

Women's Voices in Old Norse-Icelandic Poetry

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Abstract

This thesis examines the multiplicity of ways in which Old Norse-Icelandic authors represented women's voices in poetic form, in a wide variety of genres. It undertakes a detailed analysis of a selection of these verses, considering how they function as poetry, how they function in relation to their prose context, and the (literary) effect of the prose author's attribution of the verses to a woman. It considers the many and varied ways in which poets and saga authors represent the female poetic voice, including ways in which this voice may be used to evoke a mythological past, create a sense of nostalgia, destabilize or support established gender norms, function as performative speech, structure an episode or a longer poem, or allow an author/compiler to engage with contemporary societal tensions and concerns. It is not a comprehensive survey of all existing examples of women's voices within Old Norse-Icelandic poetry, but examines a range of (largely secular) verses along a continuum from the entirely fictional to the ostensibly historical.

The introduction provides a survey of existing scholarship, including relevant scholarship in women's studies and gender studies, and problematizes the frequent separation of eddic-style and skaldic-style verses in past analyses. Chapter 1 examines supernatural and legendary women's voices, and draws parallels between the structural effects of verses within prosimetric texts, and the structural effects of speech acts within longer poetic works. Chapter 2 analyzes women's dream verses, particularly in *Sturlunga saga*, and the effects of women's roles as both speakers and dreamers of verse. Chapter 3 briefly charts the representation of women's relationship with literary culture in indigenous romance, and considers the fusion of skaldic verse and chivalric tradition in the verses spoken by women in *Víglundar saga*. Chapter 4 turns to the women of the *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, including both the traditionally recognized *skáldkonur* as well as many other women whose verses have regularly been subject to questions surrounding attribution. The chapter conducts a detailed analysis of the many ways such verses function within the sagas.

Throughout, this thesis reveals the extent to which careful arrangement of verses allows an author or compiler to highlight relationships between characters, argues for the (intentional) effectiveness of women's verses as structural markers, and demonstrates that women's roles, and women's engagement with poetic composition – far from being a monolithic or fixed state of affairs – are a site of tension, conversation, and ongoing debate throughout these texts.

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Introduction

A woman gives her lover advice on how to win a game of chess. Another explains some awkward marital difficulties to her father – she wants a divorce because her husband cannot consummate their relationship. Another upholds her dead son’s honour in the face of cruel taunts from those who killed him. Another challenges a foreign missionary, mocking his god and asserting the power of her own faith. Another argues with the ghost of her dead father to win possession of a cursed sword. Another recounts the beginning of the world, and foretells its end.

All of them do these things by speaking poetry, and this is merely a very small sample of the examples I could have chosen. There are many more women like them, with equally fascinating stories that have survived the centuries. Many of them are well known to medieval scholars, but perhaps equally many have been too-often overlooked. When I began my undergraduate studies (in 2010), I could find no book in English dedicated to Old Norse-Icelandic women poets. There is now one: Sandra Ballif Straubhaar’s admirable collection of translations, *Old Norse Women’s Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*, published in 2011. It does not, however, attempt a detailed literary analysis of these poems, and it also does not examine the poems within the context that they have survived: many of these verses have survived embedded in prose texts of varying genres, and have arguably been chosen and positioned in specific ways for specific purposes by the authors or compilers of the sagas in which they appear. Many others may have been written by the authors of the prose sagas, for a particular dramatic or literary effect.

What is Old Norse-Icelandic poetry?

This thesis examines verses composed between the ninth and fourteenth centuries, predominantly by Icelanders or Norwegians. Margaret Clunies Ross, in her landmark book *A*

History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics, defines the term ‘Old Norse’ as normally including “all medieval West Norse linguistic and social groups, that is, the societies of Norway and the colonies that were established by settlers from Norway during the Viking Age ... in Orkney, Shetland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, the Hebrides, Ireland and the north-west coast of England.”¹ She then extends the definition to include medieval Sweden and Denmark, “to the extent that those East Norse-speaking societies and their Viking Age colonies practised and enjoyed Norse poetry.”² Clunies Ross’ definition will work well enough for our purposes here.

It is difficult to overstate, and perhaps still more difficult for a modern reader to grasp intuitively, the importance that poetry had in Old Norse-Icelandic culture. Modern students get entertainment from streaming apps, or social media platforms, and poetry has no particular or well-defined role either in politics or in journalism, in entertainment nor in the writing of history. It was a very different story for an Icelandic or Norwegian author or historian in the thirteenth century. Modern scholars and writers, if they wish to establish credibility, insert footnotes – or another form of precisely formatted references, depending on the dictates of their chosen style guide – that direct a reader to all of the other texts and sources that they have consulted: ‘Look, here is where I got this information. See, these other writers agree with me.’ Students in English classes, from elementary school through university, are enjoined to cite their sources. For the Norwegian or Icelandic historian a thousand years ago, stanzas of poetry could be a similarly authoritative source. Not ‘here is my footnote,’ but ‘here is how this famous contemporary poet described these events.’ Nor was poetry merely an academic exercise: it was also entertainment, theatre, performance art, debate, insult, even rap battle.³

¹ Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge, 2005), 2.

² Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, 3.

³ For a detailed discussion, see Anna Millward, *Skaldic Slam: Performance Poetry in the Norwegian Royal Court*, MA thesis, Haskóli Íslands, 2014.

In one respect, scholars of Old Norse-Icelandic poetry are particularly fortunate: the earliest detailed analysis of poetic forms and diction dates from the same era as the poems themselves. Although the exact date is hard to pinpoint, at some point between 1220 and 1225, the prominent Icelandic author, lawspeaker, and politician Snorri Sturluson composed a tripartite treatise known as the Prose Edda. Far from being concerned with prose, as its name might suggest to an idly curious reader, it is rather a textbook of poetics – a master's guide to how to compose (in Snorri's judgement) good Old Norse-Icelandic poetry. The earliest surviving manuscript is the Codex Upsaliensis, dating to the early fourteenth century, but the attribution to Snorri (1179-1241) as the author is contained within the text itself.

Many of the terms modern scholars use to describe aspects of Old Norse-Icelandic poetry thus have some basis in historical usage. Between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, in a period sometimes called the Dark Ages or the Great Silence, various economic, religious, and political factors led to a decline in the study of medieval Icelandic literature.⁴ Arngrímur Jónsson's *Crymogæa* (1609) is widely credited with reinvigorating interest, and his earlier *Brevis Commentarius de Islandia* (1592) did much to combat superstitions about Iceland in Denmark and elsewhere.⁵ It was not until 1664, however, when Peder Resen's Icelandic, Danish, and Latin edition of Snorri's Edda was published in Copenhagen, that many of the stanzas contained within it became accessible to other European scholars.⁶ Thomas Bartholin prepared the monumental *Antiquitatum Danicarum de causis contemptæ a Danis adhuc*

⁴ Heather O'Donoghue, "Old Norse-Icelandic Studies", *A Century of British Medieval Studies* (Oxford, 2007), 263-264.

⁵ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey* (New Haven, 1964), 3.

⁶ Margaret Clunies Ross, "A brief history of scholarship on skaldic poetry after the Middle Ages", *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1030*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1, (Turnhout, 2012), xxvii.

gentilibus mortis libri tres (1689), with the invaluable assistance of a young Árni Magnússon, who was thereafter to become *the* collector of Icelandic manuscripts, perhaps initially prompted by Bartholin: “When Árni had to visit Iceland in 1685 ... he had explicit instructions from Bartholin to collect and bring back with him all the manuscripts he could possibly lay his hands on.”⁷ Árni’s collecting resulted, of course, in the Arnamagnæan manuscript collection at the University of Copenhagen.

Indeed, much scholarship in the seventeenth century was carried out by Icelanders such as Arngrímur Jónsson and Þormóður Torfason (also known as Torfaeus), and was focused particularly on the Old Norse-Icelandic sagas, in the context of advancing hypotheses about “the relation of Scandinavian culture, history and religion to better-known European and classical cultures and concepts. Whatever literary examples were to be found in these works were there in support of their authors’ theories about the antiquity of Nordic culture, not there in their own right.”⁸ As Heather O’Donoghue writes, “the study of medieval Icelandic literature began with the privileging of its value as history, and the question of the balance between historicity and fictionality in Old Norse-Icelandic texts ... has dominated scholarly debate ever since.”⁹

The first full edition (with translations into Danish) of surviving skaldic poetry, Finnur Jónsson’s *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, was not published until 1912-1915. Ernst A. Kock’s Norwegian edition *Den norsk-isländska Skaldediktningen* (1946-1950) and Magnus Olsen’s *Edda- og Skaldekvad: forarbejder til kommentar* (1960-1964) followed. The most recent major edition, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, is a massive international collaboration that (as of July 2021) has published five of a projected nine volumes. As will be

⁷ Eiríkur Benedikz, “Árni Magnússon”, *Saga-Book XVI* (London, 1962-65), 90.

⁸ Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge, 2010), 156.

⁹ Heather O’Donoghue, “Old Norse-Icelandic Studies”, 264.

discussed later, many of these editions omit the poetry found in the Codex Regius, and some omit other eddic-style verses as well.

One question that dominated early scholarly debate, particularly in the early twentieth century, was the vexed question of the sagas' origins, and, additionally, the origins of the poetry contained within them.¹⁰ Since a majority of surviving Old Norse-Icelandic verse is embedded within prose texts, Margaret Clunies Ross writes that “unless one subscribes to the view that all Old Norse poetry found within prose texts was the composition of the author of the prose, it has to be assumed that the poetry had a different, and longer, transmission history, which included in many cases a period of oral transmission.”¹¹ It is nonetheless possible that some of the poetry within the sagas *was* the composition of the prose author; Guðrún Nordal, writing specifically about the sagas of Icelanders, notes that the authors “do not fake the stanzas as sources but attempt instead to give their characters a unique voice through their poetic utterances.”¹² For any given verse, therefore, there are a large number of possibilities: that the verse was composed by the individual to whom it is attributed; that it was composed by another poet, and has been misattributed; that it was composed by the prose author of the saga; or that it was composed after the first prose composition of the saga and added to later manuscripts.¹³ The problem is complicated further by the reality that, as Else Mundal notes, “[w]e do not have the original manuscripts of any sagas, and since the copying of manuscripts in the Middle Ages involved

¹⁰ For instance, see Sven Axel Anderson, “The Origin of the Old Norse Sagas: A Brief Review of the Controversy”, *Scandinavian Studies and Notes* 14.2 (1936), 25-30.

¹¹ Margaret Clunies Ross, “Conjectural Emendation in Skaldic Editing Practice, with Reference to ‘Egils saga’”, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104.1 (2005), 13.

¹² Guðrún Nordal, “Attraction of Opposites: Skaldic Verse in *Njáls saga*”, in *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. Pernille Hermann (Odense, 2005), 217.

¹³ See Guðrún Nordal, “The Dialogue between Audience and Text: The Variants in Verse Citations in *Njáls saga*’s Manuscripts”, in *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing*, ed. Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen, 2008), especially 187-188.

changes – sometimes only minor, but at other times major changes both concerning style and content – the manuscripts we have preserved do not always provide a firm basis for drawing conclusions about the original written texts.”¹⁴

The dispute over the extent to which the sagas, and the poetry within them, were a product of an oral versus a literary culture was also a bitter one.¹⁵ The central question was this: were the sagas the result of an extended, highly developed period of oral storytelling, after which they were written down? Or, were they the product of a literary culture?¹⁶ Or, perhaps, “some compromise between the two extremes, borrowing freely from available foreign models but also incorporating much native tradition”?¹⁷

Andreas Heusler coined the terms *Freiproza* (freeprose) and *Buchproza* (bookprose) to describe these competing viewpoints.¹⁸ In fact, for Heusler it was not possible to separate the freeprose versus bookprose debate from questions of historicity.¹⁹ In recent years, scholars have endeavoured to move past this controversy, instead acknowledging the influence of both oral and literary culture on the sagas, and the importance of the interaction between them. Margaret Clunies Ross, for instance, reflecting on the debate, notes that “both sides ... based themselves on misconceptions: the bookprose on an absolute view of the nature of historicity, the freeprose

¹⁴ Else Mundal, “The Dating of the Oldest Sagas About Early Icelanders”, in *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions*, ed. Else Mundal (Copenhagen, 2013), 31.

¹⁵ See Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey* (New Haven, 1964), 65-81.

¹⁶ The “bookprose” side of the debate does resist a simple single formulation: as Andersson writes, “[i]n reviewing the bookprose standpoint one runs a twofold risk of overgeneralization, on the one hand of absorbing all the sagas in one unnuanced statement of theory and, on the other, of throwing the various proponents of bookprose in a common lot without regard for individual differences. If there is one point on which the bookprose men are agreed, it is that no one theory of origins is adequate to all the sagas.” Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins*, 69.

¹⁷ Stephen Mitchell, “Reconstructing Old Norse Oral Tradition”, *Oral Tradition* 18.2 (2003), 203.

¹⁸ Andreas Heusler, *Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga* (Berlin, 1914), 54.

¹⁹ Andreas Heusler, *Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga*, 54-56.

on the notion that oral traditions are unchanging.”²⁰ She goes on to emphasize the extent to which oral and literary traditions may have continued to influence each other throughout the period: “It is therefore likely that oral communication and oral composition remained important artistic means of expression during the whole of the medieval period and beyond, and that these oral traditions influenced the written texts produced by literates at every step of the way.”²¹

Where is this poetry found? (or: The Genres of Old Norse-Icelandic Prose)

Old Norse-Icelandic poetry survives in a wide variety of manuscript contexts, including within many prose texts, that have traditionally been divided into a number of genres. Some poetry survives in collections dedicated solely to verse, such as the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda, a single manuscript likely produced sometime in the thirteenth century. Some lengthy poems on Christian subjects also survive in manuscripts without a surrounding prose context, such as the anonymous *Lilja* and *Heilagra meyja drápa* (drápa about holy maidens), or Einarr Skúlason’s *Geisli*. The vast majority, however, is included in prose texts, and the resultant interweaving of prose and poetry is often referred to as *prosimetrum*. Some of the most important prose genres that will be referenced later on in this thesis are briefly outlined here.

The *konungasögur*, or kings’ sagas, relate biographies (presented as ostensibly historical fact, though of course modern readers now question some of the details) of the kings of Norway and Denmark, from about 900 through the thirteenth century.²² According to Theodore M. Andersson, they relate non-Icelandic events, and “embrace Norwegian, Danish, Orkneyan, Faroese, and, more peripherally, Swedish history; they betray their Icelandic authorship only by

²⁰ Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 41.

²¹ Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 47.

²² For further details, see Ármann Jakobsson, “Royal Biography”, *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford, 2005), 388-402.

viewpoint and digression.”²³ In many cases, the names of their authors survive, and, in many cases, different sagas relate stories about the same rulers. Many of them also contain stanzas of poetry, often in the *dróttkvætt* form, attributed to named skalds, that celebrate the deeds of their rulers. Works such as *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*, *Sverris saga* (by Karl Jónsson), *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla* (by Snorri Sturluson) are traditionally included in this genre.²⁴

The *Íslendingasögur*, or sagas of Icelanders (sometimes also called the family sagas), are by far the best known of these genres, and relate stories of Icelandic heroes or chronicles of Icelandic families. They are written by anonymous authors, and primarily date to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, though the events they recount are set “during the period from the settlement of the island until the time of the Icelanders’ conversion to Christianity c. 1000, or slightly afterwards.”²⁵ The term refers to “tales of considerable length which centre on the lives of people from a relatively small group of Icelandic families.”²⁶ Within these sagas, stanzas of poetry (both skaldic and eddic-style) are “often an important vehicle for the expression of thoughts and feelings that it would be improper for a character to give expression to in conversation.”²⁷ The tales are both “psychologically complex and yet economical in their analysis”,²⁸ and have aptly been described as “fluent, nuanced, and seriously occupied with the legal, moral, and political life of a whole society of ordinary people”.²⁹ The debate over whether to treat them as historical

²³ Theodore M. Andersson, “Kings’ Sagas (Konungasögur)”, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide* (Ithaca, 2019), 197.

²⁴ See Theodore M. Andersson, *The Sagas of Norwegian Kings (1130-1265): an Introduction* (Ithaca, 2016).

²⁵ Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 29.

²⁶ Vésteinn Ólason, “Family Sagas”, *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2004), 101.

²⁷ Vésteinn Ólason, “Family Sagas”, 101.

²⁸ Jane Smiley, “Preface”, *The Sagas of Icelanders* (New York, 2001), xi.

²⁹ Robert Kellogg, “Introduction”, *The Sagas of Icelanders* (New York, 2001), xxi.

sources or as historical fiction or as something in between has been an extensive one, and although the genre includes far too many sagas to list, some of the most famous include *Njáls saga*, *Egils saga*, and *Grettis saga*. Very profitable work has recently been done on the relationship between verse and prose in the *Íslendingasögur*, including two volumes by Heather O’Donoghue: first, in 1991, on the relationship between verse and prose in *Kormáks saga*, and, in 2005, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, which takes as a focus *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Gísla saga*, *Grettis saga*, and *Hrafnkels saga*.

The *samtíðarsögur*, or contemporary sagas, is a term applied to the various sagas that make up *Sturlunga saga*, a large and significant compilation of texts by different authors (including some by Sturla Þórðarson, a contemporary of – and significant participant in – the events recounted).³⁰ They document a period of about fifty years of political strife and turmoil in Iceland, leading up to Iceland losing its independence to Norway (1262-1264).³¹ The sagas incorporate both skaldic and eddic-style verses.

The *biskupasögur*, or bishops’ sagas, as their name suggests, recount the deeds of early Icelandic bishops, predominantly those based in either Skalhólt or Hólar, and were likely written between 1200 and 1350. They include texts such as *Hungrvaka* (which comprises several biographies of early bishops of Skalhólt), *Þorláks saga helga*, and *Jóns saga helga*.³² They occasionally, but very infrequently, contain stanzas of poetry.

The *fornaldarsögur*, or sagas of ancient times, deal with legendary, mythic, and heroic subjects. They were compiled in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but are set in an

³⁰ R. George Thomas, “Introduction”, *Sturlunga saga*, Volume I, trans. Julia McGrew (New York, 1970), 13-15.

³¹ Jesse Byock, “The Age of the Sturlungs”, *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages* (Odense, 1986), 27.

³² Guðni Jónsson, “Formáli”, *Byskupa sögur I* (Reykjavík, 1953), ix.

indeterminable, but ancient and prehistoric, time period,³³ and there is substantial evidence to suggest that much of the poetry included in them was older than the prose, and “presumably based on earlier, orally transmitted compositions.”³⁴ In fact, Stephen Mitchell once wrote that “[i]f ... our main interest were simply to show as efficiently as possible how the *fornaldarsögur* can be distinguished from other varieties of saga writing, we could content ourselves by saying that they are the sagas that contain eddic-style poetry.”³⁵ Additionally, the “large amounts of strange events, men and weapons of supernatural qualities, trolls, giants, dwarfs, dragons and all kind of monsters ... presents a picture of the world very different from that of the essentially realistic [*Íslendingasögur*].”³⁶ Famous texts often considered to belong to this genre include *Völsunga saga* and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. Helen F. Leslie-Jacobsen has recently carried out a detailed examination of the relationship between verse and prose in these texts, in her 2013 doctoral thesis *Prose Contexts of Eddic Poetry, Primarily in the Fornaldarsögur*.³⁷

The *riddarasögur*, or chivalric sagas, may be divided into two groups: some were originally translations of Old French romances (such as *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* or *Parcevals saga*), many carried out at the Norwegian court in the early 1200s, and some were subsequent native Icelandic compositions, inspired by those translations – such as *Valdimars saga* or *Nítíða*

³³ “Annotated Taxonomy of Genres”, *A Critical Companion to Old Norse Literary Genre*, eds. Massimiliano Bampi, Carolyne Larrington, and Sif Ríkharrðsdóttir (Cambridge, 2020), 314.

³⁴ Margaret Clunies Ross, “Introduction”, *Poetry in fornaldarsögur*, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* 8 (Turnhout, 2017), xc.

³⁵ Judy Quinn et al., “Interrogating Genre in the Fornaldarsögur: Round-Table Discussion”, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006), 287.

³⁶ Peter Hallberg, “Some Aspects of the Fornaldarsögur as a Corpus”, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 97 (1982), 6.

³⁷ Helen F. Leslie-Jacobsen, *Prose Contexts of Eddic Poetry, Primarily in the Fornaldarsögur*, PhD thesis (Bergen, 2012).

saga. They are clearly fictional; regularly feature magic, romance, and far-flung locations; and do not contain verse.³⁸

These genre distinctions are often useful, but are not absolute nor unproblematic, and many of them are constructions of the last two centuries of scholarship rather than terms that Old Norse-Icelandic authors and compilers would have recognized. This thesis will not organize itself primarily by genre, but rather aims to bring works from multiple genres into dialogue, as shall be seen in subsequent chapters.

Skaldic and Eddic Verse

Old Norse-Icelandic poetry has traditionally been divided into two broad categories: skaldic and Eddic, though these distinctions (and terms) did not exist in their current form in medieval Iceland or Norway. Eddic poetry, in the narrowest possible definition, refers to the contents of a single manuscript known as the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda.³⁹ The term has frequently been applied to other poetry of a similar style and form: anonymous verse in the metres known as *fornyrðislag* (old story metre), *máláháttir* (speeches' metre), and *ljóðaháttir* (songs' metre), on mythological, heroic, or legendary topics. Skaldic verse, meanwhile, is usually described as poetry in the *dróttkvætt* (court metre) or *hrynhent* metres (both of which are far more strict about syllable-counting than *fornyrðislag*), by named poets, using much more complex diction and kennings.

Many modern scholars now admit that these are loose and controversially-defined categories. Margaret Clunies Ross, for instance, in *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*,

³⁸ See, in particular, Geraldine Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur: Writing Romance in Late Mediæval Iceland* (Odense, 2014).

³⁹ Terry Gunnell, "Eddic Poetry", *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature* (Oxford, 2005), 82.

writes that “no one criterion divides eddic-type poetry from that usually called skaldic.”⁴⁰ The editors of the series *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, meanwhile, describe the problem thus: “It has become conventional to edit the Poetic Edda anthology and eddic poetry regarded as closely related to it separately from the rest of the corpus. This has led to the production of a number of specialized editions, dictionaries and commentaries on the Poetic Edda and its adjuncts, which has had the effect of isolating them from the rest of the corpus and sometimes exaggerating their differences from it.”⁴¹

A substantial amount of verse exists somewhere on a continuum: neither clearly “skaldic” or clearly “Eddic”. Turville-Petre puts it this way: “In the poetry of the Edda, the word-order is rather more variable than in prose; and the scalds departed further from the order of normal speech. We can speak of few precise rules, although we may notice tendencies.”⁴² He also writes that – as we shall see when we turn to some texts – “Eddaic poems belong to various ages and some of their authors were plainly influenced by scalds; the same poets might use both Eddaic and skaldic forms.”⁴³

The same sagas, too, incorporate both skaldic and eddic-style verses, and a variety that might be said to exist somewhere on that continuum. Thus, the present study understands the distinction to be at least somewhat artificial, and has endeavoured to include verses from all sorts of genres (both of prose and of poetry), including those rarely discussed in tandem.

This thesis is interested in verse form inasmuch as the choice of a particular form over another would undoubtedly have been immediately noticable to a contemporary audience (and,

⁴⁰ Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, 7.

⁴¹ “General Introduction”, *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1030*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1, xv.

⁴² Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford, 1976), lx.

