, or any other conception of gendered power — could be ubiquitously couched in sexual metaphors, regardless of the sphere literally being discussed: social, martial, or romantic. Hence, audiences might have interpreted the sexualised interactions between these *fóstrur* and their wards as literally erotic on one level, but only symbolically so on another. Their groping and genitally symbolic gifts could be primarily indicative of the general socio-sexual augmentation

[300] See Clover, 'Regardless of Sex', 374–5; and Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 11.

facilitated by the assistance, wisdom, and protection of such maternal figures. The activities of these *fóstrur* give their male wards the 'balls' — understood as courage of any sort, but couched in sexual metaphors — to succeed.

These musings compel my return to where this thesis began: comparing the characterisations of Geirríðr and Katla in *Eyrbyggja saga*. As mentioned above, considering the possible extension of sexual undercurrents to any and all examples of magical fosterage, it is plausible that both these women — the good witch *and* the bad — were interpreted to have erotic interactions with Gunnlaugr. As his *fóstra*, Geirríðr enjoys potentially sexualised contact with the boy, but suffers no opprobrium. Conversely, Katla desires similar contact and makes initially non-threatening — if spiteful — efforts to attain it, but is ultimately rejected. What differentiates their interests in Gunnlaugr to justify these diametrically opposed characterisations? This question seems receptive to the lattermost interpretation above. Whether they were interpreted as literally or symbolically erotic, sexualised interactions between elderly women and younger men may only be depicted favourably if they are primarily motivated to benefit his masculine prowess. Conversely, if such women desire this sexual activity for their own ends — whether for the validation of their sexual status or for carnal pleasure — they are condemnable according to the terms presented in this chapter's introductory survey.

Katla embodies the latter motivation. As mentioned above, her suggestive argument with Gunnlaugr characterises her as sexually proud and covetous, and as motivated by carnal rather than amorous affection.[301] Her subsequent crime against Gunnlaugr — male rape, couched in the trope of supernatural riding — corroborates this interpretation. Considering the debilitating nature Gunnlaugr's injuries, it seems that Katla seeks to validate and/or satisfy her licentious nature with flagrant *dis*regard for

[301] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 28. See Chapter One, ns. 151–2.

Gunnlaugr's wellbeing.[302] Geirríðr's interactions, on the other hand, align with those of the beneficial magical *fóstrur* above. Of course, before the night of Gunnlaugr's rape, the notion that her tutelage was interpreted as sexual is somewhat speculative. However, when the saga *does* more conclusively indicate the erotic nature of her assistance, this occurs — as in the episodes discussed above — in specific preparation for danger. Katla has invited Gunnlaugr to overnight at her residence on multiple occasions, each time when there is no discernible threat to the boy.[303] However, the saga only depicts Geirríðr inviting Gunnlaugr to spend the night with her when she foresees Katla's attack.[304] Hence, Geirríðr's intention to perform implicitly sexual rituals seems reserved for when they would protect him. Unfortunately, perhaps also due to his unwillingness to engage in such sexual contact on the basis of her age, Gunnlaugr's response is reminiscent of Vígharðr and Kormákr's: he refuses Geirríðr's nocturnal assistance. It is tempting to suggest that audiences could have drawn from episodes like those above to hypothesise a different scenario if Geirríðr had managed to convince him to sleep near — or with — her that night. Her rituals might have shielded him from Katla's riding attack and perhaps, more significantly, even allowed him to dominate the wicked witch instead. He would thereby have surpassed *kvensterkleikr* and acceded to the sovereign male adulthood he never seems to attain in the saga. It is Katla's malevolent sexuality that dooms him, but — in this hypothetical, alternative scenario — it could have been Geirríðr's altruistic sexuality that not only saved him, but also augmented his masculine socio-sexual prowess in the process.