⁴³ Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, liv.

given the complexity of much skaldic verse, could often have affected the way an audience or reader engaged with the verse). However, it is relatively uninterested in questions of the authenticity or historicity of selected verses – one of the aims in subsequent chapters is to bring into dialogue selections that would not normally be considered together, including selections that may stem from very different historical contexts and genres. The previous general scholarly consensus, that surviving eddic-style poetry was in the main much older than surviving skaldic verse, has more recently been brought into serious question: “while the earliest surviving eddic poems may be slightly older than the earliest skaldic poems, in general it can be said that eddic and skaldic poetry are spread across the same historical span.”⁴⁴

Given this, it no longer makes sense to separate the two forms as has so often been done in previous literary studies: if both eddic-style verse and skaldic-style verse were being composed about the same times, and in the same locations, it may very well be worthwhile to consider what a more inclusive analysis of form and structure can reveal.

Women’s studies and Old Norse-Icelandic literature

What does all of this mean for the study of women’s voices in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, if questions of attribution and origin are so complex? That the historicity, provenance, and attribution of a great deal of Old Norse-Icelandic poetry remains in question has been a source of particular frustration for those critics interested in exploring and recovering the degree to which the women of medieval Scandinavia engaged in poetic and literary expression. Moreover, as a result of the diverse images of women presented in Old Norse-Icelandic texts, and the difficulty inherent in determining the relationship between literary images of women and

⁴⁴ Martin Chase, “Introduction”, *Eddic, Skaldic, and Beyond: Poetic Variety in Medieval Iceland and Norway* (New York, 2014), 7.

women's actual status, the scholarship that exists on women in early Germanic cultures – never mind women writers or poets – is rife with controversy.

To illustrate, very briefly, the diversity of opinions: it has been variously argued that there existed an oral tradition of women's verse that was subsequently suppressed by the new patriarchal, Christian, literate, culture;⁴⁵ that the women of Old Norse-Icelandic literature are constructions or fantasies of male authors;⁴⁶ that women's voices in the sagas represent not their own thoughts or feelings, but rather served to evoke the past in a way that "minimizes its potential disruption of or threat to the present symbolic order";⁴⁷ that Old Norse-Icelandic society operated according to a "one sex" model, where a binary existed not between men and women, but between the powerful – of either sex – and the powerless;⁴⁸ that the figure of the goading woman was indeed rooted in history, and that such goading gave women significant power;⁴⁹ and that women's verses both are⁵⁰ and are not⁵¹ less engaged with political and public discourse than the verses of their male contemporaries. In a very large number of studies, any *literary* value of these female-voiced poems has been sidelined in favour of questions of historicity.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Old Norse women's poetry is a subject that one recent scholar has aptly termed "difficult", "under-studied", and "ill-defined."⁵² The problem is bound

⁴⁵ Helga Kress, *Máttugar meyjar: Íslenszk fornbókmenntasaga* (Reykjavík, 1993), 13.

⁴⁶ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia, 1996), 208-211.

⁴⁷ Zoe Borovsky, "Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature", *Journal of American Folklore* 112 (1999), 27.

⁴⁸ Carol Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe", *Speculum* 68.2 (1993), 363-387.

⁴⁹ Else Mundal, "The Position of Women in Old Norse Society and the Basis for Their Power", *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 2.1 (1994), 3-11.

⁵⁰ Zoe Borovsky, "Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature", 26-27.

⁵¹ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 1991), 167-168.

⁵² Heather O'Donoghue, review, "Old Norse Women's Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds", *The Modern Language Review* 108.3 (2013), 1009-1010.

up with the question of historicity: if one cannot verify whether or not a woman actually composed the verses with which she is credited, why include those verses in a study? Judith Jesch, discounting many of the skaldic verses spoken by women in the *Íslendingasögur* as fictional, sums up the situation: “there remain four named Viking Age women who were remembered by medieval Icelanders as poets and whose verse is preserved in historical sagas.”⁵³ These four – Gunnhildr konungamoðir, Hildr Hrólfsdóttir, Jórunn skáldmær, and Steinunn Refsdóttir – are usually considered the most likely candidates for ‘real’ or ‘historical’ female skalds, and thus have attracted by far the most critical attention. This, however, conceals the fact that there is a very large quantity of verse spoken by named women characters in other sagas, not all of which can automatically be assumed to be fictional. Steinunn’s verses, for instance, appear in both *Kristni saga* and *Njáls saga*, and *Njáls saga*, it turns out, contains an astonishing variety of other verses that are spoken by women. Nor is this variety limited to skaldic stanzas: the compiler of *Njáls saga* gives us everything from the *dróttkvætt* of Steinunn and Unnr Marðardóttir, to the *kviðlingr* of Þórhildr skáldkona, to the valkyries of the eddic-style *Darraðarljóð*.

This study aims to take as inclusive of an approach as possible, examining the many types of women’s voices in Old Norse-Icelandic poetry, and undertaking a detailed analysis of a very wide variety of verses and a multiplicity of representations of women’s engagement with poetry. It will consider how these verses function as poetry, how they function in relation to their prose context, and the (literary) effect of the prose author or compiler’s attribution of the verses to a woman.

⁵³ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 161.

Women's poetry in Old Norse-Icelandic literature is a topic whose history is much briefer than that of the rest of the field; it was certainly overlooked by many early scholars. Even the role of women in Old Norse-Icelandic literature (regardless of their engagement with poetic speech) was, for a long time, understudied, though the image of the independent, defiant, whetter has a long history, and the complex, nuanced representations of women in the sagas have long attracted admiration: as Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir writes, "women, no less than men, are complex figures, often admirable, sometimes flawed, but whether sympathetic or not, they are conceived as individual subjects with considerable agency, either through words or actions."⁵⁴

Paul-Henri Mallet's 1755 *Histoire de Dannemarc* is frequently credited as the first appearance of the "idea of the nordic independent woman."⁵⁵ Another early study was Wolfgang Krause's 1926 work, *Die Frau in der Sprache der altislandischen Familiengeschichten*, which was not particularly concerned with poetry, but does examine different episodes featuring women in the various family sagas.⁵⁶

Rolf Heller's *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Islandersagas*, in 1958, regards the compilers or authors of the Icelandic sagas as creative forces in their own right, and thus focuses on the literary motifs within the sagas. He sums up his aim in this way:

Das Ziel der Arbeit ist die Beantwortung der Fragen, in welchem Maße sich die Sagaverfasser bei Formung ihrer Frauengestalten auf literarische Motive gestützt haben und in Verbindung damit, wie die uns vorliegenden weiblichen Rollen zu beurteilen sind, einmal in geschichtlicher, zum anderen in kulturgeschichtlicher Sicht.

The aim of this work is to answer these questions – to what extent the saga-writers relied on literary motifs when crafting their female characters, and, in relation to this, how the

⁵⁴ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World* (London, 2020), 11.

⁵⁵ Jenny Jochens, "Feminist Scholarship in Old Norse Studies", *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 19 (1995), 29. See also Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 234-239.

⁵⁶ Wolfgang Krause, *Die Frau in der Sprache der altislandischen Familiengeschichten* (Göttingen, 1926).

existent female roles are to be judged, either from a historical, or a historico-cultural point of view.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, the existence of a mere handful of early studies of women in Old Norse-Icelandic literature must be set in the context of the extensive and much more diligent study of other subjects within the field. Furthermore, most of these were primarily concerned with prose, rather than verse. Early commentary on women's poetry is principally found in large collections of skaldic or eddic-style verses – such as those by Finnur Jónsson and Magnus Olsen – rather than as a separate topic of scholarship in its own right. There were limited exceptions: Guðrún Helgadóttir's *Skáldkonur fyrri alda*, an adaptation of a series of radio talks, was released in 1961, and remains one of the only books (aside from Sandra Straubhaar's) focused on a reasonably large selection of Old Norse women poets.⁵⁸

Nonetheless, the mid-20th century, and the second wave of the feminist movement, heralded the advent of renewed interest, and the eventual application of feminist literary criticism to Old Norse-Icelandic literature.

Theorizing gender

The present work is greatly indebted to the advances in feminist philosophies and gender studies over the past century – and indeed to emerging scholarship on masculinity and queer theory, though both of those lie somewhat outside of the scope of this thesis.

Simone de Beauvoir writes in the introduction to the second volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe*: “Quand j’emploie les mots «femme» ou «féminin» je ne me réfère évidemment à aucun archétype, à aucun immuable essence.” (When I use the words “woman” or “feminine”, I

⁵⁷ Rolf Heller, *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Islandersagas* (Halle, 1958), 6. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁵⁸ Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, *Skáldkonur fyrri alda*, 2 volumes (Akureyri, 1961-1963).

evidently do not refer to any archetype, nor to any immutable essence.)⁵⁹ She continues with the now-famous argument that “On ne naît pas femme: on le devient. Aucun destin biologique, psychique, économique ne définit la figure que revêt au sein de la société la femelle humaine.” (One is not born a woman; one becomes one. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the role that the human female takes on in society.)⁶⁰ Many feminists, in fact, have drawn a clear distinction between sex and gender, partly in order to counter biological determinism, or the “idea that behavioural and psychological differences between women and men have biological causes”.⁶¹

An increasing awareness of the social construction of gender developed into a sustained critique of the male/female gender binary, and a growing understanding of the limitations of feminist scholarship that did not take intersectional concerns (such as social status, economic status, and race) into account.⁶² Already in 1975, Gayle Rubin had begun to speak of “a sex/gender system – a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention”.⁶³ At the same time, scholars such as Luce Irigaray challenged philosophers to reread the history of their field, dissecting the traditional exclusion of women from philosophy and psychoanalytic theory,⁶⁴ and Julia Kristeva

⁵⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Volume II: L'Expérience Vécue (Paris, 1949), 9.

⁶⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Volume II: L'Expérience Vécue, 13.

⁶¹ Mari Mikkola, “Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta.

⁶² Elizabeth Robertson, “Feminism and Medieval Studies: Where Have We Been, Where Are We Now, and Where Are We Going? Or, What Has Happened to Women in Feminist Studies of the Middle Ages?” *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies* (Cambridge, 2016), 238.

⁶³ Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex”, *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York, 1975), 165. For a much more in-depth discussion, also see Robin May Schott, “Feminism and the History of Philosophy”, *The Blackwell Guide to Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford, 2007), 43-63.

⁶⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris, 1974).

advocated for a feminist approach in which “the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to *metaphysics*.”⁶⁵

Elaine Showalter, reflecting on feminist criticism, distinguished two varieties: one (which she terms the *feminist critique*) concerned with woman as reader, whose subjects “include the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male-constructed literary theory”, and another (*gynocritics*) concerned with woman as writer, “with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women.”⁶⁶ Both varieties can profitably be applied to Old Norse-Icelandic literature, though difficulties in attribution and textual history have perhaps led to more of the former than of the latter.

It was Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* that revisited Beauvoir and Irigaray’s work and critiqued the heteronormativity of some of the writings of second-wave feminists. Butler begins her inquiry by asking:

What new shape of politics emerges when identity as a common ground no longer constrains the discourse on feminist politics? And to what extent does the effort to locate a common identity as the foundation for a feminist politics preclude a radical inquiry into the political construction and regulation of identity itself?⁶⁷

Butler theorizes gender as a performance, one that is “not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts” and one that “intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time”, *Signs* 7.1 (1981), trans. Alice Jarine and Harry Blake, 33, emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ Elaine Showalter, “Towards a Feminist Poetics”, *Women Writing and Writing About Women* (London, 1979), 25.

⁶⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), ix.

⁶⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 3.

Over a similar time period, linguists also turned to questions concerning the relationship between language and gender. Robin Tolmach Lakoff's 1975 book *Language and Women's Place* opened up a whole new subfield of linguistics. In her analysis of contemporary American English, she found that "women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways: in the way they are taught to use language, and in the way general language use treats them."⁶⁹ Subsequent applications of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis to the topic of women's language allowed for quantitative investigations of gendered differences in speech in a dizzying array of languages, cultures, socioeconomic contexts, and time periods.⁷⁰

Application to Old Norse-Icelandic literature

All of this important work gradually began to influence medieval studies and Old Norse-Icelandic scholarship in particular, albeit often with something of a delay.⁷¹ The first book in English on the women of early medieval Scandinavia was Judith Jesch's 1991 *Women in the Viking Age*. Jesch is chiefly concerned with the actual, historical, situation of ordinary women,

⁶⁹ Robin Tolmach Lakoff, *Language and Women's Place*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2004), 39.

⁷⁰ Examples of such study of modern British English include Paul Rayson, Geoffrey Leech, and Mary Hodges, "Social differentiation in the use of English vocabulary: some analyses of the conversational component of the British National Corpus", *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 2.1 (1997), 133-152; Hans-Jörg Schmid, "Do men and women really live in different cultures? Evidence from the BNC", *Corpus Linguistics by the Lune* (Frankfurt, 2003), 185-221. For an example of the techniques of corpus linguistics applied to historical texts, see Douglas Biber and Jená Burges, "Historical Change in the Language Use of Women and Men: Gender Differences in Dramatic Dialogue", *Journal of English Linguistics* 28.1 (2000), 21-37. Such analysis has rarely been applied to the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus, though one excellent recent example is Tam T. Blaxter, "Applying keyword analysis to gendered language in the *Íslendingasögur*", *Nordic Journal of Linguistics* 37.2 (2014), 169-198.

⁷¹ The foregoing discussion is necessarily a much-abbreviated sketch for reasons of space; a full history of feminist thought and scholarship, as applicable to medieval studies, is well beyond the scope of the present work. See in particular Judith M. Bennett, "Medievalism and Feminism", *Speculum* 68.2 (1993), 309-331; Laine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan, "Introduction: The Work of E. Jane Burns and the Feminisms of Medieval Studies", *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies* (Cambridge, 2016), 1-13; Madeline H. Caviness, "Feminism, Gender studies, and Medieval Studies", *Diogenes* 57.1 (2010), 30-45; E. Jane Burns, "Feminism and Medieval Studies: Moving Forward", *Exemplaria* 26 (2014), 291-298; Jenny Jochens, "Feminist Scholarship in Old Norse Studies", *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 19 (1995): 29-30.

and draws on a wide variety of material – including archaeological evidence, runic inscriptions, contemporary texts written by non-Scandinavians, and the poetry and prose composed by medieval Icelanders that depicts the (earlier) Viking Age, including both skaldic and eddic-style poetry, and the *Íslendingasögur*. At the time, her choice of topic was sufficiently novel that her introduction includes the pointed remark that “we cannot possibly study [the vikings] without an understanding of the whole of the historical period during which they operated, and of both the culture that they came from and those which they, to a greater or lesser degree, affected. For the study of such a substantial period of time and such a variety of cultures to ignore the experiences of half the population would be a nonsense.”⁷²

Helga Kress, in her 1993 *Máttugar meyjjar: Íslensk fornbókmenntasaga*, shows clear influence of mainstream feminist thought. The book collects a number of essays Helga had previously published elsewhere, in addition to new material, and aims to fill the gaps in previous histories of medieval Icelandic literature. Helga sees parallels between the transitions from a pagan to a Christian culture, from an oral tradition to a written literature, and from (what she considers) a female-dominated oral culture to a male-dominated literary one.

In the same year as Helga’s study, the major medieval studies journal *Speculum* devoted an entire special issue to gender.⁷³ Though the volume was the subject of significant controversy (from a variety of viewpoints), including from feminist medieval scholars who felt the issue as a whole privileged heteronormativity and did not sufficiently engage with recent work on “representation, ideology, and social construction”,⁷⁴ it also represented a significant shift in the

⁷² Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 3.

⁷³ *Speculum* 63.2 (1993); subsequently published as *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism*, ed. Nancy F. Partner (Cambridge, MA, 1993).

⁷⁴ Karma Lochrie, Clare A. Lees, and Gillian R. Overing, “Feminism Within and Without the Academy”, *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 22 (1996), 27.

academy. In that issue, Carol J. Clover published “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe”, a landmark paper that asks the remarkable question: “[W]as femaleness any more decisive in setting parameters on individual behaviour than were wealth, prestige, marital status, or just plain personality and ambition?”⁷⁵ Clover examines a variety of female characters in the *Íslendingasögur* in order to interrogate the applicability of contemporary notions of a gender binary to Old Norse literature, writing that “it seems likely that Norse society operated according to a one-sex model – that there was one sex and it was male ... [w]hat finally excites fear and loathing in the Norse mind is not femaleness per se, but the condition of powerlessness.”⁷⁶

Else Mundal subsequently examined the figure of the goading, or whetting, woman in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *samtíðarsögur*, taking the stance that “we should at least assume that the authors of the realistic saga genres wanted to portray women in a way which would be looked upon as trustworthy. Therefore, it is not likely that they would portray women in female roles which they knew did not exist in real life.”⁷⁷ Consequently, Mundal concludes that the figure of the goading, or whetting, woman was indeed rooted in a historical reality. Though she does not go as far as Clover, she does note that “[t]he qualities required in a heroine in this society are in fact the same qualities as those required in a hero.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Carol Clover, “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe”, 368.

⁷⁶ Carol Clover, “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe”, 379. Gareth Lloyd Evans has demonstrated some of the limitations of Clover’s model, arguing that to “figure masculinity as static and fixed is to misrepresent and to oversimplify the historically contingent nature of gender.” Evans draws on theories of hegemonic masculinity in order to analyze the multiple forms of masculinity that exist within saga literature. See Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders* (Oxford, 2019), 15.

⁷⁷ Else Mundal, “The Position of Women in Old Norse Society and the Basis for Their Power”, 4.

⁷⁸ Else Mundal, “The Position of Women in Old Norse Society and the Basis for Their Power”, 10.

A comprehensive survey, in English, of women in Old Norse-Icelandic literature appeared shortly thereafter in two volumes by Jenny Jochens.⁷⁹ Jochens divides her material in two, with one book treating the lives of Old Norse-Icelandic women in their society (as she puts it, “[t]he basic and ordinary problems pertaining to the lives of women, such as reproduction, marriage, and work”),⁸⁰ and the other treating the images of women (divine, supernatural, and otherwise mythological) found in Norse-Icelandic literature. Jochens bases her study of the daily social existence of women primarily on legal texts, and on three of the major genres of prose: the *Íslendingasögur*, the *konungasögur*, and the *samtíðarsögur*. In her reading of the poetry and the mythological material, Jochens identifies four key images of human women: the warrior woman, the prophetess, the avenger, and the whetter. Jochens reads such figures “as more reflective of gender, that is, men’s perceptions of women, than as representative of the actual female condition.”⁸¹

Though Zoe Borovsky does not go as far as Helga Kress, she too emphasizes the extent to which women’s power gradually became constrained to the private, domestic sphere, after the advent of a Christian literary culture. She reads women’s private performances as “elaborate fantasies” that worked through “the social drama of confrontation between old and new in the collective imagination.”⁸²

Subsequent studies, including this one, of women in medieval Scandinavia and in Old Norse-Icelandic literature have been enormously indebted to these works. However, new approaches and new perspectives have led to new insights, as well as an awareness of the value

⁷⁹ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, 1995); Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia, 1996).

⁸⁰ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 3.

⁸¹ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 3.

⁸² Zoe Borovsky, “Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature”, 25.

of studying genres other than the just more ‘realistic’ *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, and *samtíðarsögur*. It will be noted that those genres were disproportionately privileged in the works I have just discussed; this was not a unique problem and indeed is reflective of a greater trend within Old Norse-Icelandic scholarship as a whole. Many of these and other contemporary studies were also concerned with the strong, independent, striking images of women in the *Íslendingasögur*, and whether or not these images had a historical basis. More recent studies have also considered the ways women could wield power in the Norwegian court,⁸³ and women’s legal status as revealed by Norwegian and Icelandic law codes.⁸⁴

In her 2013 book, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir explicitly sets out “to uncover the multiplicity and heterogeneity of female images and perspectives on women available to medieval Icelandic audiences” and draws on “the entire corpus of extant secular, vernacular prose that was composed and committed to vellum in Iceland from the beginnings of saga literature ... until the dawn of the Reformation.”⁸⁵ Jóhanna examines a whole range of texts and characters in order to offer a more complex picture of women in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and the ways in which they exert power. The focus is, throughout, on secular, prose, literature, and Jóhanna argues that the “female characters of Old Norse-Icelandic literature tend to resist the overrigid classification in previous critical discussion; instead they constitute a diverse catalogue of characters, distinguished by factors including social position, ethnicity, economic means, and sexual behaviour.”⁸⁶

⁸³ Jenny Jochens, “La richesse, la sexualité et l’incitation: outils politiques des femmes dans le Nord”, *Médiévales* 50.1 (2006), 121-136.

⁸⁴ Else Mundal, “‘svá kona sem karlmaðr’: Women in Old Norse Society”, in *Nordic Middle Ages – Artefacts, Landscapes and Society*, eds. Irene Baug, Janicke Larsen, and Sigrid Samset Mygland (Bergen, 2015), 227-239.

⁸⁵ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York, 2013), 2.

⁸⁶ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*, 136.

This study aims to apply a similarly inclusive approach to women’s voices in Old Norse-Icelandic *poetry*, though I have focused primarily on verses spoken by human women, and there is a great deal of productive work yet to be done on verses spoken by divine and non-human women, such as the pagan goddesses and troll-women.

Authorship, attribution, and voice

When discussing stanzas of Old Norse-Icelandic poetry, it is vitally important to clarify the following terms:

Authorship: the term “author”, in relation to Old Norse-Icelandic poetry, can be used to refer to the original poet who actually composed a given verse. This is not necessarily the same person as the compiler of the prose text within which the verse is embedded. Authorship is frequently disputed, and in some cases, impossible to determine with certainty.

Attribution: many verses are attributed to an individual by the prose text, frequently with phrases such as ‘this verse was composed by’ or ‘she spoke this verse’. This attribution may or may not align with the actual author of the verse, and women’s verses have – historically – been particularly subject to questions and doubts about the accuracy of the attribution.

Voice: who speaks the verse within the text? Who is the individual identified as the speaker? This may or may not be the same person to whom the verse’s composition is attributed – for instance, if the speaker appears to someone else in a dream (who is later credited with the verse’s composition) or if the speaker is presented as reciting a verse that they heard someone else compose.

In some cases, an individual may occupy all three of these roles. In other cases, these roles may be filled by several different people. For example, Gunnhildr konungamóðir’s authorship of a single *helmingr* in *Fagrskinna* has been widely disputed. The surrounding prose

suggests that she speaks the lines to her husband, Eiríkr blóðøx, after he has heard reports (untrue, as it turns out) of the death of his brother, and frequent enemy, Hákon góði. Gunnhildr is said to know by her magic that Hákon survived, and she recites the verse to tell Eiríkr so. Quite apart from the problem that modern readers are unlikely to believe that stories of magical foreknowledge are literally true when it comes to historical accounts, she is nowhere else credited as a poet, and this has led scholars such as Magnus Olsen⁸⁷ and Judith Jesch⁸⁸ to question the attribution. Olsen even suggests Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnson, a Norwegian skald who served King Hákon and King Haraldr gráfeldr Eiríksson, and who is known from a variety of sources including *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*, as a possible author. Gunnhildr speaks the stanza within the story (it is presented as her voice) and the surrounding prose attributes it to her, but the question of authorship remains contentious. Similar queries have been raised about the stanzas spoken by the daughter of Jarl Arnfiðr,⁸⁹ and the daughter of Ármóðr bóndi,⁹⁰ in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*.

Organization and approach of this thesis

My approach is primarily one of close reading, though informed by diverse theoretical approaches, particularly from gender studies and performance studies, where relevant. I have chosen to organize the study not by genre but by fictionality, and aim to examine a wide variety of verses that reveal the multiplicity of ways in which women are shown to engage with and speak poetry in Old Norse-Icelandic texts.

⁸⁷ Magnus Olsen, *Har dronning Gunnhild diktet om Håkon den Gode?* Avhandlingar utgitt av Det Norske videnskaps-akademi i Oslo, II Hist.-filos kl. 1944 (1), 11.

⁸⁸ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 162.

⁸⁹ Sandra Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women's Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*, 24.

⁹⁰ Mikael Males, *The Poetic Genesis of Old Icelandic Literature* (Berlin, 2019), 221.

The first chapter begins with supernatural and legendary women's voices – stanzas of prophecy, of foreknowledge, of advice, of warning, of revenge, of challenge – found in texts ranging from the Codex Regius to *Eyrbyggja saga*. It begins with a discussion of *Völuspá* and *Baldurs draumar*, in the voices of two quintessential prophetesses, and compares the reception of their verses with the reception of women's prophetic verse in *Eyrbyggja saga*. The chapter then analyzes some of the structural functions of women's poetic speech acts, both within eddic-style poems without a prose context, and in sagas often critiqued for their lack of coherent structure, such as *Völsunga saga*, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and *Hervarar saga*. The chapter compares the functions that verses can have within a prose framework with the functions that speech acts (in verse) can have within a longer poem. I endeavour to demonstrate the variety and diversity of functions that these verses have – foreshadowing future events, building tension, highlighting alliances, emphasizing power dynamics between characters, marking notable shifts within a text, and many others.

The second chapter moves to another group of fictional verses – women's dream verses, primarily within *Sturlunga saga*, and investigates the extremely complex relationship that exists between the presentation of skaldic poetry and the presentation of women's voices in these sagas: the majority of verses classed by scholars as “women's poetry” in the contemporary sagas are in fact spoken by male characters, who appear to women in their dreams. The women, upon waking, then recite the verse(s) that they have dreamed. This is somewhat problematic, since the women are presented as merely the receptacles for these poetic compositions, rather than active agents in their production. This chapter thus engages with the key question of what can be said to constitute a woman's voice. (The saga records verses spoken by men but dreamed by women, verses spoken by women but dreamed by men, in addition to verses where the gender of the

speaker and the dreamer is the same.) As in chapter one, many of these verses have clear structural functions, and themes of foreknowledge and foreshadowing can be seen throughout verses in these ostensibly more ‘realistic’ contemporary sagas. I examine in particular detail the stanzas leading up to the battle of Örlygsstaðir, including the dreams of Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir, who is listed as a poet in Snorri Sturluson’s *Skáldatal*, though none of her own verses survive. The chapter closes with a detailed analysis of Jóreiðr’s dream conversation with Guðrún Gjúkadóttir.

The third chapter examines the influence of the legendary and fantastic women of the *riddarasögur* on women’s verses in the *Íslendingasögur*, such as *Kórmaks saga* and *Víglundar saga*. Although the chivalric sagas notably contain very little poetry – spoken by either men or women – they do, as Geraldine Barnes has recently demonstrated, maintain an intensive engagement with ideas of literary scholarship and composition.⁹¹ Perhaps the most significant difference between the classic portrayal of a heroine of chivalric romance in the Old French tradition and in the Old Norse-Icelandic tradition, is the added – and repeated – emphasis on the Old Norse women’s intelligence, wit, and command of language(s), all undoubtedly essential qualities for any aspiring poet. At the same time, this picture is complicated by texts such as the *Strengleikar* – in which the translator, although remaining remarkably faithful to the original, has chosen to efface the original female author. This chapter will thus move from a consideration of the many and varied ways that heroines of the translated *riddarasögur* engage with poetic and literary composition (as contrasted with their continental counterparts), to a detailed analysis of the verses in a saga that incorporates elements of chivalric romance: *Víglundar saga* – in which

⁹¹ See Geraldine Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur: writing romance in late mediæval Iceland*, 28.

much older legends (and, possibly, verses) are reworked under the influence of continental texts and, particularly, the genre of the maiden-king romance.

The fourth chapter revisits the question of whether a distinctive “women’s voice” is discernible within surviving Old Norse-Icelandic poetry, and turns to women’s verses in more realistic (less fictional, potentially “historical”) contexts. I discuss women’s engagement in the political sphere and in religious debate, and the ways in which their verses function within the greater prose narratives – comparing and contrasting with the ways in which their male counterparts’ verses function within those same narratives. The chapter analyzes not only the verses of Gunnhildr konungamoðir, Hildr Hrólfsdóttir, Jórunn skáldmær, and Steinunn Refsdóttir, but also those of other women recorded in the *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, such as Ásdís (of *Grettis saga*) and Þorbjörg (in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*) – including both skaldic and eddic-style stanzas. I find that even though the content and style of women’s verses may not differ markedly from those of their male contemporaries, the reception of those verses (both within the narrative, and in later commentary) has differed substantially. The chapter concludes with an examination of the range and diversity of women’s verses in *Njáls saga*, of varying degrees of “authenticity” or fictionality, and endeavours to apply insights from previous chapters to re-evaluate the function of women’s verse within the text.

Chapter 1

Supernatural and Legendary Women's Voices

This chapter will start by examining a selection of poetic stanzas, voiced by women, from the Codex Regius, as well as stanzas from *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Hervarar saga*, *Völsunga saga*, and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, paying particular attention to the dynamics between poet, speaker, and audience(s), the poets' representations of the ways in which the female speakers describe themselves, and the ways in which women can use these stanzas to interact with each other and with their audiences. In her 2013 book, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir interrogated conventional definitions of power, demonstrating that women can – through the use of language – wield influence in a wide range of scenarios and contexts, including socially sanctioned ones: “by using speech acts as tools for empowerment, women can work within and manipulate existing power structures for their own ends.”⁹² I also wish to ask whether we can re-evaluate the women of Eddic verse with this in mind: Can we see their speeches as a performative act? What function does their poetic speech have in the narrative as a whole? What levels of commentary on their role – voiced by them, other characters within the story, or the surrounding prose – can we discern? What changes about the audience and the impact of women's words when we lack a prosimetric framework, as is the case for the majority of the poems in the Codex Regius? Can we observe any differences between representations of men's and women's voices in poetic stanzas from these works? And what can a more extensive study of ‘women's poetry’ – expanded to place both eddic-style and skaldic-style stanzas alongside each other – contribute to our understanding of the corpus as a whole?

⁹² Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York, 2013), 10.

Like Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, I understand ‘power’ as a concept not merely limited to the imposition of one’s will through violence: giving advice, and even persuading another to action, is often a gendered role in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, but these are not consistently viewed as negative or counterproductive behaviours. It is evident that “women are permitted – even expected – to give advice to men in various different situations, usually with the purpose of moderating a planned outcome and preventing and/or averting threats to individual or national safety. Women’s counsel is usually followed to the hero’s advantage, thereby confirming that it is socially tuned and effective. [...] The consequences of ignoring women’s counsel are normally disastrous.”⁹³ Giselle Gos, in discussing *Fóstbræðra saga*, makes a similar case for women “providing a different kind of counsel, ‘heilræði’ (sound counsel), and fulfilling quite a different social role, that of a mediator who works towards diffusing violence, advocating proper social behaviour and promoting community integrity.”⁹⁴

Far from being limited to the usual roles ascribed to verses inserted in prose sagas (either expressions of emotion or supposedly reliable evidence for the historicity of the events described by the saga-author in prose), this chapter will demonstrate that a much greater variety exists in the functions and representation of women’s voices in Old Norse-Icelandic poetry. I shall also be probing the distinction that is usually made between approaches to the analysis of skaldic verse (and its structural function as incorporated in, say, the *Íslendingasögur*), and eddic-style verse, both with and without a prose context. Hervör’s stanzas in *Hervarar saga*, for instance, are obviously “Eddic” in form, but I shall show that their function is, arguably, closely aligned with

⁹³ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*, 41.

⁹⁴ Giselle Gos, “Women as a Source of heilræði, ‘sound counsel’: Social Mediation and Community Integration in *Fóstbræðra saga*”, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108.3 (2009), 282.

that of skaldic stanzas as they appear in the *skaldsögur*.⁹⁵ Furthermore, while skaldic verse is often (though not exclusively) framed as something to be spoken in a formal setting, in front of a lord and often a large audience, I shall also explore what we can gain from also thinking of Eddic prophecies as performances, or as speech acts.

Völuspá and its *völva*

“Alt veit ek”,⁹⁶ says the speaker of *Völuspá* to Ódinn – I know all.⁹⁷ Jenny Jochens has described the opening poem of the Codex Regius, not inaccurately, as the “matrix of Old Norse womanhood” and the “most powerful of all Old Norse poems”,⁹⁸ and for Hermann Pálsson, it is “el más grande poema del norte pagano” – the greatest poem of the pagan north.⁹⁹ Yet while the *völva* may claim to know everything, with a memory that stretches back to the earliest days,¹⁰⁰ her modern readers can make no such assertion: the sibyl’s prophecy has generated no shortage of widely differing interpretations, and no shortage of spirited scholarly debate.¹⁰¹

Presented as the direct speech of a female seeress,¹⁰² or *völva*, the poem sketches out the past and future of the Old Norse cosmos in allusive, often cryptic stanzas. In addition to the

⁹⁵ T. P. Rowbotham comes to similar conclusions in his analysis of the verses in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. See T. P. Rowbotham, “Fornaldarsögur, Prosimetrum, and History-Writing in Medieval Iceland”, PhD thesis (York, 2018), particularly 169-187.

⁹⁶ Ursula Dronke, “Völuspá”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume II, Mythological Poems* (Oxford, 1997), 14.

⁹⁷ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁹⁸ Jenny Jochens, “Völuspá: Matrix of Old Norse Womanhood”, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 88.3 (July 1989), 344.

⁹⁹ Hermann Pálsson, “El más grande poema del norte pagano: *Völuspá*, ‘La profecía de la sibila’”, *Acta poetica* 16 (1995), 37-54.

¹⁰⁰ Ursula Dronke, “Völuspá”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume II, Mythological Poems*, 14.

¹⁰¹ For an overview of trends in past scholarship, see Annette Lassen, “The Early Scholarly Reception of *Völuspá*”, in *The Nordic Apocalypse: Approaches to Völuspá and Nordic Days of Judgement* (Turnhout, 2013), 3-24.

¹⁰² The significance of the poem’s alternation between first- and third- person references to the speaker has been debated. Ursula Dronke, for instance, argues that there are in fact two or three distinct personae: “‘I’ will be the living, teaching *völva*, who reveals to men her occult knowledge, ‘she’ the prophetic *völva*, who plays a vital part in the life of the gods themselves.” (Dronke, “Völuspá”, 28.) However, the alternation of pronouns referring to a single speaker is not uncommon in eddic poetry, and many scholars

version preserved in the Codex Regius, which forms the basis for most edited texts of the poem, an important variant exists in Hauksbók, and Snorri quotes liberally from the poem in *Gylfaginning*.

Given the evocative, powerful language, and the striking imagery of the poem, it is perhaps not surprising that it is a relatively popular text for modern performers to present or adapt¹⁰³ – and although we have no direct evidence for its performance for an Old Norse audience, the unnamed speaker evokes a sense of a gathered audience in the opening half stanza of the poem:

Hljóðs bið ek allar
[helgar] kindir
meiri ok minni
mogo Heimdal[1]ar.

I ask for silence from all hallowed beings, greater and lesser children of Heimdallr.¹⁰⁴

The significance of the *völva*'s address to her audience in the context of the study of skaldic poetry has not gone unnoticed by scholars: Sigurður Nordal, for instance, remarks that “just as a court poet looked round the royal hall and called for silence from king and court, the sibyl surveys the worlds of gods and men as she begins her prophecy.”¹⁰⁵

The possibility has been considered¹⁰⁶ that *Völuspá* may have been composed by a woman, or may have been performed by female performers – unfortunately, no direct evidence

concur with Carolyne Larrington, who deems it “most likely that they refer to a single seeress” in *Völuspá*. Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2014), 284.

¹⁰³ For instance, the Old Norse Poetry in Performance conference in Oxford in June 2016 included two performances of excerpts from the poem. See performances by Einar Selvik (<http://www.worldtreeproject.org/document/2230>) and Hanna Marti (<http://www.worldtreeproject.org/document/2153>).

¹⁰⁴ Ursula Dronke, “Völuspá”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume II, Mythological Poems*, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Sigurður Nordal, *Völuspa*, trans. B.S. Benedikz and John McKinnell (Durham, 1978), 6.

¹⁰⁶ Björn M. Ólsen, “Til Eddakvadene”, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 30 (1914), 135; Jenny Jochens, Jenny Jochens, “Völuspá: Matrix of Old Norse Womanhood”, 344.

for or against these suggestions survives either. Jenny Jochens has aptly summed up the situation: “a woman in the roles of both author and performer of *Völuspá* cannot be ruled out although it is impossible to prove. The second role of performer would have been meaningful to a Nordic audience for centuries.”¹⁰⁷

What is clear, however, is that we are firmly in the realm of myth and legend, of supernatural beings and not of historical fact – which is precisely why I have chosen to begin this study with the *völva* and her supernatural comrades. Although Sandra B. Straubhaar chose not to include poems from the Codex Regius in her compilation *Old Norse Women’s Poetry* (a decision in the introduction that is put down to “space, thematic balance, and the author’s caprice”),¹⁰⁸ there is evidence to suggest that the *völva* and the tradition of female prophecy constitute one of the earliest examples we have of women’s representation in Old Norse verse. Additionally, a large number of critics have noted that, as Straubhaar puts it, “the saga compilers seem to have been far readier to ascribe lengthy poems to supernatural women or legendary heroines of long ago than to their own recent female ancestors.”¹⁰⁹ Jochens comments that of the existing female voices in early Nordic literature, “[p]rophetesses and sorceresses project the strongest tunes”,¹¹⁰ and Katharine Morris also stresses the relationship between the female and the supernatural or the extraordinary:

In the sagas, where there are dreams, there are women. Women are either inside the dreams as characters or outside the dreams as interpreters. In a sense, the dreams open a space for the feminine within the saga narrative. This feminine voice explodes in the realm of the supernatural and explains the magical and the irrational. Often the Norse

¹⁰⁷ Jenny Jochens, “At the Dawn of Nordic Literature: A Chorus of Female Voice”, in *Female Voices of the North I, An Anthology*, ed. Inger M. Olsen and Sven Hakon Rossel (Vienna, 2002), 22-23.

¹⁰⁸ Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women’s Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds* (Cambridge, 2011), 6.

¹⁰⁹ Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women’s Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*, 3.

¹¹⁰ Jenny Jochens, “At the Dawn of Nordic Literature: A Chorus of Female Voice”, 14.

witch was the dreamer, the dream figure, or the dream interpreter, which is a continuation of her role as prophetess in the Icelandic culture.¹¹¹

The connection between women and prophecy in early Germanic and Nordic religion is one that does rest on a historical basis. Frequently cited in support of this¹¹² is a passage from Tacitus’

Germania:

[I]nesse quin etiam sanctum aliquid et providum putant, nec aut consilia earum aspernantur aut responsa neglegunt. vidimus sub divo Vespasiano Veledam diu apud plerosque numinis loco habitam; sed et olim Auriniam et complures alias venerati sunt, non adulatione nec tamquam facerent deas.

[The Germanic tribes] deem that there is in them [women] some holy and prophetic power, and neither scorn their counsel nor neglect their answers. We saw in the days of Vespasian how Veleda was considered by many a deity; but in former times they also venerated Aurinia and many others, and not with flattery nor as though making false goddesses.¹¹³

Behind the well-known pantheon of the Æsir and Vanir lies an extensive pagan tradition that features a variety of primarily female supernatural figures – such as the *vǫlur*, *dísir* (guardian spirits), *norns*, and *valkyries*.¹¹⁴

Unfortunately, despite the striking examples of female prophetic voices available to scholars within eddic-style poetry, these voices have rarely been brought into dialogue with the female-voiced skaldic stanzas that have been preserved. As this traditional genre distinction should perhaps be seen more as a continuum and less of an absolute divide (as discussed in the introduction to this work), this study will aim to do exactly that, and will organize itself not by

¹¹¹ Katherine Morris, *Sorceress or witch?: the image of gender in medieval Iceland and northern Europe* (London, 1991), 49.

¹¹² For instance, Jenny Jochens in *Old Norse Images of Women*: “The divine and mortal *vǫlur* alike reflect perceptions of female wisdom among the ancient Germanic tribes, manifested especially in the divination of the future reported by Tacitus.” (42) Also see Jochens, “At the Dawn of Nordic Literature: A Chorus of Female Voice”, 15; Judy Quinn, “Ok verðr henni ljóð á munni: Eddic Prophecy in the *fornaldarsögur*”, *Alvíssmál* 8 (1998), 29.

¹¹³ Tacitus, “Germania”, in *Tacitus I*, Loeb Classical Library 35 (Cambridge, 1970), 142.

¹¹⁴ See further Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 35-38.

genre, but by examining a continuum of women’s voices in poetry, ranging from the entirely supernatural, to the (ostensibly) entirely realistic. I use the word ‘realistic’ rather than historical, because for the purposes of this study I am relatively uninterested in whether or not we can definitively establish if a given verse was actually composed by a woman, only if it might plausibly have been, and am significantly more interested in the way in which the verse functions within the text, and its associations within the wider poetic tradition.

The seeress’ authority is established in the opening stanzas of *Völuspá* and appears to be primarily based on her memory: she relates the tales “þau er fremst um man” (those that I remember from earliest days).¹¹⁵ The emphasis on memory is repeated twice more in the second stanza: “Ek man iǫtna / ár um borna / ... / Níó man ek heima” (I – born of giants – remember ancient times ... I remember nine worlds).¹¹⁶ Judith Jesch agrees, writing that “[t]he emphasis is very much on her [the *völva*’s] experience, she tells what she remembers, what she knows and what she sees.”¹¹⁷ The text indicates that she is older and wiser than Óðinn himself, and her tone is almost mocking when Óðinn comes to her for advice:

Ein sat hón úti,
þá er inn aldni kom,
Yggiungr ása,
ok í augo leit:
‘Hvers fregnið mik?
Hví freistið mik?
Alt veit ek, Óðinn,
hvar þú auga falt ...’

Alone she sat outside, when the old one came, the terrible one of the Æsir, and looked in her eyes: “What do you ask of me? Why do you try me? I know all, Óðinn, where you left your eye ...”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Ursula Dronke, “Völuspá”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume II, Mythological Poems*, 7.

¹¹⁶ Ursula Dronke, “Völuspá”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume II, Mythological Poems*, 7.

¹¹⁷ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 1991), 143.

¹¹⁸ Ursula Dronke, “Völuspá”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume II, Mythological Poems*, 14.

The reader, or audience, is invited to recognize that her authority and wisdom exceed that of the gods – even that of Óðinn, who relentlessly pursues wisdom.¹¹⁹ The poem emphasizes her knowledge of matters hidden to everyone else when the *vǫlva* sees Baldr’s “*ørlög fólgin*” (concealed fates),¹²⁰ and her knowledge of the past and knowledge of the future appear to be connected:

Fiqlð veit hún fræða –
fram sé ek lengra,
um ragna røk
rømm, sigtíva.

She knows much of old knowledge – I see further ahead, concerning the fate of the powers, the fate of victory’s gods.¹²¹

The poem positions the *vǫlva* as an outsider, who can recognize the gods’ moral failings (specifically, their oath-breaking)¹²² as well as their lack of knowledge: in her analysis of the episodes of the giant-builder and Baldr’s death, Ursula Dronke notes that “in an instant of insight into fate’s balance sheet, the *vǫlva* has seen the gods’ perjury as ‘paid for’ by the killing of Baldr”.¹²³ Within the poem, there is no one to challenge the *vǫlva*’s authority: not even Óðinn (implicitly part of her audience) dares speak, and she ceases to prophesy at the time of her choosing.

This is not, however, the only time Óðinn asks for the advice of a *vǫlva*: in the poem *Baldrs draumar*, Óðinn leaves the council of the Æsir and travels to seek out a seeress, whom he raises from the grave with spells:

¹¹⁹ Carolyne Larrington and Judy Quinn, in a detailed analysis of the different versions of the poem, argue that the *vǫlva*’s prophecy “forces Óðinn to confront the mortality that is inherent in the lives of gods”.

Carolyne Larrington and Judy Quinn, “‘I remember giants’: Mythological Remembering through *Vǫluspá*”, in *Myth, Magic, and Memory in Early Scandinavian Narrative Culture* (Turnhout, 2021), 61.

¹²⁰ Ursula Dronke, “*Vǫluspá*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume II, Mythological Poems*, 15.

¹²¹ Ursula Dronke, “*Vǫluspá*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume II, Mythological Poems*, 18-19, and 22-23.

¹²² Ursula Dronke, “*Vǫluspá*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume II, Mythological Poems*, 13-14.

¹²³ Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda: Volume II, Mythological Poems*, 47.

Þá reið Óðinn
fyr austan dyrr,
þar er hann vissi
volu leiði.
Nam hann vittugri
valgaldr kveða,
unz nauðig reis,
nás orð um kvað ...

Then Óðinn rode east of the door, to where he knew there was the grave of a *vǫlva*. He began to recite charms over the one skilled in witchcraft, until unwillingly she rose, and spoke words of a corpse...¹²⁴

In *Baldrs draumar*, the relationship between the *vǫlva* and her audience is much more argumentative and dynamic: Óðinn raises the *vǫlva* from the grave and compels her to speak, but she is reluctant to reveal too much information. There is no sense of a larger audience, but the reader is presented with a compelling back-and-forth dialogue between the two, as Óðinn repeatedly insists that “vil ek enn vita” (I want to know more).¹²⁵ The *vǫlva* of *Baldrs draumar* has access to the same sort of knowledge as the speaker of *Vǫluspá* – knowledge that is hidden even from Óðinn – but has arguably less authority, since she does not have the same control over the knowledge that she reveals. She is in the position of one being compelled to speak, rather than in the position of one who may speak as she chooses. Óðinn’s hold over her, however, is incomplete – for when she learns of his true identity, she successfully refuses to reveal anything more, and taunts him as he leaves. The introduction of poetic dialogue (and Óðinn’s participation in the speaking of poetry) has a levelling effect – whereas in *Vǫluspá*, the *vǫlva* has a casual, unquestioned, authority,¹²⁶ in *Baldrs draumar* the balance of power shifts towards Óðinn. This

¹²⁴ Ursula Dronke, “Baldrs draumar”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume II, Mythological Poems*, 155.

¹²⁵ Ursula Dronke, “Baldrs draumar”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume II, Mythological Poems*, 155-156.

¹²⁶ This extends to the poem’s context within the Codex Regius: as Annette Lassen has remarked, “we find no comments on *Vǫluspá* within the Codex Regius; indeed, the commentator does not even entitle the poem at the head of the manuscript. The compiler’s silence in connection with *Vǫluspá* is interesting, given the many other prose comments and explanatory narratives found throughout the manuscript. The first voice of the manuscript is thus the voice of the ancient prophetess or *vǫlva*, asking for silence when

points to what will be an overriding theme in the succeeding chapters, where I will demonstrate that one of the functions of placing verses in the mouth of particular speakers is to emphasize relationships or power dynamics between characters.

Prophecy and Magic

There is a distinction to be made between prophecy and magic within the Old Norse sources – on the one hand, we have figures such as the *vǫlva* who can divine the future through dreams or some innate gift, and on the other we have figures such as Katla and Geirríðr in *Eyrbyggja saga*, who use magic (whether through spells, instruments, or chants) to influence the future according to their own or another’s desire. Somewhere between the two would sit figures such as Þorbjörg from *Eiríks saga rauða*, who can neither change nor predict events through any innate gift, but can foretell the future by use of a particular chant or ritual.¹²⁷ This is a distinction that has been highlighted by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, who is particularly skeptical “as to whether women who perform magic in the sagas are based on pagan *vǫlur*: such a view implies the rather questionable idea that authors and their audiences in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were generally familiar with historical pagan religious practices and regarded them as effective, even if they were obsolete at the time of writing.”¹²⁸

This is a worthwhile distinction to draw here because the evidence suggests that recorded stanzas of poetry are predominantly associated with the former rather than with the latter – with prophecy, rather than with magic. *Eyrbyggja saga* features both: a great deal of supernatural

delivering her prophecy, *Vǫluspá*. Regrettably, the commentator tells us nothing about his view of her identity or origin.” Annette Lassen, “The Early Scholarly Reception of *Vǫluspá*”, 9.