It is also worth noting how these considerations might pertain to other instances of hypothetically beneficial, sexual foster-mothers. To begin with, Gunnhildr

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[302] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 29.
[303] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 28.
[304] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 28–9.

konungamóðir enjoys a favourable sexual relationship with Hrútr before his departure. It is only at this point that her potential status as a beneficial, sexual *fóstra* — a role she could be said to inhabit in *Laxdœla saga* — falters.[305] Her curse against Hrútr's impending marriage demonstrates the jealous underpinnings of her interest, tied to her own self-concept as a sexually desirable entity and her exclusive enjoyment of the boy's attentions. Like Brana, Esja, and others, her role could have been as the facilitator of his future exploits, including his romantic success with a partner more suitable for permanent union. However, Gunnhildr's curse has exactly the opposite intention: it seeks to thwart his marital future in what William Miller convincingly interprets as a declaration of her own erotic prowess: 'no little Icelandic girl was woman enough to take on Hrútr like she could'.[306] Gunnhildr thus becomes an embodiment of condemnable, self-interested libidinousness in female old age. Þórgunna could even be seen in a similar light. Considering her repeated and arguably desperate attempts to defend her sexual status, her ill-fated romantic interest in Kjartan could have been interpreted as motivated more by a will to uphold that self-conception than one to selflessly benefit his masculine accession. Unlike Gunnlaugr, however, both Hrútr and Kjartan manage to circumvent the jealous efforts of their elderly admirers, making these condemnations of senescent female sexuality somewhat less stark.[307] The libidinous old women are still problematic, but — even without the help of one of their beneficial *fóstra* counterparts — exceptional young men might overcome their predations and curses. Though not literally wrestling their elderly admirers, both these men thus show that they have surpassed *kvensterkleikr* and accede to sovereign masculine adulthood.

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[305] *Laxdœla saga*, 52–3. See Sayers, 'Power, Magic, and Sex', 67.
[306] Miller, *Why Is Your Axe Bloody?*, 30.
[307] For Kjartan, see ns. 221–7 above. For Hrútr, see Chapter One, ns. 126–7.

This chapter has outlined what seems to be a fairly comprehensive repudiation of the sexual activeness of old women. Such conclusions are supported by the vast majority of depictions of elderly female sexuality, which align the active eroticism of such figures with a nexus of undesirable attributes, often including supernatural Otherness. These conclusions are also upheld in the *Fróðárundur*. This episode constitutes a highly complex, symbolic refutation of the efforts of a post-menopausal woman to cling on to her status as sexually active and desirable, especially to younger men. However, the prevalent trope of the beneficially sexual troll foster-mother represents a unique exception to these conclusions. These episodes seem to indicate that elderly female sexuality can be depicted favourably, provided that its primary motivation is to augment the male's socio-sexual capital, rather than to satisfy or validate the sexuality of the elderly female. Whether these episodes were interpreted as literally or symbolically erotic, it is certainly significant that they feature emphatically positive portrayals of elderly women engaging in sexualised activities with younger men. This might have reflected an array of medieval Icelandic considerations on the topic, some of which undeniably relate to conceptions of elderly female sexuality as desirable and advantageous.

## Conclusion

The close readings above substantiate the notion that saga composers and audiences could use supernatural motifs to consider marginal sexualities in an exceptionally detailed and arguably uninhibited manner. In each case, the supernatural depiction pushes the commentaries indicated in naturalistic episodes or non-literary sources to exaggerated heights, or in entirely different — and, therefore, perhaps implicitly unsettling — directions.

Supernatural distance is employed in the sagas to vindicate the sexual entitlements of adolescent males, particularly when their activities approach or exceed what seem to be the limits of acceptable masculine dominance. For example, some supernatural riding episodes can be interpreted as vindicating male sexual violence, including as an avenue towards socio-sexual maturity. Such notions tend otherwise only to be presented obliquely or with distinct moral ambiguity, as in the naturalistic sequences from *Finnboga saga* and *Grettis saga*. Likewise, naturalistic episodes usually portray non-committal, pre-marital relationships unfavourably, with particular reference to their negative impact on women's future prospects, or the ire of their legal administrators. However, there are numerous 'temporary troll lover' episodes that portray such relationships in an emphatically positive light. These informal trysts are facilitated or even welcomed by the trollish females and their families, and are also ultimately beneficial to the males' sexual maturation. *Ketils saga hængs* also expands on the commentaries presented in naturalistic episodes. Though, like many of the latter, it portrays this model of male sexual entitlement in a negative light, this saga uses supernatural motifs to justify this stance on emotional, rather than exclusively social or economic, grounds.