¹²⁷ *Eiríks saga rauða*, ed. Einar Ól Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (Reykjavík, 1935), 206-208.

¹²⁸ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*, 50. The same distinction is made by Jenny Jochens, “Old Norse Magic and Gender: Þátr Þorvalds ens Víðfǫrla”, *Scandinavian Studies* 63.3 (1991), 306.

activity is recounted in a saga that is usually classed among the *Íslendingasögur*, and this juxtaposition of historical account with a “pyrotechnic display of the supernatural”¹²⁹ has concerned many critics. Jean-Pierre Mabire remarks that “l’auteur, qui a une prédilection marquée pour les choses de l’ancien temps, n’hésite pas à faire intervenir dans son récit fantômes et sorcières, et rapporte maintes superstitions populaires auxquelles il semble accorder grand crédit.” (The author, who has a marked interest in matters of ancient times, does not hesitate to insert ghosts and witches into his account, and recounts a number of popular superstitions to which he seems to give great credit.)¹³⁰ The reaction of critics is perhaps best summed up by Heather O’Donoghue: “the more sophisticated the account of Snorri goði’s career, or the analysis of Þórarinn’s revulsion when involved in violence, the more bizarre and unaccountable seem the hauntings at Fróðá, or the witch Katla’s conjuring tricks.”¹³¹ Nonetheless, critical approaches have gradually shifted: “from one which assumes that the part of the saga that would make it comprehensible under their scheme must be missing, to one which looks within the saga as we have it for the thematic and structural elements that would have rendered it meaningful for its author and intended audience.”¹³²

The only verses given to a woman in *Eyrbyggja saga* are spoken by neither Katla nor Geirriðr. Instead, Þóroddr’s old foster-mother finds herself in a position that the *völva* of *Baldur’s draumar* might well relate to – “in the unenviable position of telling a stubborn man a true prophecy that he does not want to hear.”¹³³ The prose implies that the bull Glæsir embodies the

¹²⁹ G.N. Garmonsway, “*Eyrbyggja saga*”, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 12 (1937-45), 82.

¹³⁰ Jean-Pierre Mabire, *Le Composition de la Eyrbyggja Saga* (Caen, 1971), 10.

¹³¹ Heather O’Donoghue, *Skaldic verse and the poetics of saga narrative* (Oxford, 2005), 128.

¹³² Jennifer Livesay, “Women and Narrative Structure in *Eyrbyggja Saga*”, *Folklore Forum* 21:2 (1988), 181.

¹³³ Sandra B. Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women’s Poetry: The voices of female skalds*, 23.

spirit of Þórolfr bægifótr,¹³⁴ and Þóroddr's foster-mother (who is never named, so her verses are listed as 'anonymous' in anthologies) advises Þóroddr that the bull should be killed. When she learns that he has not done so, she speaks two stanzas of *dróttkvætt* telling the destruction that the bull will bring upon him:

Þá kvað kerling vísu þessa:
Haus knyr hjarðar vísi,
hann ræðr of fjör manna,
hallar hristi mjallar
hadds, blóðvita roddu;
sá kennir þér sinna
svarðristit ben jarðar;
þat verðr, at fé fjotrar
fjör þitt, en sék gorrva.

Þóroddr svarar: “Gamalœr gerisk þú nú, fóstura, ok muntu eigi þat sjá.” Hon kvað:

Ópt es auðar þopta
œr, es tungu hrœrir,
sésk á blóðgum búki
bengrát, es ér látið;
tarfr mun hér, þvít horfa
hann tekr reiðr við mœnnum,
þat sér golls ens gjalla
Gerðr, þinn bani verða.

“Ekki mun svá verða, fóstura,” sagði hann. “Því er verr, at svá mun verða,” sagði hon.

Then the old woman spoke this verse:

“The herd-leader shakes his head, he plots the death of men, with a blood-knowing voice – the shaker of the hair of new snow (=old woman) shudders; he will take you to a sword-slash in the earth (=grave); this will come to pass, that the beast will take your life, and I see it clearly.”

Þóroddr answered: “Now you are in your dotage, foster-mother, and you are not able to see that.” She said:

“Often the rowing bench of riches (=woman) is mad, when she moves her tongue, that is your opinion; I see weeping wounds on a bloody trunk; here the bull will be your bane, because he begins to turn against men in anger, so sees the Gerðr of jingling gold (=woman).”

He said, “It shall not be so, foster-mother.” “It is true, that it will be so,” she said.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Heather O’Donoghue, *Skaldic verse and the poetics of saga narrative*, 130.

¹³⁵ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (Reykjavík, 1935), 173-4.

The imagery is striking and the kennings memorable: Þóroddr will be laid not just in a grave, but in a *svarðristit ben jarðar* (swordslash in the earth). In this episode, it could be argued that Þóroddr's foster-mother is effectively powerless – Þóroddr brushes off her concerns, repeatedly, and refuses to kill the bull despite her attempted intervention. But the stanzas ensure that her second warning cannot be overlooked by the reader, even if it is discounted by her foster-son. Heather O'Donoghue, in her analysis of the dialogue verses in *Eyrbyggja saga*, writes that they “emphasize the personal and emotional lives of individual, even, in social terms, marginal, saga characters”.¹³⁶ Although O'Donoghue does not say so explicitly, I would argue that this is certainly the case for Þóroddr's foster-mother, whose powerful and evocative *dróttkvætt* stanzas lend weight to her warnings.

The author of the surrounding prose also prefaces the episode by inviting a reader of the saga to believe Þóroddr's foster-mother: “hon þótti verit hafa framsyn á fyrra aldri, en er hon eldisk, var henni virt til gamalóra, þat er hon mælti; en þat gekk þó mart eptir, sem hon sagði.” (It was thought she had foresight in years past, yet as she aged, what she said was deemed dotage from old age; but nonetheless many matters went as she said.)¹³⁷ The prose therefore sets up a discrepancy between how the prophecy is received by other characters in the saga, and how it should be understood by the reader. Þóroddr's foster-mother, and her words, are given authority in the mind of the reader if not in the mind of her foster-son, and the medium of verse in which she delivers the prophecy (notably *dróttkvætt* rather than one of the Eddic metres) passes unremarked by the compiler or indeed by any of the other characters within the saga. Regardless of whether the stanzas had an independent existence outside of the saga, the author/compiler's use of them recalls the prophetic power and wisdom of other mythic women in the Eddic corpus.

¹³⁶ Heather O'Donoghue, *Skaldic verse and the poetics of saga narrative*, 78.

¹³⁷ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 171.

Þóroddr's foster-mother is not the only woman to prophesy in the saga: after Katla and her son Oddr have been captured, and Oddr is sent to the gallows, Arnkell taunts Katla and receives this reply: “en um þat vilda ek at mín ákvæði stœðisk, at þú hlytir því verra af feðr þínum en Oddr hefir af mér hlotit, sem þú hefir meira í hættu en hann; vænti ek ok, at þat sé mælt áðr lýkr, at þú eigir illan fōður.” (And about that, I will it that this verdict stands – that worse shall come to you from your father than has come to Oddr from me, as you have more at risk than he; and I expect that it will be said before the end, that you had an evil father.)¹³⁸ Both women foretell the future, and the events they predict both come true. But only Þóroddr's foster-mother speaks in verse. The discrepancy may, of course, be down to the author or compiler's knowledge and the verses that were available to them,¹³⁹ but it may also relate to the perceived authority of the speaker and the way in which the author/compiler intends that speaker to be perceived. Though the wisdom of his foster-mother is marginalized in Þóroddr's mind, her use of verse gives her words weight. It is not at all clear that the same is true for Katla's audience – she is portrayed as a far less sympathetic character, and her ‘prophecy’ is as much a curse as it is a foretelling of the future.¹⁴⁰

Brynhildr and *Völsunga saga*

The speaker of *Völuspá* prophesies unchallenged; the *völva* of *Baldrs draumar* engages in a verbal contest with Óðinn himself; Þóroddr's foster-mother is ignored and disregarded by

¹³⁸ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 54.

¹³⁹ Heather O'Donoghue singles out both the story of Víga-Styrr and this episode with Glæsir as episodes whose “distinction from the whole narrative is especially evident, because the verses, whilst not lending an exactly historical veracity to events, do give the impression that their speakers are voices from a past, and perhaps once had an existence independent of the saga narrative.” Heather O'Donoghue, *Skaldic verse and the poetics of saga narrative*, 129.

¹⁴⁰ For further insight into Katla's character, see Forrest S. Scott, “The woman who knows: female characters of *Eyrbyggja Saga*”, *Parergon* 3 (1995), 80-81.

Bóroddr but granted legitimacy by her use of verse, and by the surrounding prose. All three of these women could be described as outsiders, marginalized in different ways, and yet are thus able to access knowledge and wisdom that is beyond natural. Each of these poetic speeches, and the way that they are received, and framed, clearly points to dynamics of power and status between the speaker and their audience. Nor are these isolated examples: verse is certainly a common, and well-recognized, medium for supernatural women to pass on supernatural information to a (usually male) audience. In *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr's extraordinary knowledge first becomes apparent through verse, when Sigurðr resolves to put her wisdom to the test. He has been told, he says, “vænleik ok vitru” (of her beauty and wisdom), and he asks her to “kenn oss ráð til stórra hluta” (give me counsel on great matters).¹⁴¹ She then recites several stanzas of the poem known elsewhere as the *Sigrdrífumál* of the Codex Regius – stanzas particularly concerned with runes. She prefaces her recitation with a wish that subtly foreshadows Sigurðr's later loss of memory, explicitly wishing “gefi goðin okkr góðan dag, at þér verði nyt ok frægð at mínum vitrleik ok þú munir eptir þat er vit ræðum” (that the gods give us a good day, that you make use of my wisdom and become famous, and that you may remember that which we discuss).¹⁴²

The poetry sits uneasily in the surrounding prose, and at first glance it seems that the compiler had the poem available to him and so included it without being too picky about whether it fit the context precisely; Sigurðr's reply to the rune stanzas is the most obvious example of this, when he says that “[m]unkat ek flæja / þótt mik feigan vitir, / emkat ek með bleyði borinn” (I will not flee, though you know that I am fated to die, I was not born with cowardice).¹⁴³ In

¹⁴¹ *Völsunga saga*, ed. R. G. Finch (London, 1965), 35.

¹⁴² *Völsunga saga*, ed. R. G. Finch, 35.

¹⁴³ *Völsunga saga*, ed. R. G. Finch, 39.

neither the prose nor the rune-verses thus far has Brynhildr said anything about a possible foreknowledge of Sigurðr's fate.

Despite the slight disjunction between the poetry and the prose, the incorporation of these stanzas into *Völsunga saga* may have served one clear purpose for the compiler. This episode with Sigurðr is the first introduction of Brynhildr's character in the saga, and establishes her from the outset as an authority, as a woman also possessed of supernatural knowledge, and also as an outsider. Her dual nature as a valkyrie and as a mortal woman in the various sources has attracted no small amount of commentary from other scholars;¹⁴⁴ suffice it to say here that in *Völsunga saga*, this dual nature is frequently apparent – she is both a valkyrie who has struck down a man in battle against Óðinn's wishes,¹⁴⁵ and repeatedly named as the (implicitly human) daughter of Buðli and the foster daughter of Heimir.¹⁴⁶ She sits at the boundary between the human and the supernatural: for Manuel Aguirre “she is otherworldly not because she necessarily has divine attributes but because she is conceived not fully to belong in ordinary human space”.¹⁴⁷ She is thus, again, an inhabitant of a marginal space.

In the Eddic poems, Brynhildr is above all a speaker – for some critics, indeed, the archetypal whetter. For Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, Brynhildr's “identity is constructed by her utterances rather than by her actions”,¹⁴⁸ and Jenny Jochens describes her as “a woman whose fame rested on murderous deeds of revenge that she achieved, however, not by direct physical

¹⁴⁴ See Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 163-165. This duality in *Völsunga saga* is disputed by Manuel Aguirre, who sets out to show that “the fabled inconsistencies in Byrnhild's character are illusory”. Manuel Aguirre, “Narrative Composition in the Saga of the Volsungs”, *Saga-Book 26* (2002), 5.

¹⁴⁵ *Völsunga saga*, ed. R. G. Finch, 35.

¹⁴⁶ *Völsunga saga*, ed. R. G. Finch, 42.

¹⁴⁷ Manuel Aguirre, “Narrative Composition in the Saga of the Volsungs”, 16.

¹⁴⁸ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, “Gerðit Hon ... sem konor aðrar: Women and Subversion in Eddic Heroic Poetry”, in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York, 2013), 118.

action but indirectly through performative speech-acts of goading and inciting men to execute her purposes immediately.”¹⁴⁹ In *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr’s knowledge and wisdom are established from the outset with her poetic speech, the longest speech by any character in poetry in the saga, and one that accounts for almost half of all the poetic stanzas the compiler has chosen to include.¹⁵⁰ It is immediately apparent that this is a woman possessed of otherworldly knowledge; a woman who may not quite fit into the boundaries and confines of everyday society; and a woman whose chief power may be her words, rather than her actions. It is certainly clear from the verses that neglecting or forgetting her wisdom may lead to grave consequences: “Qlrúnar skaltu kunna, / ef þú vill at annars kván / véli þik eigi í tryggð, ef þú trúir.” (Ale-runes you must know, if you desire that another’s wife will not betray you, if you trust her.)¹⁵¹ She also warns him against “meinblandinn mjöðr” (poisoned mead),¹⁵² a particularly poignant warning given that it is by a drink given to him by Gunnhildr that Sigurðr will later lose his memory of the vows he made to Brynhildr. She is not only a whetter; within *Völsunga saga* she only turns to that role after the supernatural advice she has bestowed has been neglected, and her initial function as a wise woman helps to ensure sympathy for her plight later in the saga.

Brynhildr’s poetic advice to Sigurðr sets her apart, but the stanzas from *Sigrdrífumál* are not the only time the compiler of the saga has chosen to use verse to enhance characterization. Perhaps one of the most striking scenes in the saga is the confrontation between the two queens,

¹⁴⁹ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 162.

¹⁵⁰ For a much more detailed analysis of the verses in *Völsunga saga*, see Judy Quinn, “Trust in Words: Verse Quotations and Dialogue in *Völsunga saga*”, in *Fornaldarsagornas Struktur och Ideologi*, eds. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen, and Agneta Ney (Uppsala, 2003), 89-100.

¹⁵¹ *Völsunga saga*, ed. R. G. Finch, 36-37.

¹⁵² *Völsunga saga*, ed. R. G. Finch, 37.

Brynhildr and Guðrún, and their debate over what has happened, and their opinions of their husbands. The debate predominantly plays out in prose, with one striking exception:

Guðrún svarar, “Áttu svá gofgan mann at óvíst er hverr meiri konungr er, ok gnótt fjár ok ríkis.” Brynhildr svarar, “Sigurðr vá at Fáfni, ok er þat meira vert en allt ríki Gunnars konungs, svá sem kveðit er:

Sigurðr vá at ormi,
en þat síðan mun
engum fyrnask,
meðan ǫld lifir.
En hlýri þinn
hvarki þorði
eld at ríða
né yfir stíga.”

Guðrún svarar, “Grani rann eigi eldinn undir Gunnari konungi, en hann þorði at ríða, ok þarf honum eigi hugar at frýja.”

Guðrún answered, “You have so noble a husband, with an abundance of goods and power, that it is unknown which is the greater king.” Brynhildr answered, “Sigurðr fought with Fafnir, and that is greater than all of Gunnarr’s power. As is said:

Sigurðr fought the worm, and afterwards that shall not be forgotten, while men live. But your brother did not dare to ride at the fire nor to step over it.”

Guðrún answered, “Grani did not run at the fire under king Gunnarr, but he [Gunnarr] had the courage to ride, and it is not necessary to reproach him for courage.”¹⁵³

The inclusion of this stanza has several effects: one, it unquestionably reinforces Brynhildr’s argument that Sigurðr is the better man. Guðrún has no comparable stanza to recite about Gunnarr; only Sigurðr’s deeds appear to have merited the composition of celebratory verse. It also, however, reinforces the perception that Brynhildr is an outsider, and one who has access to supernatural knowledge, through her prophetic statement that “þat síðan mun / engum fyrnask, / meðan ǫld lifir” (afterwards that shall not be forgotten, while men live). The appeal to poetic authority does not win her the argument from Guðrún’s perspective (who immediately blames Gunnarr’s horse, Grani), but it may be intended to win her the point for a reader.

¹⁵³ *Völsunga saga*, ed. R. G. Finch, 51-52.

Manuel Aguirre's analysis of the structure of *Völsunga saga* concludes that "[i]f the centre of gravity, the axis around which the story turns is shaped by the deeds of the male heroes in the Volsung line, the frame within which these take place is provided by a variety of female figures whose consistently ambivalent behaviour suggests that they are all manifestations of one single principle which sets and keeps the story in motion."¹⁵⁴ For Aguirre, the female figure in medieval literature "appears to be less, and more, than man: she moves on the periphery, exhibiting little political power yet wielding or symbolising the larger forces to which political power is ultimately subservient."¹⁵⁵ Certainly the female seeresses we have seen thus far would fit this pattern: although they may not have access to obvious political power, we have seen in all of these texts that women may gain distinction through poetic speech, that poetic speech may be correlated with supernatural wisdom or knowledge, and that the perception of this speech by other characters within the text versus the framing of this speech by the surrounding prose may differ substantially. Although the speaker may be forced to prophesy, or her words disregarded or even scorned by her audience within the text, both the surrounding prose and subsequent events may indicate an appreciation of the character's wisdom. This can serve to heighten tensions by foreshadowing catastrophic events that are yet to come, and to create a favourable impression of a character who may be an outsider or a marginal figure within the text. Crucially, women's prophetic verse is not limited to stanzas in eddic-style forms.

Heiðr and Signý in *Hrólfs saga kraka*

Particularly interesting power dynamics also emerge in the verses of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, which, like *Völsunga saga*, is often critiqued for the episodic or composite nature of its structure.

¹⁵⁴ Manuel Aguirre, "Narrative Composition in the Saga of the Volsungs", 34.

¹⁵⁵ Manuel Aguirre, "Narrative Composition in the Saga of the Volsungs", 35.

According to Jesse Byock, “[t]he various stories concerning Hrolf and his heroes were first assembled in a coherent, single text possibly as early as the thirteenth century. In its present form, *Hrolf’s Saga* was composed around 1400. ... Today the earliest of the forty-four known manuscripts dates from the seventeenth century, and all of these are copies deriving ultimately from a single common ancestor. The saga author, well aware that he was arranging a compilation of older material, retains the episodic structure of his sources, often telling the audience when one sub-tale ends and another begins”.¹⁵⁶ Byock claims that “[i]f the underlying, individual episodes are often discernible, the saga is, nevertheless, a unified work, very much in the matter-of-fact style of the Icelandic family sagas.”¹⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the composite nature of the saga is still very much discernible – with elements and storylines that link it to the *fornaldarsögur* and the *riddarasögur* (as shall be discussed in later chapters), as well as the family sagas.

The seeress Heiðr speaks her verses in a public venue, at the command of King Fróði: “Hana bad k(ongur) að neyta listar sinnar og vita hvar hún kynni að s(eigia) til sveinanna.” (The king bade her to use her craft and to learn what she could say about the boys.)¹⁵⁸ This is a dynamic we are by now well acquainted with; although the immediate context is less obviously supernatural, the parallels to Óðinn’s demands of the *völva* would be hard to ignore. Despite Fróði’s initial generosity towards the seeress, when “[g]iördi hann þá gilla veitslu j möti henni, og setti hana á seidhiall einn háfan” (he had then a great feast made for her, and set her on a platform for incantations),¹⁵⁹ it is clear that he intends to coerce her to his will by any means necessary, and he commands her to give him information about Helgi and Hroar. Initially, he praises her, while making this request: “eg veit ... að nú mun margt fyrir þig bera, og sje eg nú

¹⁵⁶ Jesse Byock, “Introduction”, in *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (London, 1998), ix.

¹⁵⁷ Jesse Byock, “Introduction”, in *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, ix.

¹⁵⁸ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay (Copenhagen, 1960), 9.

¹⁵⁹ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 9.

mikla giæfu áá þeir og suara mier sem skiotast” (I know ... that now many things will be known to you, and I see that now great luck is with you, and answer me speedily).¹⁶⁰ From the beginning of their interaction, Fróði combines flattery with commands, and seeming respect with an expectation that the seeress will – in return – fulfill his demands. When treating her with honour and respect fails, he turns to threats of torture: “Fr(odi) k(ongur) herdir nu ad seidk(onunni) fast og bidur hana ad seigia ed sanna ef hun skuli ecki pijnd verda” (King Fróði now speaks firmly to the sorceress, and bids her speak the truth if she does not wish to be tortured).¹⁶¹

Heiðr is not the only woman in *Hrólfs saga kraka* to speak in verse. When her two brothers enter the hall, Signý has this exchange with her husband, the jarl:

Jall sp(urdi) þui hun gräti. Hun kuad þä vjisu,
 Qll eru ordinn,
 ætt Skiölldunga,
 lofdungz lundar,
 ad limum einum.
 Brædur sáá eg mijna,
 áá berum sitia,
 enn Sævilz recka,
 áá soðludum.

The jarl asked why she cried. Then she spoke a verse: “All have become, the family of the princely grove of the Skjöldungar, only limbs. I saw my brothers, riding bareback, but Sævill’s warriors in saddles.”¹⁶²

Signý’s role in this episode seems strikingly maternal, possibly due to the significant age difference between her and her younger siblings. The boys regularly behave with (apparently) no regard for their own safety, running around like the children that they are: “Koma þeir nu til veitslunnar og hlaupa aptur og framm eptir höllinni, og eitt sinn ber þä þar ad sem Signi systir

¹⁶⁰ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 10.

¹⁶¹ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 11.

¹⁶² *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 8-9.

þeirra var. Hun m(ællti) til þeirra helldur lagt, verid ecki j höllinni, þui lytill er þröski. þeir gäfu ecki gaum ad þui.” (They come now to the feast and run up and down the hall, and once this brought them to where Signý, their sister, was. She said to them in a low voice, not to stay in the hall, because they were young in years. They gave no heed to this.)¹⁶³ (Various law codes cite age sixteen as the age of majority – at this point in the saga, Helgi and Hroar are ten and twelve, respectively.)¹⁶⁴ Much of the episode emphasizes their youthfulness – when Sævill refuses to allow the boys to accompany him to Fróði’s feast, Helgi (the younger of the two) “fær sier eitt ötamid tryppi ad rijda er Helgi var reyndar, hleipir nu eptir lidinu og horfir aptur til hala og liet sier alla vega keimskliga” (found for himself an untamed colt to ride, and when Helgi was seated on it, now he leaps after the host, but he is turned backwards towards the tail and seems in all ways very foolish).¹⁶⁵ The unbridled colt is an apt mount for Helgi and his brother, who are similarly young and untamed. Although the saga-narrator is otherwise sympathetic to Helgi and Hroar’s cause – siding repeatedly with them and their family while condemning King Fróði as “mesti rifballdi” (most savage)¹⁶⁶ – the explicit commentary on their foolishness here is unmistakable. They are not helping their cause (in the grand scheme of things, achieving vengeance for their father), and they are certainly not helping anyone who is trying to protect them – like Sævill or Signý.

Signý is essentially powerless throughout this episode, unable to control her younger brothers’ youthful boisterousness, and able to do little to shield them from Fróði’s recognition.

¹⁶³ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 9.

¹⁶⁴ For example, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágas*, ed. and trans. Andy Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins (Winnipeg, 1980), volume Ia, 17. For a comprehensive discussion, see Nic Percivall, “Teenage Angst: The Structures and Boundaries of Adolescence in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-century Iceland”, in *Youth and age in the medieval north*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden, 2008), 127-149.

¹⁶⁵ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 8.

¹⁶⁶ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 1.

Sævill twice warns her about the necessity of keeping the boys' presence a secret, but Signý's only direct action in the boys' defense is one that comes perilously close to revealing all: after the seeress mentions Hoppr and Hó, "Og j þui kastadi Signi til hennar gullhryngi. Hun varð glöð vid sendingina og vill nu afbregða. þui varð nu so s(agdi) hun, og er þetta lygd ein er eg seigi, og villist nu miög spáádömur minn allur." (And because of this Signý cast a gold ring to her (Heiðr). She was pleased with the present and wants now to break off. So now she said, "This is a lie that I have said, and now my prophecies are all false.")¹⁶⁷ Unfortunately, this sudden reversal in Heiðr's willingness to divulge prophetic information tips Fróði off, and he begins to question what he is being told. The narrator then recounts that "[k]ongi var sagt að Sygni væri siuk ordinn af reyki þeim sem legði af ofninum" (the king was told that Signý had become sick because of the smoke from the oven),¹⁶⁸ but we are never told how much Fróði is inclined to believe this story. Signý's actions do spark the second warning from her husband, Sævill, who "bidur hana að sitja vpp og bera sig hraustliga, þui margt kann að verða suien(unum) til lífz, ef það áá til að vilja" (bids her to sit up and bear herself bravely, "because it can have much to do with keeping the boys alive, if that is meant to be").¹⁶⁹ Sævill obviously feels that this second warning is necessary, given Signý's behaviour. Her protective instincts are not something that she has been able to translate into much effective action on the boys' behalf, and her husband appears to be a more rational agent, giving her counsel and support.

In both Signý and Heiðr's cases, they are defined primarily by their relationship to the men in their lives – and by what they can, or cannot, do for them. Signý's actions are guided by her husband's advice and her desire to protect her brothers; Heiðr's prophecies are forced from

¹⁶⁷ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 10.

¹⁶⁸ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 10.

¹⁶⁹ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 10-11.

her, at least partially by Fróði (though also by the magic that possesses her). What power is available to them appears to be primarily available through deception and subterfuge, though in Heiðr's case, she also has significant magical abilities. After her final prophetic stanza and her accompanying (prose) qualification, Heiðr flees the hall entirely to avoid Fróði's anger.

They are, however, for a brief moment in Fróði's hall, allies. Heiðr does not merely stop divining, upon receiving the ring; she appears to understand (from the mere gift of the ring) Signý's concern for concealing the boys and – lest Fróði work out the cryptic references in her first two verses – actively takes Signý and the boys' part by disavowing any truthfulness in her previous verses. Though the narrator has not previously shown her interacting with Helgi and Hroar directly, or saying anything to them, at the end of the episode it is suggested that she had advised them to flee the hall: “Enn þad heilrædi kiendi völuan þeim ad þeir skylldu forda sier þä hun hliop vtar eptir höllinni.” (And the *völvu* had given them good counsel to save themselves, and she ran herself from the hall.)¹⁷⁰

The narrator of *Hrólfs saga kraka* spends very little time on the relationship between Signý and the sorceress, giving scant motivation for Heiðr's decision to defy Fróði by attempting to protect the boys – but there is one way in which they are implicitly affiliated: both are speakers of verse. It is certainly possible, and perhaps probable, that these verses were inherited as part of individual episodes by the compiler; the episodic nature of the saga is particularly visible in its incorporation of poetry – with several linked verses incorporated into specific episodes, rather than consistently or regularly incorporated throughout the entirety of the prose. As it turns out, however, in the rest of the saga, verse stanzas spoken by characters closely

¹⁷⁰ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 11.

related (not necessarily by blood; also by allegiance) have the effect of marking these characters as allies – establishing or cementing a relationship between them.

When Þorir first visits his brother, Elgfróði, he does so in disguise. When Elgfróði returns home to find a hooded man sitting in his hut, this is his response:

[L]ytur ecki hyrliga til hinnz komna mannz. Bredgur nu skalminni og m(æ)lir,
Greniar skalm,
geingur vr slíjdrum,
minnist hönd,
hilldar verka.

He did not look kindly on the newly-arrived man. Now he drew his short sword and said, “A short sword howls, leaving its sheath; a hand remembers the work of battle.”¹⁷¹

Þorir responds in kind:

Enn eg læt vyz
áá veigie ödrum,
öxe myna
jafnt hlíod bera.

“I permitted my axe, on another wide road, to make precisely that sound.”¹⁷²

The verses are strikingly similar in content – both Elgfróði and Þorir refer to their respective, distinct, weapons, and Þorir emphasizes the similar nature of their sounds. Immediately following this verse exchange, Þorir reveals himself and the brothers are reunited: “Og þá duldist Þorer ecki leingur, og þeckti Fróði brödur sinn, og baud honum allt ad helmingi vid sig þad sem þá hafdi hann saman dreigid, þui þar skorti eigi aud mykinn. Þörir vill þad eige þiggia.” (And then Þorir did not disguise himself any longer, and Fróði recognized his brother, and bade him have half of all that he had brought together, because he was not short of wealth. Þorir did not desire to accept this present.)¹⁷³ By representing both of their initial speeches in verse, and in the

¹⁷¹ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 64.

¹⁷² *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 64.

¹⁷³ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 64.

same form and length of verse, the saga-author implicitly highlights the close relationship between the two men – even when one of them is unaware of it.

Two other closely linked verses occur when Aðils lights a great fire in his hall, ostensibly to show hospitality but in reality to burn Hrólfr and his men. Aðils has assumed “hann eij stadist gieta brunann eptir þui sem kapparnar” (that he [=Hrólfr] would not endure the heat after the manner of his champions)¹⁷⁴ and hopes to thus be able to distinguish between them. However, Boðvarr and Svipdagr – two of Hrólfr’s greatest champions – declare two lines: “Aukum nu elldana / ad Adilz borg” (Now let us increase the fires in Aðils’ fortress).¹⁷⁵ Hrólfr, shortly thereafter, declares in the same metre: “Eigi flyr sä elldinn / sem yfir hleypur” (no one flees the fire as he leaps over it).¹⁷⁶ Immediately thereafter, “stikla þeir allir yfer elldinn, og ætla nu ad Adilz kongi og taka hann höndum” (they all jumped over the fire, and intended now to take King Aðils captive).¹⁷⁷ The two short sections of verse not only reinforce the strong sense of allegiance and loyalty between Hrólfr and his champions, but also help the saga-author’s establishment of Hrólfr as one of them – a champion in his own right, not merely a weak king. He fights with them, leaps over fires with them, endures heat with them – and speaks verse to them, as they do to him.

Signý and Heiðr are thus one of three separate groups of characters paired by the insertion of poetic stanzas into the narrative. The only two isolated stanzas (appearing in their own chapters – sufficiently distant from other stanzas to make an intended structural link unlikely) are those spoken by Reginn and by King Aðils – and perhaps unsurprisingly, both Reginn and King Aðils are, for different reasons, particularly solitary characters. Implicitly, then,

¹⁷⁴ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 96.

¹⁷⁵ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 97.

¹⁷⁶ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 97.

¹⁷⁷ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, 97.

Signý and Heiðr are aligned before the saga-author ever indicates that they may in fact end up on the same side, and though they may not speak a word directly to each other, such direct speech is apparently unnecessary – the throwing of a single ring is enough to cement the alliance. I would suggest that the saga-author uses verses as a structural tool to establish or draw attention to relationships between these characters – and that characters who use a similar form of language can subtly underscore their alliance. The partial stanzas in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (where each character speaks only part of a full verse) are particularly significant, but this use of similar verse forms to highlight alliances or relationships can also be seen when characters speak complete verses (as, for instance, in *Víglundar saga*, discussed in later in chapter 3).

Hervarar saga

Just as verse can be used to underscore an alliance, it can also be used to dramatize conflict – and this is true of eddic-style verses as well as skaldic ones, as can be seen in *Hervarar saga*. Like *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Völsunga saga*, *Hervarar saga* is not usually lauded for its structural cohesion. The text survives in thirty-two manuscripts, of which six have historically been used to establish the text. These are divided further into three main redactions, R (represented primarily by the vellum Gl.kgl.sml.2845, 4to, in the Royal Library in Copenhagen), H (the oldest text of which is found in Hauksbók, in the hand of Haukr Erlendsson), and U (which survives in a small paper manuscript in the University Library, Uppsala). The prose texts' incorporation of poetic stanzas varies, often considerably, between the various redactions. This is particularly notable in the case of the riddles Gestumblindi poses to Heiðrekr in the second half of the saga: although all three redactions (R, H, U) begin with the same four riddles and end with

the same two, the order otherwise is completely inconsistent between the extant witnesses.¹⁷⁸

This is, however, perhaps particularly easy to understand when dealing with a text such as the riddle-verses, where the exact order of the middle verses has very little bearing on a story or plot.

Although Hollander believed that the lay was “decidedly in the later manner, in style and composition”, and “could hardly be older than, say, the twelfth century”,¹⁷⁹ it is generally now agreed that the poems substantially predate the prose saga, and *Hervararkviða* and Hjalmar’s death song are in fact often regarded as some of the oldest extant Old Norse poetry, co-opted by a writer who, in Christopher Tolkien’s view, fashioned them into a work that is “something of a gallimaufrey, unkempt, ununified, with many inconsistencies ... the saga-writer would have needed to be far more ruthless with his material than he was to make a satisfactory design”.¹⁸⁰ However, Tolkien also comments that both “*The Waking of Angantyr* and *The Death-Song of Hjalmar* are poems that, not being complete in themselves, presuppose the existence of some sort of narrative frame to the dialogue; in this respect they differ from *The Battle of the Goths and the Huns*”.¹⁸¹ A clear outline of the most probable history of the entwining of verse and prose is given in Jenny Jochens’ book, *Old Norse Images of Women*. Hervör, the viking shieldmaiden, is seen as a creation of a later writer who had read an account of Hervör, the princess of the Huns, and created a suitably impressive (and ultimately far more prestigious) female figure to be her grandmother;¹⁸² Hervör’s position “as the only heir born after the decimation of twelve brothers makes her male role necessary, at least for a short period”,¹⁸³ and the result of the numerous

¹⁷⁸ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* (London, 1960), xviii.

¹⁷⁹ Lee Hollander, *Old Norse Poems: the most important non-skaldic verse not included in the Poetic Edda* (New York, 1936), 29.

¹⁸⁰ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, viii.

¹⁸¹ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, xii.

¹⁸² Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 98-99.

¹⁸³ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 99.

redactions and recombinations of the original material is that “the viking Hervör becomes the ancestor of her Germanic namesake, who historically would have preceded her by half a millennium”.¹⁸⁴

A total of seventeen stanzas are attributed to Hervör by the saga-author; all are represented as spontaneous speech, rather than explicitly described as poetic compositions. Hervör’s *fornyrðislag* verses may, at first glance, be very different in form from the highly complex *dróttkvætt* stanzas of Kormákr Ögmundarson or Egill Skallagrímsson, but as a speaker of verse, she does share a number of traits with disruptive outlaws and poets, such as the principal characters of *Kormáks saga Ögmundarsonar*, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, and *Gunnlaugs saga örmstungu*. As Margaret Clunies Ross notes in *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, “[i]n their early lives both the poets and the outlaws are difficult, hot-tempered and assertive, in several cases to such a pronounced degree that they can be classed as anti-social”.¹⁸⁵ Hervör shares a striking number of similarities with these unruly poets of the *Íslendingasögur*: the saga-author tells us that she “var sterk sem karlar” (was as strong as a man)¹⁸⁶ and that as a child, “[h]on gerði ok optar illt en gott” (she often did more harm than good).¹⁸⁷ The description “var sterk sem karlar” is usually understood as a sign of her deviance from established gender norms, but should also be understood as a subtle way of aligning her with similar (male) heroes in other sagas, whose classic traits usually include unusual youthful strength, equivalent to that of an adult. Þórólfr, Egill’s older brother, “var langt um fram jafnaldra sína at afli” (was much stronger

¹⁸⁴ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 100.

¹⁸⁵ Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 134.

¹⁸⁶ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 10.

¹⁸⁷ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 10.

than others his age),¹⁸⁸ and Egill, “þá er hann var þrjú vetr, þá var hann mikill ok sterkr, svá sem þeir sveinar aðrir, er váru sex vetra eða sjau” (when he was three winters old, was then as big and strong as other boys, who were six or seven).¹⁸⁹ By the time Egill reached the age of twelve, “var hann svá mikill vexti, at fáir vóru menn svá stórir ok at afli búnir, at Egill ynni þá eigi flesta menn í leikum” (he had become so big that few adult men were big and strong enough, that Egill could not beat them in games).¹⁹⁰ When she is forbidden to train “við skot ok skjöld ok sverð” (with bow and shield and sword), Hervör runs away and embarks on a project not dissimilar to that of the many saga-heroes who go off to raid or plunder: she “drap menn til fjár sér” (killed men for their belongings), and she is described as a “stigama[ð]r”,¹⁹¹ a word that Tolkien translates and Zoega glosses as “highwayman”, suitably illustrating the similarities between Hervör and other anti-social outlaw protagonists. Carol J. Clover has provided one possible explanation for this in “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe”:

[T]heir system and ours do not line up and ... the mismatch is especially obvious, and especially alien, where women and the feminine are concerned. From the outset, scholars have speculated on what unusual notion of womanhood might account for such startlingly strong female figures in a culture that seems otherwise to hold femaleness in such contempt. [...] I mean in this essay to turn the question inside out and ask whether the paradox – extraordinary women, contempt for femaleness – may not have more to do with the virtual absence of *any* notion of “womanhood” than it does with the existence of some more spacious or flexible notion than our own.¹⁹²

What does seem to be clear from the saga-author’s introduction of Hervör is that, within the text itself, she is remarkable (and remarked upon) not only for her sex or her appropriation of a male role, but also for her exceptionality in general – strength and daring that would be similarly remarkable in a male protagonist.

¹⁸⁸ *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík, 1933), 80.

¹⁸⁹ *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, 80.

¹⁹⁰ *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, 99.

¹⁹¹ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 10.

¹⁹² Carol J. Clover, “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe”, 386.

Like the unruly poets, Hervör displays youthful strength and anti-social tendencies; she also shares their characteristic hasty and impetuous nature. McKinnell writes that “[w]hen Angantyr gives her the sword rather than allowing her to destroy herself in the fire, it becomes clear that the real reason for his reluctance to let her have it was concern for his descendants ... she fails to notice this, either because of jubilation at her success or because her fascination with honour overrules his warnings. Imperceptive haste does seem very likely in her.”¹⁹³ The word “þegar” (at once, forthwith) repeatedly describes her actions (and reactions): for instance, when her father’s honour has been insulted, she “gengr þegar fyrir jarl” (goes at once to the jarl),¹⁹⁴ and she later asks her mother to outfit her as quickly as possible: “Bú þú mik at öllu / sem þú bráðast kunnir” (as fast as you can, equip me in all ways).¹⁹⁵ The saga-author’s attitude towards Hervör’s behaviour is often ambivalent, and characters within the saga often dislike her. (For instance, the jarl disapproves of her behaviour and she is unpopular with the servants.¹⁹⁶) Margaret Clunies Ross has previously collected evidence from the sagas, in particularly *Egils saga*, to demonstrate that “medieval Scandinavian attitudes to those groups who were among the most skilled in the community, whether in intellectual or in practical abilities, were highly ambivalent”,¹⁹⁷ so this should not be surprising if we consider Hervör in the context of other exceptional characters. Similarly, if Jochens’ account of the evolution of the saga is correct, then at some point a writer or adaptor of the material must have given Hervör, princess of the Huns, not simply a glorious father or grandfather, but a *grandmother*. While a lineage of female warriors is not a frequent occurrence in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, saga protagonists like

¹⁹³ John McKinnell, “The Trouble with Father: *Hervararkviða* and the Adaptation of Traditional Story-patterns”, in *Essays on Eddic Poetry* (Toronto, 2014), 310.

¹⁹⁴ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 10.

¹⁹⁵ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 11.

¹⁹⁶ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 9.

¹⁹⁷ Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge, 2005), 90.

Njáll and Egill lay claim to extensive heroic genealogies: the writers appear to take great pleasure in recounting the deeds of their fathers and their grandfathers and their great-grandfathers. The interest in family ties and lineages is so commonplace as to perhaps seem unremarkable – but usually, it is through an unmistakably patriarchal lens.

Forming a consistent explanation of the relationship between verse and prose in the saga is at first glance (as Tolkien and others have noted) a difficult endeavour – almost as difficult as producing a coherent overall structure for the saga. The poetry may broadly be divided into a) the stanzas spoken by Oddr and Hjálmar before their deaths (twelve stanzas); b) the stanzas spoken by Hervör and those she converses with (between thirty-one and thirty-five stanzas, depending upon the manuscript); c) the riddle-contest between Gestumblindi and Heiðrekr (approximately thirty stanzas); and d) a series of thirty-one stanzas in chapter 10, all in some way related to the battle between the Goths and the Huns. Chapters four through eight contain a sustained if episodic prose narrative that incorporates no verses whatsoever. There is also a substantial amount of repetition in names throughout the saga: two men named Angantýr; two women named Hervör, neither of whom is content to fulfil their expected gender role; and two sons named Heiðrekr. It remains unclear to scholars how much of this duplication is intentional, or how much of the story has become confused as a result of these similar names: for instance, to give only one example, the first Hervör, in her first speech, states that “áka ek várri / vegsemð hrósa, / þótt hon Fróðmars / fengi hylli” (Little can I boast of our honour, although my mother found Fróðmar’s favour).¹⁹⁸ How this is related to the statement later in some versions of the saga that Hervör the second was fostered “með Fróðmari jarli” (with jarl Fróðmar)¹⁹⁹ is still unclear: the H and U redactions of the saga have Ormarr as her foster-father, as he is in *The*

¹⁹⁸ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 10.

¹⁹⁹ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 30.

Battle of the Goths and the Huns.²⁰⁰ We have no other surviving references to Fróðmar that would explain either, or that would clarify the backstory to which (the first) Hervör refers.

The majority of the verses in the saga represent direct speech – except for a great number of those from *The Battle of the Goths and the Huns*. The majority of the verses are not presented by the saga-author as directly providing authoritative evidence for the prose narrative – except for two stanzas spoken by Hjálmar and Oddr, which are introduced by the phrase “þetta viðmæli þeira sanna þessar vísur” (these words of theirs are attested by these verses).²⁰¹ The sole driving or overarching narrative is not so much that of an individual or a family, but of Tyrfingr, which the saga-author introduces at the very beginning, and to which we periodically return throughout the tale. Each of the four sections of stanzas refer overtly to Tyrfingr and elements of its history – except for the riddle-contest between Gestumblindi and Heiðrekr. This, which may in origin have had no relation to the other poems, is connected to the sword through Heiðrekr’s actions at the conclusion of the contest, when Gestumblindi poses his unanswerable question and Heiðrekr reacts badly: “þá bregðr Heiðrekr Tyrfingi og höggr til hans” (then Heiðrekr draws Tyrfingr and attacks him [=Óðinn]).²⁰² It is this action that leads to Heiðrekr’s death, as Óðinn curses him for his deed: “Fyrir þat, Heiðrekr konungr, er þú rétt til mín ok vildir drepa mik saklausan, skulu þér inir verstu þrælar at bana verða.” (“Because of this, King Heidrekr – that you have attacked me, and would kill me without reason – your death will come from the lowest thralls.”)²⁰³ For Christopher Tolkien, this “unity of a kind” provided by the story of Tyrfingr remains “essentially

²⁰⁰ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 91.

²⁰¹ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 6.

²⁰² Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 44.

²⁰³ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 44.

external and incomplete,” and the virtue of the work thus “not in its structural coherence but in its memorable scenes.”²⁰⁴

What can be said, then, about the structural function of the verses in a saga not especially known for a logical or overly coherent structure in the first place? A surprising amount, if we focus particularly on Hervör’s verses. All of her direct speech is reported as poetry – up until she settles back into a more traditionally feminine role. The saga-author recounts no major event that precipitates this decision on her part, merely that “en er henni leiddisk svá vera, fór hon til Bjarmars jarls ok settisk til hannyrðanáms” (and when she grew weary of [raiding], she went to Bjarmarr the jarl, and settled down to handicrafts).²⁰⁵ Her only direct utterance *not* in verse is her final speech to her son, Heiðrekr, when she bequeaths him Tyrfingr and a mark of gold. Within the context of *Hervarar saga*, this immediately places her alongside Oddr and Hjálmar, and Gestumblindi/Óðinn and Heiðrekr – major, and male, heroic figures who dominate their sections of the saga, in part through their control of conversations and their poetic speeches. Some approaches to saga-verses (primarily skaldic verses) have highlighted a number of possible structural and literary functions within a prose context – notably (as George Turner emphasized in his analysis of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*)²⁰⁶ as a medium for the expression of personal emotions and thoughts not otherwise voiced within the typical terse, ‘objective’ style of saga prose. More recently, Margaret Clunies Ross has praised an approach that examines the performative and persuasive functions of *lausavísur*:

Such an approach involves our seeing verses as performances of a socially valorised version of the self of a saga character (usually based upon a historical personage), as he or she attempts to persuade, question, evade or otherwise disturb a particular Icelandic social ethos. An advantage of this approach is that it allows us to urge with some

²⁰⁴ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, xi.

²⁰⁵ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 20.

²⁰⁶ George Turner, “The Verses in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*”, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 76 (1977), 384-91.

confidence that the functions which medieval Icelandic saga-authors ascribed to purportedly tenth-century poetry can be retrieved, even if the motivations of the original composers can only ever be reached at second hand.²⁰⁷

Hervör's speeches structure her episode of the saga: the exchanges with the jarl and with the shepherd allow the saga-author to prefigure and build naturally towards her longer and more dramatic exchange with Angantýr. The saga-author shows us three main confrontations in verse: with the jarl, with the herdsman, and finally with Angantýr. Each of these three confrontations becomes progressively longer, and the stakes involved become progressively higher.

Hervör's first verse, meanwhile, is not merely an expression of heightened emotion, but an indirect (and successful) request for information:

Hervör varð við þessi orð æfar reið ok gengr þegar fyrir jarl ok kvað:

Áka ek várrí
vegsemð hrósa,
þótt hon Fróðmars
fengi hylli;
föður hugðumk ek
fræknan eiga,
nú er sagðr fyrir mér
svína hirðir.

Hervör was angered by these words, and she goes immediately to the jarl, and said: Little can I boast of our honour, although she (= her mother) found Fróðmar's favour; I thought I had a hero for a father; now it is said to me that he was a swineherd.²⁰⁸

One of the slaves has just told her that “því bannar jarl öllum mönnum at segja þér þitt faðerni, at honum þykkir skömm, at þú vitir þat” (the jarl bans all men from speaking to you about your parentage, because he is ashamed that you should know it).²⁰⁹ The stanza emphasizes the divide

²⁰⁷ Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, 67. For a fuller exploration of this approach, and its application to stanzas from *Eyrbyggja saga* (known as the *Máhlíðingavísur*), see Kate Heslop, “‘Gab mir ein Gott zu sagen, was ich leide’: *Sonatorrek* and the myth of skaldic lyric”, in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference, 2-7 July 2000, University of Sydney*, eds. Margaret Clunies Ross and Geraldine Barnes (Sydney, 2000), especially 160-162.

²⁰⁸ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 10.