Naturalistic episodes do sometimes portray young women converting their sexual and romantic aspirations into actions. In such instances, these behaviours are usually framed as troubling, though again with primary reference to the social impact on women and the honour of their legal administrators. However, the depiction of a ghostly sexual assault in *Heiðarvíga saga* expands upon these commentaries. This episode incorporates motifs analogous to those used to similar ends in *Haukdœla þáttr* and *Grettis saga*, but augments them with supernatural distance to portray the dangers of adolescent female sexual volatility in exaggeratedly grisly terms – as physically and emotionally traumatic to women themselves. Conversely, supernatural motifs can also be used to defend young women's active engagement in the marital and even sexual sphere. Admittedly, female consent and even limited involvement in matrimonial negotiation are portrayed positively elsewhere. However, *Sigrgarðs saga frœkna* employs the supernatural distance offered by a malevolent curse to depict a young woman's marital and sexual desires emphatically positively, and also to defend her playing an even greater role in arranging her marriage than any man.

Unlike many medieval European texts, especially those featuring the *senex amans* trope, the sagas seldom criticise the active sexuality of elderly men. Indeed, they more frequently vindicate such figures via portrayals of their enduring virility and dominance, even into their late sixties. As above, supernatural depictions seem to provide a platform to expand and nuance such notions. Specifically, when depicted as wives to feeble kings, trollish queens seem to permit the unambiguously sympathetic portrayal of their elderly male partners, even when the latter are impotent and shamefully submissive. However, the sagas also employ trollish revenants to construct an otherwise unattested figure of scorn: the abhorrently capable *senex amans*. These haunting episodes characterise the endurance of otherwise laudable masculine potency and dominance into old age as

deviant and even disgusting, problematising the positive portrayals of such traits in naturalistic sources.

In contrast to their usual treatment of old men, the sagas portray elderly female sexuality harshly by broader medieval European standards. The sexual activeness of old women is rarely portrayed in naturalistic sources, but, when it is, it is almost always decried. This censure is taken to extremes in the corpus's abundant, unfavourable depictions of libidinous old trolls. However, although menopause is implicitly significant to the identification of women as inappropriate sexual figures, the sagas seldom refer to and never directly describe this physiological transition. The *Fróðárundur* of *Eyrbyggja saga* contribute to the corpus's consistent criticism of senescent female sexuality, while additionally employing supernatural motifs to symbolise menopause and the physical deterioration of the elderly female body. However, the sagas' frequent depictions of supernatural foster-mothers can be interpreted as unique exceptions to this pervasive polemic. They characterise elderly female sexuality as desirable and beneficial, though seemingly only when intended to augment the socio-sexual capital of young men.

In medieval Icelandic homesteads and farm complexes, where many saga materials were composed, copied, read, and recited, people had closer and more frequent contact with a broader range of demographic groups than is the norm in the nuclear family of the modern West. Living, sleeping, and performing the gamut of human bodily and reproductive functions in close quarters, *sögumenn* and audiences would have witnessed those around them in all manner of compromising situations, erotic and otherwise. This would include individuals who were not their immediate kin, but were inappropriate sexual figures by virtue of their other embodied intersectional identifiers, including but not limited to their age. Being consistently confronted not only by the clothed, manicured, primarily social façades people usually elect to display today, but

also by their visceral bodies, leaking and gurgling in various stages of development and decay, it is likely that medieval Icelanders were prompted to consider the sexual identities of all demographic groups on a far more regular basis than we are. The absence of the sexuality of some such figures in naturalistic saga episodes — including pre-pubescent boys and girls, as well as post-menopausal women — might indicate the anxiety such considerations elicited. But medieval Icelanders did write, read, and hear about such sexualities: they just concealed them under layers of supernatural Otherness. The discrepancies between the portrayals of such marginal sexualities in the naturalistic and supernatural sources contribute to the sense not only that these were unsettling topics, but also that Icelanders did contemplate their ramifications from a broader range of perspectives and in greater detail than they could express directly. The supernatural episodes discussed here represent just some of the ways in which medieval Icelanders seem to have wrestled with the imagined or actual sexual identities of the marginal figures they saw around them, ranging from fantasy to disgust.

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