²⁰⁹ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 10.

between her previous belief (with the stress on *froeknan*) and this new information (*svína hirðir*), but the association between her father and either a hero or a swineherd is still not confirmed: “hugðumk” (I thought) and “er sagðr fyrir mér” (it is said to me) highlight her uncertainty. Her outburst to the jarl is thus not only an expression of indignation and outrage, but an invitation for him to either contradict or verify her words. This implicit request is answered – and the jarl echoes her words when he confirms that “frœkn með fyrðum / var faðir þinn taliðr” (valiant among warriors / your father was spoken of).²¹⁰

This can be read as a successful perlocutionary speech act. Austin defines the term “performative” as an indication “that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action”,²¹¹ and lays out a distinction between two ways of understanding performative speech acts: the illocutionary and the perlocutionary. Illocutionary utterances are, or are a component of, “the doing of an action”²¹² – examples would include “I do”, spoken at a marriage ceremony, or “I promise I will finish folding the laundry when I get home.”²¹³ Furthermore, these performatives can be – in Austin’s view – either happy or unhappy, depending (among other factors) on the circumstances in which they are uttered, whether the person uttering them has the authority to do so, whether the person uttering them has a feeling or intention that aligns with the force of the act in question, and whether the performative functions as intended – whether it is received or recognized within a social context. A “felicitous performative is one in which I not only perform the act, but some set of effects follows from the fact that I perform it.”²¹⁴ A

²¹⁰ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 11.

²¹¹ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1975), 6.

²¹² J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 5.

²¹³ Diana Whaley categorizes a number of the situational verses in *Heimskringla* as illocutionary acts, and makes use of Searle’s taxonomy in order to classify them. See Diana Whaley, “Skalds and situational verses in *Heimskringla*”, in *Snorri Sturluson: Kolloquium anlässlich der 750. Wiederkehr seines Todestages*, ed. Alois Wolf (Tübingen, 1993), 245-266; especially 256-260.

²¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London, 1997), 17.

perlocutionary speech act is one that intends to bring about an effect, in relation to psychological consequences – a speech that aims to persuade, convince, terrify, or inspire someone, or coerce them into a desired action.

In the first section of verses, Hervör's speeches successfully accomplish a number of these aims: first, she convinces the jarl to give her more information on her father. She then implicitly justifies her reason for leaving (the jarl had previously seized her and forced her to live at his house after she went on a killing spree; he would certainly have the power to keep her there if he disagreed with her motives for going.) Finally, she asks her mother to lay out men's clothes for her.

Hervör continues this trend of felicitous perlocutionary acts in conversation with the herdsman. In each of her verse dialogues, she speaks for a defined purpose: either to get information, or to convince someone to do something for her or to give her something. This culminates in the only two explicitly *illocutionary* acts when she summons Angantýr and when she lets him return to the rest that is death: “Vek ek yör alla / undir viðar rótum”, she says (I wake you all, from under the roots of the tree).²¹⁵ The saying is the doing of it, and similarly at the end of her conversation with Angantýr: “Búi þér allir ... heilir í haugi” (May you all lie in health ... resting in the mound).²¹⁶

Drawing focus to a character, providing momentum, emphasizing skilled use of language, building tension to a climax – these are all characteristics of the saga-author's use of eddic-style verses in the Hervör episode. Throughout, we see Hervör's developing verbal skill in argumentation and manipulation; she is repeatedly and regularly forced to defend her aims, and her actions, and to persuade others to allow her to proceed. By the end of the episode, when she

²¹⁵ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 14.

²¹⁶ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 19.

shows up at her father's grave mound to argue his sword away from his dead shade in the midst of burning fires – well, the author has already established her ability to handle (and win) an argument under pressure.

Guðrún and *Atlakviða*

Atlakviða provides a noteworthy comparison for this relationship between verse and prose for a number of reasons. In terms of the manuscript witnesses, we have a far more straightforward situation than *Hervarar saga*, since *Atlakviða* survives only in the Codex Regius, GKS 2365 4^o. There are no extant variants in verse structure or order – but the poem has nonetheless generated much attention for the irregularity of its metrical form. *Atlakviða* mixes *málahátttr* and *fornyrðislag* throughout, and explanations for this have varied widely. Dronke opts to “trace the coherences in the poem's structure and the nature of its subtleties”,²¹⁷ concluding that the text “reveals the imagination and verbal taste of a strikingly individual poet” and that the “variety in the poem is not accidental”.²¹⁸ She also notes that it “has yet to be proved that *málahátttr* and *fornyrðislag* were in early Norse rigidly distinguished metres”.²¹⁹ Becker, Neckel, and Boer have all separately argued for its patchwork nature – a mix of verses originally composed by a varying number of authors.²²⁰ It is also demonstrably a poem that mixes

²¹⁷ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems* (Oxford, 1969), 13.

²¹⁸ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 29.

²¹⁹ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 20.

²²⁰ J. Becker, “Die Atli-lieder der Edda”, in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 33 (1908), 205; Gustav Neckel, *Beiträge zur Eddaforschung* (Dortmund, 1908), 133; *Die Edda: mit historisch-kritischem commentar*, ed. R.C. Boer (Haarlem, 1922), 222.

straightforward eddic-style word order,²²¹ and more complex skaldic diction (such as that which Dronke identifies in stanza 31).²²²

Even if *máláháttir* and *fornyrðislag* were recognized as distinct metres at the time the poem was written in the form it appears in the Codex Regius, there is still much to recommend Dronke’s conception of a single poet, varying form and metre for particular effect. In Guðrún’s first speech, for instance, a shift in metre occurs partway through:

‘Ráðinn ertu nú, Gunnarr –
hvat muntu, ríkr, vinna
við Húna harmbrögðom?
Höll gakk þú ór snemma!

‘Betr hefðir þú, bróðir,
at þú í byrnio færir,
sem hiálmom aringreypom,
at síá heim Atla.
Sætir þú í sǫðlom
sólheiða daga,
nái nauðfólva
létir nornir gráta,
Húna skialdmeyiar
hervi kanna,
en Atla síálfan
léter þú í ormgarð koma.
Nú er sá ormgarðr
ykr um fólgin.’

‘Now you are betrayed, Gunnarr –
what will you do, mighty one,
against the harmful deeds of the Huns?
Go out from this hall quickly!

‘You would have done better, brother,

²²¹ Margaret Clunies Ross cites the opening stanza as an example of this: “there are neither kennings nor *heiti* in this verse, and the word order is straightforward.” Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, 26.

²²² Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 22-23. Klaus von See et al. also single out stanza 31 for particular comment, calling it a “Höhepunkt” (climax) of the poem and noting that its importance is emphasized by the intertwining of the main and subordinate clauses, a feature common to skaldic verse but comparatively less common in eddic-style stanzas. Klaus von See et al., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda* Volume 7 (Heidelberg, 2012), 328.

to come in a coat of mail,
 with hearth-encircling helmets
 to see the home of Atli.
 You should have remained in the saddle
 through sunlit days;
 let the Norns mourn
 the very pale corpses;
 let the Huns' shieldmaidens
 work the harrow,
 and Atli himself
 you should have brought to the snake pit.
 Now the snake pits lies waiting
 for the two of you.²²³

The transition to shorter, terser lines as Guðrún describes what Gunnarr could have done to avoid his fate creates a heightened sense of urgency, an effect that would have been particularly noticeable if the poem was spoken aloud. The tight, precise alliteration in “Sætir þú í sǫðlom / sólheiða daga, / náí nauðfólva / létir nornir gráta” adds to the effect, building tension and creating a highly evocative image. Thus, the shift into Guðrún’s *fornyrðislag* creates the effect of stretches of verse within the narrative in *málahátt*.

The transition from longer, flowing lines to terse, precise, clipped ones might be dismissed as accidental if it was only found in this example. The poet, however, chooses to make a very similar transition midway through Guðrún’s final speech, when she reveals her deception to Atli:

‘Sona hefir þinna,
 sverða deilir,
 hiqrto hrædreYROG
 við hunang of tuggin.
 Melta knátto, móðugr,
 manna valbráðir,
 eta at qlkrásom
 ok í qndugi at senda.

‘Kallaraðu síðan

²²³ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 6.

til kniá þinna
Erp né Eitil,
ǫlreifa tvá –
séraðu síðan
í seti miðio
gullz miðlendr
geira skepta,
mana meita
né mara keyra.’

‘Distributor of swords,
you have chewed your sons’
gory hearts
with honey.
You are digesting, mighty one,
the flesh of the slain,
eating it as ale-morsels,
sending it to the high seats.

‘You will not call, henceforth,
to your knee
Erpr nor Eitill,
both cheerful from ale –
you will not see again
in the middle of the dais
the generous princes
fitting spear-shafts,
clipping manes,
or cantering horses.’²²⁴

The transition builds tension, and the density of images increases; Guðrún’s speech gains a sharper edge, and the distance between alliterative syllables shortens, focusing the reader’s (or listener’s) attention. Even if the distinction between metres did not formally exist at the time the poem was composed, surely the poet would not have been unaware of the auditory effect that this shortening of the lines, and tightening of the alliteration, could have. The transitions also serve to underlie the poet’s characterization of Guðrún: while she might have “varnaði við tárom, / vaðin í þyshöllo” (fought with her tears, powerless in the hall),²²⁵ she does not remain

²²⁴ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 10-11.

²²⁵ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 9.

powerless or tearful for long. By the final stanzas of the poem, the roles are entirely reversed – the Huns weep, but Guðrún does not:

Ymr varð á bekkíom,
afkárr sǫngr virða,
gnyr und guðvefíom:
gréto börn Húna,
nema ein Guðrún,
er hon æva grét
bræðr sína berharða
ok buri svása,
unga, ófróða,
þá er hon við Atla gat.

Groaning rose up from the benches,
a strange song from warriors,
a din from under costly cloaks:
the children of the Huns wept,
except Guðrún alone,
she never wept
for her bear-hearted brothers
and her dear sons,
young, unlearned,
those that she had with Atli.²²⁶

One could argue that this is merely a demonstration of Guðrún’s loyalty to her brothers: she weeps for them, but not for her (and her husband’s) children. Instead, I would like to argue that the poet’s presentation of Guðrún is more complex than that – and that her speeches echo in miniature her own transition throughout the poem, as the wife, bright lady, and mother makes herself into a steely-eyed heroine in order to achieve her vengeance.

Guðrún makes four main speeches in the poem: (1) to her brothers on their arrival, (2) to curse Atli when he orders Gunnarr’s death, and to Atli before (3) and after (4) he eats the food she prepares. In her discussion of the structure of the lay, Ursula Dronke distinguished three great acts, each of which “is given its own climax: each moves from doubt to certainty, from

²²⁶ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 11.

concealment to revelation”.²²⁷ The acts Dronke distinguishes are as follows: from the arrival of Atli’s messenger, to the arrival of Gunnarr and Högni at Atli’s fortress; the conflict between the brothers and Atli, ending with their deaths; and Guðrún’s revenge, which starts immediately once Atli returns to his hall. Though she does not remark upon this, Dronke’s division of the poem in this way notably makes Guðrún’s speeches the turning points. The second act “opens as they see Atli’s towering shield-girt fortress. Guðrún, desperate, meets them as they enter and orders them out of the hall, to save their lives”.²²⁸ The third act “opens as Guðrún advances with wifely reverence to offer a golden cup to her lord and invite him to the feast”.²²⁹ Her first and her final speech both provide the revelations that Dronke identifies at the end of each section of the lay. Both speeches mark turning points, standing at the transition between seeming peace and open violence. Thus, these speech acts can function in a way that parallels the function of verses in a prosimetric text.

The story of Sigurðr, Brynhildr, and Guðrún may well be one of the most well-known, and most influential, of the Norse legends for modern English writers. In *Atlakviða*, however, many of the classic elements of the story are completely absent: no dragon, no hero, no incest, and no love triangle. Instead, we have a poem centred on the conflicting loyalties of a lone woman, caught in the conflict between brothers and husband. As Jenny Jochens noted, “[t]he logical center of the Nibelung drama is Sigurðr, and the two women take their place in relation to him. A problem arises from the oldest poems, which do not deal with Sigurðr at all, but only with Guðrún, her brothers, and her sons.”²³⁰ While noting this singular fact, Jochens hesitates to place Guðrún at the centre of her story or to credit her with independent action, writing that

²²⁷ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 13.

²²⁸ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 14.

²²⁹ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 15.

²³⁰ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 138.

“[e]ven in the most ancient poems the two women [Brynhildr and Guðrún] did not execute uniquely heroic acts but responded to deeds already initiated by men ... even Brynhildr, the most independent of the heroines, was not self-reliant and self-motivated. She defined herself in relation to men, aspired to the best husband, but did not engage in creative and performative actions herself.”²³¹ I contend that by structuring the poem as the author has, and by marking significant shifts by giving Guðrún the stage, so to speak, the poet has absolutely chosen to demonstrate (and implicitly approve) her ability to take fate (and language, and action) into her own hands.

Unlike Hervör, who spends much of *The Waking of Angantyr* describing herself and justifying her actions, Guðrún does no such thing – there is not a word given to her that directly describes her perception of herself, her thoughts or feelings at the actions she is undertaking, or even any commentary on her own deeds. However, her words leading up to the revelation of the death of her two sons do emphasize that she is in control: Atli should take the food “glaðr at Guðrúno” (gladly from Guðrún).²³² She also notes that the feasting will happen in Atli’s hall, in the seat of his power, his home – a space that she will shortly control. Her audience is both Atli and presumably Atli’s men who have returned with him: this is a public speech, and one carefully worded to allow her to gain the most impact for the coming revelations. She must first be perceived as a dutiful wife, loyal to her lord rather than to her brothers (or at least, accepting of their fate) in order to accomplish her aims. The reader or the listener knows, however, that her previous speech on the subject of Atli was a vicious curse: despite the poet’s remark that she was powerless, and “varnaði við tárom” (fought with her tears), while Atli dragged Gunnar out to kill him, the curse Guðrún spoke immediately thereafter foreshadowed her final victory:

²³¹ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 139.

²³² Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 10.

‘Svá gangi þér, Atli,
sem þú við Gunnar áttir
eiða oft um svarða
ok ár of nefnda,
at sól inni suðrhóllo
ok at Sigtýs bergi,
hǫlkvi hvílbeðiar
ok at hringi Ullar.’

‘So may it be for you, Atli,
as you swore in oath
often to Gunnarr
and promised long ago,
by the sun in the south
and by Óðinn’s mountain,
by steed of sleep’s pillows,
and by the ring of Ullr.’²³³

At this point in the poem it would be easy enough to read this as a bitter curse made by a woman who has no power to change the situation. Guðrún’s relationship with fate is a particularly interesting one, though. In her first speech, to her brothers, she suggests that they should have taken charge of their own fate:

‘Sætir þú í sǫðlom
sólheiða daga,
nái nauðfölvu
létir nornir gráta...’

‘You should have remained in the saddle
through sunlit days;
let the Norns mourn
the very pale corpses...’²³⁴

That the Norns should be brought to weep by the devastation Guðrun wishes her brothers had caused could be simply an artistic flourish, but it likely betrays a more significant desire, since the idea of making the Norns do anything is one that might give pause – as controllers of fate, they should be one force that is immune to human challenge or influence. As Dronke comments,

²³³ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 9.

²³⁴ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 6.

“As the inexorable judges of men the Norns are presumably without pity. To make them weep would be to achieve a virtual impossibility.”²³⁵ Guðrún, however, is perhaps one of the few characters who does not seem to believe that she has no power to influence fate. Her curse upon Atli is better understood as an expression of intent, an expression of resolve. Her words – her declaration of enmity – is the first step in a sequence where she takes control of fate: “sköp lét hon vaxa” (she made fate mount).²³⁶ Indeed, Guðrún’s curse functions by turning Atli’s own words against him. She paraphrases his oath, “thereby turning it into a poetic curse directed against an oath-breaker.”²³⁷

Shoshana Felman and Judith Butler both extended the study of speech acts to include insults and threats, types that occur with some regularity in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Austin included promises as straightforward examples of illocutionary speech acts; Felman aptly points out that “if promising consists in committing oneself to do something *for* someone, then, similarly, threatening consists in committing oneself to do something *against* someone. Although the *meaning* of the promise (love and marriage) is of course different from that of the threat (revenge and punishment) the force behind both is the same.”²³⁸ Applying this line of interpretation, Guðrún’s first speech act, to her brothers, is an illocutionary warning, albeit an infelicitous one: although the act is heard and acknowledged by its intended audience, it fails to have its intended effect. Gunnar and Högni do not leave the hall at once, and they are unable to summon others to assist them. Gunnar suggests that it is already too late for any warning: “Seinat er nú, systir, / at samna Niflungom” (it is too late now, sister, to gather the Niflungar).²³⁹

²³⁵ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 27.

²³⁶ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 11.

²³⁷ Anne Irene Riisøy, “Performing Oaths in Eddic Poetry: Viking Age Fact or Medieval Fiction?” *Journal of the North Atlantic* 8 (2016), 148.

²³⁸ Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* (Stanford, 2003), 13.

²³⁹ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 7.

This first speech-act, however, is the only one which fails. Guðrún's curse after Gunnar's death does not take immediate effect, but it is a clear (and felicitous, in Austen and Butler's terms) threat: a threat which "prefigures or, indeed, promises a bodily act, and yet is already a bodily act, thus establishing in its very gesture the contours of the act to come. The act of threat and the threatened act are, of course, distinct, but they are related by a chiasmus. ... The threat begins a temporal horizon within which the organizing aim is the act that is threatened; the threat begins the action by which the fulfillment of the threatened act might be achieved."²⁴⁰ Butler goes on to explain that "[f]or the threat to work, it requires certain kinds of circumstances, and it requires a venue of power by which its performative effects might be materialized. The teleology of action conjured by the threat is disruptible by various kinds of infelicities. Nevertheless the fantasy of sovereign action that structures the threat is that a certain kind of saying is at once the performance of the act referred to in that saying; this would be an illocutionary performative."²⁴¹

The poet would seem to be highlighting the effectiveness of Guðrún's curse in the following stanza: there is nothing that will save Atli from her revenge. She has a venue in which to work it, and she is fully capable of engineering the circumstances that will allow it to be completed. "þiggia knáttu, þengill, / í þinni hóllo..." (You may take and eat, lord, / in your hall ...) ²⁴² is then a perlocutionary act (and a successful one) – the object of which is simply to induce Atli to eat, to enjoy the feast that she has prepared. Guðrún also chooses the perfect moment for her revelation: only after the warriors have assembled, have drunk ale, and have eaten of the

²⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, 11.

²⁴¹ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, 12.

²⁴² Ursula Dronke, "Atlakviða", in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 10.

dishes she has prepared. Atli “móðan hafði hann sik drukkit” (had drunk himself weary)²⁴³ and “vápni hafði hann ekki” (he had no weapons).²⁴⁴

Both Guðrún and Hervör are described in highly ambiguous terms: it is not accidental that modern scholarship has spent a significant amount of paper and ink debating whether or not each character’s portrayal is misogynistic. Their verses may be, in form, very different from the highly complex *dróttkvætt* stanzas of Kormákr Ögmundarson or Egill Skallagrímsson, but as speakers of verse, and in the functions of their speeches within the surrounding narratives, I hope I have managed to draw out some of the similarities. They also share a number of character traits with the troublesome outlaw poets, who are similarly described (in the prose texts) in highly ambiguous terms. Precocious, capable of exceptional cruelty as well as exceptional deeds of valour, and wielding words that could both promise and threaten, praise and insult: these legendary women are not so different from the skalds. The literary and structural functions that their speeches in verse can fulfill within a narrative are not so different either.

Conclusion

The women’s verses discussed in this chapter are a fount of prophecy, of advice, of authority, of resolve, of super- or un-natural knowledge – but also of pleading, of vulnerability, and of lamentation. These verses are clearly sites of tension – where female characters push back against established power dynamics. In her discussion of Eddic heroic poetry, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir writes that speech acts “appear in a subversive light in the poems, enabling women to shirk and critique the traditional, passive roles they are expected to fulfill”.²⁴⁵ In many cases it

²⁴³ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 11.

²⁴⁴ Ursula Dronke, “*Atlakviða*”, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems*, 12.

²⁴⁵ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, “Gerðit Hon ... sem konur aðrar: Women and Subversion in Eddic Heroic Poetry”, in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, 117.

would seem that the compiler or author of a text invites the reader to give their words additional weight even when the immediate audience of the verses (within the story) disregards or rejects them. Whether it is in the interactions of the *vǫlva* and Óðinn, Þóroddr's old foster-mother and her heedless foster-son, Heiðr and Signy and King Froði, Hervör and her father, or Guðrún and Atli, women's verses (in prosimetric texts) and women's speech acts (in Eddic poems) demonstrate a constant negotiation between female characters' search for greater autonomy, and the social and political structures that surround them. The verses do not necessarily bestow influence on these women, but rather these characters frequently use verse in order to claim such influence, power, or autonomy for themselves.

None of the women discussed in this chapter would fit neatly (or at all!) into a category of 'Old Norse-Icelandic female poets' – all are supernatural or legendary figures, and the ability to clearly define and precisely characterize the exact provenance of their verses is long lost to us. Although many of them do not speak in traditional skaldic metres, it is clear that their verses have a wide variety of specific structural functions in their textual contexts, similar to those more frequently discussed in the context of the (predominantly male) skalds. These functions are not unique to women's verses, but they are evident even in – and, perhaps, particularly in – texts that have been sometimes criticized for a lack of coherent structure, such as *Vǫlsunga saga*, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, or *Hervarar saga*. Women's verses in the sagas, and women's poetic speech acts in the Eddic poems, can foreshadow future events; build tension; emphasize dynamics of power and status between characters; underscore alliances; mark notable shifts within a work; and create dramatic and engaging confrontations with heightened stakes. Almut Suerbaum has written that "Austin's concept of a speech act may be particularly helpful in enabling us to think of presence

as created through language in the performative act”,²⁴⁶ and we shall see in subsequent chapters more evidence that many of the women verse-speakers of Old Norse literature do exactly this – creating and maintaining their presence through their verses.

²⁴⁶ Almut Suerbaum, “Medieval Culture ‘betwixt and between’. An introduction”, in *Aspects of the Performative in Medieval Culture* (Berlin, 2010), 3.

Chapter 2 Women's Dream-Verses

Sturlunga saga has often been regarded as “closer to history”²⁴⁷ than the family sagas and other, more clearly fictional texts such as the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*. The texts that comprise *Sturlunga saga* are separated from the Icelandic family sagas, according to Úlfar Bragason, “by the fact that they were put into writing shortly after the events they recount”,²⁴⁸ and are also usually considered generically separate from the bishops' sagas due to their distinctly secular content. However, this distinction is not absolute: *Sturlunga saga* contains not only secular sagas, but also *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, and in one key manuscript, *Árna saga biskups Þorlákssonar*.²⁴⁹

Sturlunga saga has thus long been regarded as one of the chief sources for twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic history, and the component texts judged reliable as such a source because “they were written shortly after the events took place, and were based on the evidence of contemporaries or eye- or ear-witnesses.”²⁵⁰ One scholarly approach to analyzing the family sagas as literature has indeed relied upon comparing them to the contemporary sagas: by “measuring the sagas' representation of events and customs against that of a set of texts thought to lie closer to history: the laws, the bishops' sagas, *Sturlunga saga*, *Íslendingabók*, and *Landnámabók*.”²⁵¹

²⁴⁷ Carol J. Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas”, in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Ithaca, 1985), 254.

²⁴⁸ Úlfar Bragason, “Sagas of Contemporary History (*Sturlunga saga*): Texts and Research”, in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford, 2005), 427.

²⁴⁹ See Úlfar Bragason, *On the Poetics of Sturlunga* (Berkeley, 1986), 18; also 21-23. For an examination of *Árna saga biskups* and its relation both to the contemporary sagas and the bishops' sagas, see Haki Antonsson, “*Árna saga biskups* as Literature and History”, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 116.3 (2017), 261-285.

²⁵⁰ Úlfar Bragason, “Sagas of Contemporary History (*Sturlunga saga*): Texts and Research”, 433.

²⁵¹ Carol J. Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas”, 254.

The prologue of *Sturlunga saga* does much to encourage these readings, a prologue which McGrew and Thomas describe as “the compiler’s definition of the principles and sources which were the bases of these choices”.²⁵² The compiler clearly asserts that Sturla Þórðarson “hafði hann þar til vísindi af fróðum mönnum, þeim er váru á öndverðum dögum hans; en sumt eptir bréfum þeim, er þeir rituðu, er þeim váru samtíða, er sögurnar eru frá” (had access to the knowledge of wise men, those who lived in his early years; and also to some writings, which were written by those who were contemporary with the events the sagas recount).²⁵³ The compiler adds that “[m]arga hluti mátti hann sjálf sjá ok heyra þá er á hans dögum gerðust til stórtíðinda” (he himself saw and heard a large part of the great events that happened in his day).²⁵⁴

Although the exact provenance of the contemporary sagas is a matter of some scholarly debate, and not all scholars accept at face value the compiler’s claims in the prologue,²⁵⁵ the contemporary sagas were certainly written and then compiled at a time very close to the events they describe. That some of the sagas are indeed based on direct eye-witness accounts cannot be ruled out.

Therefore it is not unreasonable that we might expect social practices represented in *Sturlunga saga* to reflect more closely a historical reality. In particular, we might hope that representations of women, and women’s engagement with literary culture, might more nearly

²⁵² *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, trans. Julia H. McGrew and R. George Thomas (New York, 1970–4), 55.

²⁵³ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, eds. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík, 1946), 115. Hereafter abbreviated *Sturlunga saga*.

²⁵⁴ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 115.

²⁵⁵ See Stephen N. Tranter, *Sturlunga saga: The Role of the Creative Compiler* (Frankfurt, 1987), 221; also David Clark, “Manslaughter and Misogyny: Women and Revenge in *Sturlunga saga*”, *Saga-Book* 33 (2009), 28. Guðrún Nordal describes *Sturlunga* as a “carefully constructed version of political events”: Guðrún Nordal, “The Contemporary Sagas and their Social Context”, in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge, 2000), 221.

reflect such a historical reality. Nonetheless, recent criticism has begun to query this assumption, and to encourage further study of the texts' literary qualities. Stephen Norman Tranter's 1987 study argues that the compiler used a variety of strategies to creatively adapt and select the material for *Sturlunga saga*, in a way that creates a "structure linked by unities of theme and content",²⁵⁶ and that "sought to give the people of his own age a lesson from the past, in the hope that they would recognize the dangers, understand the remedies, and act accordingly."²⁵⁷ Tranter stresses the societal impact of constant feuding, and contends that the compiler has deliberately shaped his material in order to warn contemporary readers against perpetuating a cycle of violence – identifying reconciliation as a key theme. Similarly, Úlfar Bragason, in his 1986 doctoral thesis, notes that the "contemporary sagas abide by the same principles of selection and organization of narrative material and employ the same epic-dramatic form and objective narration as are used in the family sagas."²⁵⁸ Jesse Byock has gone so far as to argue that the contemporary sagas are primarily, and intentionally, structured around the cycle of feuds – and their narrative components, which he identifies as conflict, advocacy, and resolution.²⁵⁹ For Byock, the formal characteristics of feud also provide a series of key similarities between the family sagas and *Sturlunga saga*.²⁶⁰

Any survey of women's voices in Old Norse-Icelandic poetry cannot, therefore, omit a serious study of the contemporary sagas. Jenny Jochens opened her landmark work, *Women in Old Norse Society*, with a detailed discussion of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir's repeated appearances in the dreams of a sixteen-year-old girl named Jóreiðr Hermundardóttir.²⁶¹ In her collection of Old

²⁵⁶ Stephen N. Tranter, *Sturlunga saga: The Rôle of the Creative Compiler* (Frankfurt, 1987), 9.

²⁵⁷ Stephen N. Tranter, *Sturlunga saga: The Rôle of the Creative Compiler*, 235.

²⁵⁸ Úlfar Bragason, *On the Poetics of Sturlunga*, 1.

²⁵⁹ Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley, 1982), xi.

²⁶⁰ Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 5.

²⁶¹ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 13-15.

Norse women's poetry, Sandra B. Straubhaar dedicates an entire section to selections from *Sturlunga saga*, to poems that are "heard by women in dreams, and later repeated to listeners as the dream is retold."²⁶² But can we attribute composition of a dream-verse spoken by a man to a female dreamer, as Straubhaar does? Can we consider such verse a representation of a woman's voice? In fact, that the women have later repeated these dreams to listeners – although implicitly necessary in order to explain the compiler's knowledge of them – is nowhere directly recounted or even stated in *Sturlunga saga*.

Furthermore, since these dream-women (both as speakers and as dreamers) are repeatedly associated with the supernatural (the dream sequences in general stand as one of the more obviously fictional literary constructs in *Sturlunga saga*), we must be wary of drawing conclusions about women's engagement with poetry in the 'historical reality' of thirteenth-century Iceland. I will thus, throughout this chapter, focus on the function of the stanzas within the narrative, and not on what this may or may not tell us about women poets in thirteenth-century Iceland. Although the contemporary sagas are, as we have discussed, usually regarded as among the more historically authentic texts, the dream sequences challenge this assumption.

Dreams have a special significance within the sagas – with regard to the family sagas, Lars Lönnroth has argued that they "have an effect on the narrative that is both stabilizing and unsettling: they make us glimpse an existential or metaphysical pattern behind the events, and this pattern tends to counteract the rationality and the apparent realism of the saga as a whole".²⁶³ The dreams within the contemporary sagas may be "presented as authentic and significant to the telling of contemporary events",²⁶⁴ but their content and form have a similar effect. The dream-

²⁶² Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women's Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*, 39.

²⁶³ Lars Lönnroth, "Dreams in the Sagas", *Scandinavian Studies* 74.4 (Winter 2012), 456.

²⁶⁴ Judy Quinn, "The Use of Eddic Poetry in Contemporary Sagas", *Frá Sudlægrí Strönd* 3 (1987), 54.

verses in *Sturlunga saga* are – as Ralph O’Connor and others have noted – full of allusions to mythology and to a legendary past.²⁶⁵ O’Connor, in fact, goes so far as to characterize the dreams in *Íslendinga saga* as “deployed so as to reinforce the political, religious, and ethical views of the saga author”.²⁶⁶ Lönnroth distinguishes three main functions of dream-verses within the Old Norse-Icelandic texts, including “to anticipate future events”,²⁶⁷ to “signal the presence of some metaphysical force – a blind destiny or possibly a god – operating behind the stage”,²⁶⁸ and to “tell us something about the character of the dreamer”.²⁶⁹ Most of the dream-verses within *Sturlunga saga* may be considered prophetic, a type of dream that Kelchner, in her study, considers “predominate in Old Norse literature”, and which she further notes “constitutes an effective and convenient means of welding together literary material”.²⁷⁰ Gabriel Turville-Petre went so far as to say that “among no people in Europe is the cult of dreams so deeply rooted. In no literature are dream-symbols more sophisticated, nor their interpretation more subtle and intricate.”²⁷¹ For Turville-Petre, “[b]elief in dream-symbolism implies a belief in fate and, in Iceland, this belief transcended the religious opinions of pagans and Christians. Not only men, but also the gods are subject to the decree of an impersonal, insensitive fate.”²⁷²

The question of what constitutes a ‘woman’s voice’ in the poetry of *Sturlunga saga* is thus – for a wide variety of reasons – a significantly more complicated question than it might at

²⁶⁵ Ralph O’Connor, “Astronomy and Dream Visions in Late Medieval Iceland: Stjörnu-Odda draumr and the Emergence of Norse Legendary Fiction”, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 111.4 (October 2012), 487.

²⁶⁶ Ralph O’Connor, “Astronomy and Dream Visions in Late Medieval Iceland: Stjörnu-Odda draumr and the Emergence of Norse Legendary Fiction”, 487.

²⁶⁷ Lars Lönnroth, “Dreams in the Sagas”, 455.

²⁶⁸ Lars Lönnroth, “Dreams in the Sagas”, 456.

²⁶⁹ Lars Lönnroth, “Dreams in the Sagas”, 456.

²⁷⁰ Georgia Dunham Kelchner, *Dreams in Old Norse Literature and Their Affinities in Folklore* (Cambridge, 1935), 75.

²⁷¹ Gabriel Turville-Petre, “Dreams in Icelandic Tradition”, *Folklore* 69 (1958), 93.

²⁷² Gabriel Turville-Petre, “Dreams in Icelandic Tradition”, 95.

first appear: though Straubhaar attributes the stanzas she collects to the (female) dreamers, and in fact subtitled her book “the voices of female skalds”, those stanzas are usually presented within *Sturlunga saga* as spoken by a *male* dream-figure. Meanwhile, there exist a comparable (in fact, slightly larger) number of verses – not included in Straubhaar’s collection – in which a female speaker appears to a male dreamer. These female dream-speakers have been associated by scholars with a variety of traditionally female supernatural figures, including the *hamingja* or the “guardian spirit of the family”,²⁷³ trolls, and valkyries.²⁷⁴ In a few cases, this association is made explicit in the verses; in other instances, it relies on the descriptions of the dream-women, who tend to be particularly large, strong, and martial in look and demeanour. As in the other dream-verses, the speaker usually provides a dire warning, advice, or both.

The content and context of both sets of verses is at first glance very similar: the dream-verses are, as Judy Quinn has noted, nearly all “clustered before important battles, at which the valkyries intend to set about their business of choosing the slain. They almost invariably mention battle or death.”²⁷⁵ In her analysis of the function of verses in *Sturlunga saga*, Quinn also identifies “the gender of the voice” as one aspect of the “difference in the two types of verse quoted in contemporary sagas”, drawing a functional distinction rather than a formal one between skaldic and eddic-style stanzas.²⁷⁶ The dream-verses do form a distinctive subset of the verses incorporated into *Sturlunga saga*, and are unique in including women as either the speaker or primary audience of a verse – of the several hundred, predominantly skaldic, stanzas incorporated into the text as either evidence or occasional poetry outside of a dream context, exactly none are spoken by women.

²⁷³ Georgia Dunham Kelchner, *Dreams in Old Norse Literature and Their Affinities in Folklore*, 30.

²⁷⁴ Judy Quinn, “The Use of Eddic Poetry in Contemporary Sagas”, 59.

²⁷⁵ Judy Quinn, “The Use of Eddic Poetry in Contemporary Sagas”, 59.

²⁷⁶ Judy Quinn, “The Use of Eddic Poetry in Contemporary Sagas”, 63.

The gender of the dreamer does appear to play a significant role in shaping the form of the verse – verses spoken to female dreamers are in eddic-style metres, while verses spoken to male dreamers are significantly more likely to be in skaldic ones. When women and poetry are associated in *Sturlunga saga* (with the women either as speakers or audience of the verses), it is exclusively within the context of a dream. With the exception of Jóreiðr’s dream-dialogues with Guðrún (which in fact take place over the course of several nights), the speaker of the verse is male when the dreamer is female, and vice versa.

We can thus have either a male or female speaker, and either a male or female dreamer – and, it should be said now that the majority of *draumvísur* in *Sturlunga saga* are presented as both spoken, and dreamt, by men. (There is also one verse which does not fit into these categories, as it is spoken by ravens in a dream of Sigurðr Styrbjarnarson.²⁷⁷ There are also a few verses that resist any categorization by gender since both their dreamers and speakers are unspecified and thus unknown.)

Not all of the dream-verses appear in all versions of the text: our source for the text of *Sturlunga saga* is primarily dependent on two manuscripts, *Króksfjarðarbók* and *Reykjafjarðarbók* (AM 122 a fol. and AM 122 b fol.), both of which are defective, and their seventeenth-century paper descendants.²⁷⁸ The dream sequences are considerably expanded in AM 122 a fol. and its descendants relative to AM 122 b fol. In all texts, however, the trope of foreshadowing important battles or deaths of key figures with the appearance of many portentous dreams is well established. How close these manuscripts come to the original compilation is of course a matter of uncertainty; Björn M. Ólsen, in a landmark study, argued that neither

²⁷⁷ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 428.

²⁷⁸ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, ed. Guðbrandur Vigfússon (Oxford, 1878), clxxi; *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, ed. and trans. Julia H. McGrew and R. George Thomas (New York, 1970–4), 15.

Króksfjarðarbók nor *Reykjafjarðarbók* represents the original compilation, which he dates to shortly after the death of Sturla Þórðarson.²⁷⁹ Nonetheless, Stephen Norman Tranter has shown much evidence to suggest the hand of a conscious, careful compiler, who was capable of producing – and sought to produce – a “structure linked by unities of theme and content”.²⁸⁰

Women as speakers

The dream-verses spoken by women (all, with one remarkable exception, to a male audience) share a number of striking similarities, both with each other and with the content and form of other eddic-style poetry spoken by women. The trope of dreams portending future disaster is first introduced in *Sturlunga saga* by the following episode, which is perhaps representative:

Um vetrinn eftir bardagann í Víðinesi váru dreymðir draumar margir. Þat dreymði mann í Skagafirði, at hann þóttist koma í hús eitt mikit. Þar sátu inni konur tvær blóðgar ok reru áfram. Honum þótti rigna blóði í ljórana. Önnur kvað konan:

Róum vit, ok róum vit,
rignir blóði,
Guðr ok Gøndul,
fyr guma falli.
Vit skulum ráðask
í Raftahlíð,
þar munum blótaðar
ok bölvaðar.

During the winter after the battle at Víðines, many dreams were dreamed. A man from Skagafjörð dreamed that he thought he came into a large house. Within, sat two women, covered in blood and rocking back and forth. It seemed to him that blood rained down from an opening in the roof. One of the women spoke this:

We – Guðr and Gøndul –
are rocking, and we are rocking;
blood rains down,
before men fall.
We shall rush
to Raftahlíð,
there we shall be bloody

²⁷⁹ Björn M. Ólsen, “Um Sturlungu”, *Safn til sögu Íslands ok íslenzka bókmennta* III (1902), 193-510.

²⁸⁰ Stephen N. Tranter, *Sturlunga saga: The Role of the Creative Compiler*, 9.

and cursed.²⁸¹

The women identify themselves explicitly as Guðr and Gøndul – valkyrie names attested in *Skáldskaparmál* and in *Darraðarljóð*, amongst others – and in fact the stanza shares a line (“rignir blóði”²⁸²) with *Darraðarljóð*, which appears in almost identical form in the preceding prose. This is the first of several stanzas in which female figures with supernatural traits appear in dreams, apparently warning the dreamer about future feuding. The stanza shares other similarities with *Darraðarljóð*, in the repetition of key phrases and in certain diction choices.

The stanza naming Guðr and Gøndul, for instance, reads as follows:

Vindum, vindum
vef darraðar,
ok siklingi
síðan fylgjum.
Þar sjá bragna
blóðgar randir
Guðr ok Gøndul,
er grami hlífðu.

We are weaving, we are weaving
the web of spears,
and afterwards
follow the king.
There Guðr and Gøndul
see the heroes’
bloody shields,
which guarded the king.²⁸³

Sandra B. Straubhaar writes that “the speech of ghosts and damned souls has several identifiable features, notably including the repetition of phrases, as in the old poetic spell-casting meter, *galdralag*.”²⁸⁴ In a number of stanzas, the last line is repeated, a convention that Jón

²⁸¹ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 251. The translation of the last two adjectives is debated. See *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 587, for additional discussion.

²⁸² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól Sveinsson (Reykjavík, 1971), 457.

²⁸³ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól Sveinsson, 456-457.

²⁸⁴ Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women’s Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*, 39.

Jóhannesson²⁸⁵ and Judy Quinn distinguish as “conventionally adopted in verse spoken by dead men or spirits”.²⁸⁶ The repetition of words or phrases is characteristic of much of the dream verse in *Sturlunga saga*; in the sequence of dreams that precede the battle of Örlygsstaðir, we have a number of examples:

“varir mik ok varir mik, / at viti Sturla” (I suspect, and I suspect, that Sturla knows)²⁸⁷
“Sit ek ok sék á / svarit Steinvarar” (I sit and I seek Steinvör’s answer)²⁸⁸
“Segið mér, ok segið mér” (Tell me, and tell me)²⁸⁹

Within *Sturlunga saga*, the Guðr and Gøndul verse is immediately followed by a mirroring stanza:

En í Vestfjörðum dreymði mann: at hann þóttisk kominn í litla stofu, ok sátu uppi menn tveir svartklæddir ok höfðu gráar kollhettur á höfði ok tókust í hendr. Sat á sínum bekk hvárr, ok réru ok ráku herðarnar á veggina svá hart, at þá reiddi til falls. Þeir kváðu vísu þessa, ok kvað sítt orð hvárr þeira:

Höggvask hart seggir,
en hallask veggir;
illa eru settir,
þás inn koma hettir;
Verk munu upp innask,
þás aldir finnask,
— engr es á sómi, —
á efsta dómi.

And in the West Fjords a man dreamed this: that he seemed to come into a little room, and within sat two men, clad in black, and they had gray caps on their heads, and they shook hands. Each one sat on his own bench, and rocked, and drove their shoulders into the walls so hard, that they nearly fell down. They spoke this verse, and each spoke alternate words:

Men fight hard,
the walls sway;
they [the fighters] are ill placed,
when the hooded ones come in;
Such deeds will be paid for,
when all come
to the judgement day –

²⁸⁵ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 587.

²⁸⁶ Judy Quinn, “The Use of Eddic Poetry in Contemporary Sagas”, 70.

²⁸⁷ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 417.

²⁸⁸ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 421.

²⁸⁹ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 426.

there will be no honour for them.²⁹⁰

The prose preceding this verse clearly sets it up to echo elements of the first stanza: with “menn tveir” (two men) rather than “konur tvær” (two women), sitting in a “litla stofu” (little room) rather than a “hús ... mikit” (big house), and who “réru” (rock) as they speak. The end-rhyme of the couplets (unusual in *dróttkvætt*) may be intended, in this case, to indicate a parallel to the repetition of phrases characteristic of *galdralag*, and thus to identify the men with the supernatural. The repeated references to blood in both verses are likely intended to foreshadow the sequence of events that immediately follows the stanza, where seven Icelandic chieftains assemble a force of eight hundred and forty men, and launch an attack on Bishop Guðmundr – an attack that leads to the casting out of the bishop, and (as noted several times) the spilling of blood inside his church.²⁹¹

However, this relationship between the stanzas is not similarly established in the stanzas themselves – only in the surrounding prose. The prose preceding the first stanza summarizes the contents of the stanza very closely, including the details that the women are rocking and that blood is raining down as they speak. The relationship between the preceding prose and the second stanza is far less clear: the compiler appears to have interpreted the admittedly cryptic “höggvask hart seggir, en hallask veggir” as creating a causal relationship between the two events: men strike the walls, causing them to fall. Thus the prose states that the two men “ráku hendrnar svá fast á veggina, at þá reiddi til falls” (drove their shoulders into the walls so hard, that they nearly fell down). “Höggva”, however, more usually refers to the actual act of striking

²⁹⁰ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 251.

²⁹¹ “Þar váru fleiri menn drepnir, en sumir í húsum inni. Einn drápu þeir í kirkjugarðinum, svá at blóðit hraut á kirkjana. Sex menn létust þar af biskupsmönnum. Þeir Arnórr létu ok sex menn.” (Other men were killed there, and some within the house. They killed one man in the churchyard, so that blood spilled on the church. Six men of the bishop’s followers died there; and they and Arnórr lost six men.) *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 252.

or smiting someone (or something) in combat,²⁹² and the first two lines of the stanza – if read without the guidance of the preceding prose – could more probably be interpreted as referring to the striking of blows in battle, and the destruction of property that often resulted.

I would argue that the two verses have clearly been grouped together by an author or compiler, and the preceding prose written in order to make them ‘fit’ together, as it were: in order to frame what is not a particularly related pair of verses seem as though they are closely related. R.J. Glendinning has argued that the second verse is a Christian companion piece to the first – with the grey-hooded men possibly identified as greyfriars.²⁹³

In these stanzas, it is fairly clear that the compiler of the saga is deploying verse for a structural purpose; is selecting and arranging stanzas in a meaningful relationship to each other; and is explicitly drawing on a pre-Christian past, with an explicitly pre-Christian vision of death, to foreshadow dramatic events concerned with an extended feud against a bishop. These verses share a number of similarities with eddic-style stanzas “spoken by a prophetic voice”,²⁹⁴ as Judy Quinn has previously noted.

What is gained by evoking these supernatural figures in an otherwise ‘authentic’ and ‘historical’ narrative? Zoe Borovsky has, I think convincingly, argued that “[a]ccounts of women’s visions and dreams may have been the result of a cultural constraint that demanded that marginal figures (such as women, slaves, and old men) stand for or become ‘mouthpieces’ for the past, but they may also have been an actual outlet for the expression of discontent with the new social order”.²⁹⁵ Certainly the supernatural women who appear throughout *Sturlunga saga*

²⁹² Geir T. Zoëga, “höggva”, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Toronto, 2004), 225.

²⁹³ Robert J. Glendinning, *Träume und Vorbedeutung in der Islendinga saga Sturla Thordarsons: Eine Form- und Stiluntersuchung* (Bern, 1974), 95-97.

²⁹⁴ Judy Quinn, “The Use of Eddic Poetry in Contemporary Sagas”, 62.

²⁹⁵ Zoe Borovsky, “Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature”, 32.

register a sense of unease, not only through their repeated descriptions of impending doom and destruction, but through their unwillingness to celebrate the cycle of feud, or hold it up as any kind of heroism. They *are* marginalized characters, and are described as possessing traits unusual for human women: these dream-speakers are “mikill ok stórleitr” (large and broad-faced),²⁹⁶ or “mikill ok illilegr” (large and evil-looking).²⁹⁷ Whereas for male heroes, “mikill” is usually a stock compliment, for the women dream-speakers it is often immediately linked to a negative comment on their appearance.

In fact, the physical descriptions of these dream-speakers are one key way that the compiler identifies them with the supernatural. Carol Clover has written that the world of the Icelandic sagas is one “in which ‘masculinity’ always has a plus value, even (or perhaps especially) when it is enacted by a woman”,²⁹⁸ but the supernatural dream-women of the contemporary sagas break this pattern – possibly because their presence in the saga, perhaps as agents of an inevitable fate, suggests a condition of powerlessness in which the historical or semi-historical (but certainly ‘natural’) saga-heroes have little control over the outcome of the feuds that they themselves have started. “What finally excites fear and loathing in the Norse mind”, Clover goes on to write, “is not femaleness per se, but the condition of powerlessness, the lack or loss of volition, with which femaleness is typically, but neither inevitably nor exclusively, associated”.²⁹⁹

The prose introduction to Þorgrímr Hauksson’s dream provides an excellent example: “Hann dreymði, at hann þóttisk ríða með flokkinum inn til Dala. Hann þóttist sjá, at kona gekk á móti flokkinum, mikil ok stórleit, ok þótti honum kenna af henni þef illan.” (He dreamed, that he

²⁹⁶ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 320-321.

²⁹⁷ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 403.

²⁹⁸ Carol Clover, “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe”, 372.

²⁹⁹ Carol Clover, “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe”, 379.

seemed to ride with a troop into the dales. It seemed to him that he saw that a woman came to meet the troop, large and broad-faced, and it seemed to him that a foul smell came from her.)³⁰⁰

The prose introduction to Hafliði Höskuldsson's dream features a similar description: "Kona fór fyrir liðinu, mikil ok illilig, ok hafði dúk í hendi ok á rauftrefr niðr ok blæddi ór." (A woman rode before the troop, large and evil-looking, and she had in her hand a cloth, and it was hanging down in tatters and dripping blood.)³⁰¹ Snæbjörn, meanwhile, is not explicitly dreaming in the following passage, but it is surrounded by dream-verses and still implies that the female speaker is decidedly supernatural: "Hann gékk út um nótt; þat var fyrir jól um vetrinn fyrir Örlýgsstaðafund. Þá gékk kona í túnit mikil ok þrystilig, daprlig ok rauðlituð. Hon var í dökkbláum kyrtli. Stokkabelti hafði hún um sik." (He went out one night; that was before Christmas, during the winter before the battle of Örlýgsstaðir. Then a woman came into the home meadow, big and strong, dismal-looking and ruddy. She was in a dark blue kirtle. She had a linked belt around her waist.)³⁰²

The blood-covered appearance of many of these dream-figures is not only a striking visual image, but one that links the dream women of the contemporary sagas to other supernatural figures of ill intent throughout the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus. Gísli Súrsson is visited by two dream-women, one good and one evil – the latter of whom is repeatedly described as covered in blood, and indeed we are told she desires to cover Gísli in it as well:

Ok nú segir Gísli, at konan sú in verri kemr opt at honum ok vill jafnan ríða hann blóði ok roðru ok þvá honum í ok lætr sér illiga.

[...]

Kemr, þegars ek skal blunda,
kona við mik til funda,
oss þvær unda flóði,
öll í manna blóði.

³⁰⁰ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 320-321.

³⁰¹ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 403.

³⁰² *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 424-425.

And now Gísli says, that the evil woman comes often to him and always wants to smear him with gore, and wash him in blood, and act in an evil way.

[...]

When I go to shut my eyes,
the woman comes to find me
and covers the two of us
entirely in men's blood.³⁰³

A number of these dream women also make explicit reference to visiting, or travelling to, a mysterious dark or loathsome place, the horrors of which they are clearly familiar with: Hafliði Höskuldsson, for instance, dreams of a woman who kills fighters by pulling off their heads with a piece of cloth, as she says “en hlægir mik ærit / ill vist, þars þeir gista” (It gladdens me, that they stay in an evil place).³⁰⁴ A similar unnamed woman appears to Snæbjörn, preceding the Örlygsstaðir battle: “Kemk í dal, þars dyljumk, / dánarakrs til vánar, / harmþrungin fórk hingat, / Heljar ask at velja: / Heljar ask ferk velja.” (I come into the valley of the death-country, there where I conceal myself; I came hither filled with grief to endure hell's ash [=hunger]; I will endure hell's ash [hunger].)³⁰⁵ The overt reference to “Heljar”, the characteristic repetition of the final line, and her earlier assertion that “[g]ríðr munk gumnum heðra” (here will I be the killer of men),³⁰⁶ all align her with the supernatural and specifically with the valkyries.

Women as dreamers

The stanzas spoken by male speakers to female dreamers do not share all of these features: although they similarly focus on predictions of imminent death and destruction, they are more likely to be spoken by named, human individuals (men known to the dreamer). Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir, for instance, dreams of “Þorgrím ór Gunnarsholti” (Þorgrím from

³⁰³ *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1943), 76.

³⁰⁴ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 403.

³⁰⁵ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 425.

³⁰⁶ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 425.

Gunnarsholt),³⁰⁷ and Þuríður dreams that Sturla Sighvatsson appears to her.³⁰⁸ When the male speaker is anonymous, they are more likely to be described simply as “maðr”, “a man”, as contrasted with the more elaborately coded descriptions of the supernatural female speakers we have already examined. A woman at Munka-Þverá “dreymði ... at maðr kæmi at henni. Sá kvaði vísu þessa” (dreamed ... that a man came to her. He spoke this verse).³⁰⁹ Halldóra, a woman from Fljót, “dreymði um sumarit fyrir Örlygsstaðafund, at maðr kvæmi at henni, ok kvað þetta” (dreamed during the summer before the battle at Örlygsstaðir, that a man came to her, and spoke this).³¹⁰

If the verses voiced by supernatural, female figures contribute to a sense of impending fate, robbing the main actors in the feud drama of – at least some of – their control over future events, and additionally allow the author or compiler to register significant concerns about the patterns and cycles of feuding within contemporary Icelandic society, it is less clear to what degree the dream-verses attributed to female dreamers (but spoken by men) might fulfill such a structural function. It is possible that despite some superficial similarities with the dream-verses voiced by female figures, the verses spoken to women could fulfill a very different purpose, and we turn now to an examination of these verses. I wish to be clear before doing so that such verses cannot be considered as direct or even indirect representations of a woman’s voice: they could, however, be considered as a saga-author or saga-compiler’s imaginative recreation of what a woman in this era might conceivably have dreamed, though we cannot say with any certainty that these verses were in fact dreamed (or composed) by the female dreamers who hear them.

³⁰⁷ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 421.

³⁰⁸ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 426.

³⁰⁹ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 416.

³¹⁰ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 425.

At the start of the sequence of dreams that leads up to the battle at Örlygsstaðir, an unnamed woman receives this dream:

Í þenna tíma dreymsði konu at Munka-Þverá, at maðr kæmi at henni. Sá kvað vísu þessa:
Saman dragask sveitir,
svellr órói, –
varir mik ok varir mik,
at viti Sturlu.
Ætla lyðir,
þótt á laun fari,
– kemr vél fyrir vél –
vélar at gjalda.

Margir váru þá aðrir stórdraumar, bæði fyrir norðan land ok sunnan.

At that time, a woman at Munka-Þverá dreamed that a man came to her. He spoke this verse:

A body of men are gathering together,
unrest grows –
I suspect, and I suspect,
that Sturla knows this.
People intend
to repay deceit
even though it is kept secret
– deceit comes from deceit.

There were many other important dreams, both in the northern lands and in the southern.³¹¹

We have the same characteristic repetition, of “varir mik ok varir mik”, and the verse is followed by a characteristic statement that implies this is only one of many dreams that came to members of the population. However, the verses voiced by men do not include many of the key features (supernatural characteristics of the speaker; references to a journey through a loathsome or dark place; references to an ability to perform supernatural feats) that unite the verses attributed to female speakers.

This is in fact the first of about twenty stanzas that lead up to the battle of Örlygsstaðir, and if we accept Tranter’s argument about the compiler’s main themes and overarching concerns

³¹¹ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 416-417. “vél”, translated as “deceit” here, could also be understood as “trickery” or “fraud”.

in assembling *Sturlunga saga*, the preservation of such a large quantity of dream-verses in a theoretically factual and historical saga may begin to make more sense, as may the attribution of verses to women as well as men: although women may have been excluded from participating in the composition and recitation of traditionally ‘skaldic-style’ poetry, they are not immune from the consequences of the feud cycle. Particularly in the sequence of dreams leading up to the conflict at Örlygsstaðir, the compiler records dreams from all over the island and from a wide variety of people. The prose following the above stanza explicitly states that important dreams occurred “bæði fyrir norðan land ok sunnan” (both in the northern lands and in the southern).

The compiler may be choosing to demonstrate the wide-ranging effects of the feud by attributing verses to a cross-section of society: people from Fellsendi and Svartárdalur and Sauðafell and Sandvík and Fljót and Halleyjarhóll and Keldur. The verses are heard by priests, named heroes and their relatives, and a large number of unnamed men and women. The verses also demonstrate an intriguing blend of Christian and pre-Christian traditions: Þorgeirr, for instance, is a priest who dreams of a valkyrie, who warns that “koma mun hörð fyr harða / hrið ok skammt at bíða” (from one severe storm [=battle], another hard one will come, and with only a short time to wait).³¹²

If there is a message to the dream-verses taken as a whole, this would seem to be it: to drive home the devastation that has been caused by the continuing feud, and to act as a warning to future readers of the compilation against similar behaviour. In crafting this message, the compiler appeals to both pagan and Christian authorities, and to both male and female authorities. The valkyries who foretell the future in *Sturlunga saga* are, as Judy Quinn has written, “female voices of authority familiar from the eddic corpus but rare in skaldic verse”,³¹³

³¹² *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 428.

³¹³ Judy Quinn, “The Use of Eddic Poetry in Contemporary Sagas”, 63.

and the compiler may be invoking them here to underscore a message that transcends the boundaries of religion, or gender, or time. It is not simply – as Borovsky would argue – that the female, supernatural speakers can express views that the compiler might not be able to put in the mouth of a male character. It is, perhaps, rather the compiler marshalling the female authorities of the past in order to demonstrate that it is not only Christianity that disapproves of – or, at least, is painfully aware of the consequences of – the ongoing feuds and the consequent destruction: these supernatural female authorities also see the (dangerous, unwanted) outcome of the feuds – some of which are, critically, launched against prominent members of the church. The perpetual feuding affects all members of Icelandic society, and thus it is perhaps fitting that the lines between pagan and Christian authority figures are blurred when the compiler invokes them to subtly warn against following the protagonists’ examples.

The verses spoken to women, however, may have an additional purpose, which becomes apparent when we turn to another passage which aptly illustrates the complexity of women’s voices and relationship with poetry in *Sturlunga saga*. Later in the saga, Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir will play something of an archetypal ‘whetter’ role, as she tries to incite her husband, Hálfðan, to support her brother’s quest for revenge – but before the battle of Örlygsstaðir she has a dream that other scholars³¹⁴ have interpreted as prefiguring the death of either her father or one of her brothers, since both Sighvatr and Sturla die from head injuries in the ensuing battle:

Steinvöru Sighvatsdóttur at Keldum dreymði ok í þenna tíma, at hón þóttist úti standa, ok komin í eyðitröð eina. Hón þóttist sjá Þorgrím ór Gunnarsholti sitja á traðargarðinum – ok horfði á mannshöfuð, er lá á garðinum. Hann kvað:

Sit ek, ok sék á
svarit Steinvarar:
Hví liggr hér á vegg
höfuð í örtröð?

³¹⁴ Zoe Borovsky and Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, for instance.

Margir váru aðrir draumar sagðir í þenna tíma, þó at hér sé eigi rítaðir, þeir er tíðindavænir þóttu vera, svá ok aðrir fyrirburðir.

Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir also had a dream at that time, at Keldur: it seemed to her that she stood outside, and had come into a deserted cattle pen. It seemed to her that she saw Þorgrímr from Gunnarsholt sitting on the wall of the pen – looking towards a man’s head, which lay in the pen. He said:

I sit and I seek
For Steinvör’s answer –
Why lies here by the wall
a head in the pen?

Many other dreams were told at this time, though they are not written here, and they were thought to be full of great tidings, and other foreshadowings.³¹⁵

The desire to read this (notably by Straubhaar; also by Guðrún P. Helgadóttir)³¹⁶ as an authentic verse composed by Steinvör herself is understandable – she is listed as a poet in *Skáldatal*, but none of her other verses survive. She is not the speaker of this verse, but it is not entirely uncommon within the sagas for a (male) character to dream a verse that he is subsequently credited with composing.

However, in the dream, Steinvör does not speak the verse. Instead, she dreams that a man asks her a question – to which she makes no reply. Given previous discussion of the problematic nature of considering other dream-verses in *Sturlunga saga* as any sort of authentic or direct representations of women’s voices, I find substantiating her authorship or composition a hard argument. Borovsky, however, “read[s] Steinvör’s verse not as “women’s voice” or even Steinvör’s voice but as Sturla’s complex remembering of Steinvör’s voice [...] a voice that stands for the Sturlung past and a tribute (in the form of a question) to the answer that he himself did not or could not give.”³¹⁷ Perhaps the compiler is asking Steinvör herself a question: implicitly asking her to justify the continuing violence (“Hví liggr hér á vegg / höfuð í örtröð?”),

³¹⁵ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 421.

³¹⁶ See Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, *Skáldkonur fyrri alda*, Volume 1, 24-25.

³¹⁷ Zoe Borovsky, “Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature”, 31.

and perhaps her lack of a response, and the stanza's indication that Þorgrímr is still seeking an answer ("Sit ek, ok sé ek á, / svarit Steinvarar") is meant to suggest that there can be no rational answer. Why is her brother's (or her father's) head lying by the wall? Perhaps they are victims of society, or of inexorable fate — but perhaps they are rather victims of their own willingness (and Steinvör's own willingness) to escalate and perpetuate a unnecessary cycle of violence. And perhaps her lack of a response, her lack of direct engagement with the problem, foreshadows Steinvör's future role in continuing the cycle.

The engagement of women in both the speaking and the hearing of dream-verses, then, draws them into the cycle of feud, a cycle in which they can be read not only as victims, but also as agents complicit in the violence. In *Old Norse Images of Women*, Jochens identified the whetter as one key role that female figures fulfill in the sagas; Jóhanna Katrin Friðriksdóttir and others have more recently demonstrated that influential women were also capable of playing a peacemaking role. That the female dreamers of *Sturlunga saga* receive poetic warnings, but are not shown to act on them, points to the possibility that by not seeking to end the violence they help perpetuate it.

Guðrún and Jóreiðr

There is only one example in *Sturlunga saga* – and precious few in the entire surviving corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic literature – of women speaking to each other in verse. In a previous chapter, I have already discussed *Atlakviða*, and the structural function of Guðrún's three major speech acts within that poem. Guðrún, however, had a long and multi-faceted history of appearances within both Germanic and Old Norse poetry, and "remained a familiar figure in the minds of ordinary Icelanders" for centuries.³¹⁸ She appears in *Sturlunga saga*, in the dreams

³¹⁸ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 14.

of the sixteen-year-old Jóreiðr, in a passage that Jenny Jochens singles out as exemplifying both religious tensions and Germanic-nordic continuity.³¹⁹

Guðrún's appearance in *Sturlunga saga* shares many features with the other images of (pagan) supernatural dream-women already mentioned in this chapter. On her first appearance, she is described in this way: “Hon þóttist vera úti þar á hlaði í Miðjumdal. Hon sá konu ríða vestan fyrir hlaðit á gráum hesti í dökkum klæðum. Mikill var hestrinn ok svá konan.” (She [=Jóreiðr] thought herself to be outside there [=the church], on the pavement in Miðjumdalr. She saw a woman ride from the west over the pavement on a gray horse and in dark clothes. The horse was very large and so was the woman.)³²⁰ Jóreiðr's first dream, the prose takes pains to note, takes place near a church, and she is said to be the wife of a priest: “Sá maðr bjó suðr í Miðjumdal ... er Páll hét. Hann var prestmaðr ok góðr búþegn. Kona sú var með honum, er Jóreiðr hét ok var Hermundardóttir. Þetta dreymði hana Jóreiði, sextán vetra gamla, þar í Miðjumdal um messu Máriu Magdalenu í kirkju.” (There was a man who lived south in Miðjumdalr ... who was named Páll. He was a priest and good farmer. His wife was with him; she was named Jóreiðr and she was the daughter of Hermundr. Jóreiðr, then sixteen winters old, dreamed this, there in Miðjumdalr, around the time of the feast-day of Mary Magdalene in the church.)³²¹

Over the course of four separate dreams, Jóreiðr asks questions about various individuals involved in the feuds, and Guðrún answers in verse. Many of the verses include end-rhyme, and repeat the final line, as in this example from the first dream:

“Hvat veiztu til Þorvarðs?” segir mærin.
“Þat veit ek allgerla,” segir draumkonan:
Hann es hurð fyr heim

³¹⁹ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 15.

³²⁰ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 519.

³²¹ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 519.

brynjaðr í sveim,
eru brennumenn þá,
mannhundur, hjá,
mannhundur hjá.

“What do you know of Þorvarðr?” said the maiden.

“I know that very clearly,” said the dream-woman:

He is at the door of his home,
mailclad in the tumult;
there are fire-raisers there,
scoundrels (are) nearby,
scoundrels nearby.³²²

Combined with the physical description, the repetition and the end-rhyme and the old metre all clearly align Guðrún with the supernatural or otherworldly; she later states that she has come from the land of the dead. Jóreiðr asks whether there is “mark” (a matter of importance) in what Guðrún says, and receives this reply:

Mark es þér
sem þínum föður
ok öllum yðrum
áttniðjungum.

It is a matter of importance for you
and for your father
and for all others
of your kin.³²³

Throughout subsequent exchanges, Guðrún imparts more and more information about the ongoing feud. Many of her verses are spoken in response to direct requests from Jóreiðr: what does Guðrún know about Þorvarðr? Or Steinólfr? Or Gizur Þorvaldsson? The surrounding prose both highlights the gulf in experience and culture between the two women, through Jóreiðr’s fear of Guðrún and her questions about why heathens should come here now, and also emphasizes the benefits of alliance. The prose also takes some care to show Guðrún’s opposition to the current

³²² *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 519.

³²³ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 519.

actions of the pagans: in the first dream, she says of the *brennumenn* that “Þa ætla þeir með illvilja sinum at koma heiðni á allt landit.” (They intended, with their evildoing, to bring paganism to all the land.)³²⁴ Later, during the third dream, the prose attributes this statement to Guðrún: “Nú hefir þetta þrisvar borit fyrir þik, enda verður þrisvar allt forðum. Þat er ok eigi síðr, at góð er guðs þrenning.” (Now has this come to you three times, for all good things come three times. And the Trinity of God is no less good.)³²⁵ The prose framework, in other words, takes care to indicate that not only is Guðrún not hostile towards Christianity, she is openly supportive of it.

Despite the emphasis in the prose on the evils of paganism, the verses also exhibit an unequal relationship between the two women: Guðrún has access to supernatural knowledge that Jóreiður does not. The prose also indicates that by imparting this knowledge to Jóreiður, Guðrún may believe that she can influence events for the better: in the third dream, she specifically instructs Jóreiður to share what she has dreamed with others:

Seg Þorvarði
þessa grímu,
ungum auðskata,
ef þik eftir spyr.
En þótt þik eigi
eftir fregni,
þó skaltu segja
syni oddvita.

Tell Þorvarður
of this night,
the young warrior,
if he asks you later.
But even if he does not
ask you later,
nevertheless you should tell him,
the son of the chieftain.³²⁶

³²⁴ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 520.

³²⁵ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 521.

³²⁶ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 521.

While this could be a convenient literary fiction to explain why the verses have survived, it also presents Guðrún as a figure whose wisdom could be useful more widely, within the storyworld.

Throughout, both the prose and the verse reinforce the possibility of friendship between Guðrún and Jóreiðr: in the second dream, Guðrún speaks a stanza about Steinólfr (who is already dead, although the news has not reached Miðjumdalr) which includes a notable comment in the latter half of the verse:

Nú es Steinólfr
í styrstraumi
á stagli píndr
með Agli.
Ves þú vinr
vinar míns,
en ek mun með svinnum
at saka bótum.

Now Steinólfr is
(in the battle)
tormented on the rack
with Egill.
Be you a friend
to my friend,
and I will, with wisdom,
seek redress.³²⁷

Friendships between women are rare in Old Norse-Icelandic literature; so rare that Natalie M. Van Deusen can identify only two explicit references to friendships between women in the entire corpus.³²⁸ Analyzing examples from *Laxdæla saga* and *Víglundar saga*, she argues that “female relationships, both friendly and antagonistic, are strategically presented in the sagas in a way that works to preserve both the politically and philosophically masculine realms of friendship as well

³²⁷ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 520.

³²⁸ Natalie M. Van Deusen, “Sworn Sisterhood? On the (Near-) Absence of Female Friendship from the *Íslendingasögur*”, *Scandinavian Studies* 86.1 (2014), 58.

as the highly gendered kinship structure upon which medieval Icelandic society was based.”³²⁹

Nonetheless, there is no shortage of examples of alliances, mentorship, and depictions of community and positive relationships between women, even if they are not explicitly described as friendship.³³⁰ In the verse, Guðrún never directly calls Jóreiðr a friend, though she clearly indicates that she could be both a friend and an ally; the prose makes the connection more explicit, during Jóreiðr’s third dream:

Hon mælti þetta: “Hví spurðir þú mik engis ok eigi at nafni?”

Mærin svarar: “Mér er ótti at þér, en þó vil ek nú vita, hver þú ert eða hvat þú heitir.”

Hon segir: “Ek heiti Guðrún Gjúkadóttir.”

“Hví fara heiðnir menn hér?” kvað mærin.

“Engu skal þik þat skipta,” segir hon, “hvárt ek em kristin eð heiðin, en vinr em ek vinar mins.”

She [Guðrún] said this: “Why have you not asked me anything, and not even my name?”

The maiden [Jóreiðr] answers: “I am afraid of you, but nevertheless I now want to know, who you are and what you are called.”

She says: “I am called Guðrún Gjúkadóttir.”

“Why do heathens come here now?” said the maiden.

“It should be of no importance to you,” she said, “whether I am Christian or heathen, for I am a friend to my friends.”³³¹

Jóreiðr is clearly wary of Guðrún; the episode emphasizes Jóreiðr’s connection to the Christian church – both through her husband and her geographical location – from the outset. Guðrún is an echo of a very distant past, one that seems alien to the much younger, Christian, Jóreiðr.

Nonetheless, the ensuing dialogue (and Guðrún’s verses, which impart supernatural knowledge) bridges the divide, and opens up the possibility of future friendship (or, at the very least, a peaceful coexistence) between the Christian and the pagan. This is at least partly a construction

³²⁹ Natalie M. Van Deusen, “Sworn Sisterhood? On the (Near-) Absence of Female Friendship from the *Íslendingasögur*”, 54.

³³⁰ For example, Signy and Heiðr’s alliance in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (see chapter 1), Ólǫf’s mentorship and guidance of Ketilríðr in *Víglundar saga*, and Nítíða’s relationships with both her foster-mother Egidía – also a queen who rules her own kingdom – and Sýjalín, in *Nítíða saga* (see chapter 3).

³³¹ *Sturlunga saga*, Volume 1, 520-521.

of the prose author or compiler: Guðrún's verse states that if Jóriðr is a friend to her friend, she will "saka bótum" (seek redress, or compensation) for Steinólfr, but the prose places the emphasis firmly on friendship in the context of the pagan/Christian divide.

Although the passage does highlight significant tensions between pagan and Christian Icelanders, it also seems to indicate that (in the compiler's view) the only way to resolve this cycle of death and destruction is for both sides to work in harmony, and this does *not* mean a complete abandonment of pagan wisdom. Rather, the exchange (and the careful framing of the verses by the surrounding prose), points to a desire for the Christian and the pagan, the old and the young, the ancient and the contemporary, to actively build alliances and thereby to break the cycle of feuds.

Chapter 3 Romance Heroines

Skaldic poetry and the chivalric sagas: at first glance, two genres of Old Norse-Icelandic literature that might appear to have little – if anything – to say to each other, and that some scholars have indeed seen as existing in clear tension or opposition. Kevin J. Wanner, for example, has drawn on Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological conception of “capital” to argue that Snorri Sturluson composed his Edda to celebrate and promote skaldic verse in reaction to an influx of continental, chivalric, literature, primarily through translations commissioned by King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway.³³² Torfi H. Tulinius, in his essay “Romance and the Creation of a New Genre in Medieval Iceland”, has gone further, arguing that Snorri Sturluson composed *Egils saga* (which Tulinius takes to be one of the earliest of the *Íslendingasögur*, and a founding text of the genre) specifically in reaction to this influx, and that *Egils saga* itself betrays an indebtedness to the French romance *Le chevalier au lion*.³³³ Bjarni Einarsson, meanwhile, has proposed that the similarities between the poets’ sagas pointed to the (alleged) fictitious nature of those sagas, and argued that they had been inspired by, and modelled on, the *Tristan* story and other Old French narratives of courtly love.³³⁴ This possible influence has been discussed at length,³³⁵ but suffice it to say for now that the two traditions may not be as far apart as they appear.

³³² Kevin Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: the conversion of cultural capital in medieval Scandinavia* (Toronto, 2008).

³³³ Torfi H. Tulinius, “Romance and the Creation of a New Genre in Medieval Iceland”, in *Textual Production and Status Contests in Rising and Unstable Societies*, eds. Massimiliano Bampi and Marina Buzzoni (Venice, 2013), 33-42.

³³⁴ Bjarni Einarsson, *Skáldasögur: Um uppruna og eðli ástaskáldsagnanna fornu* (Reykjavík, 1961).

³³⁵ See, for instance, Peter G. Foote, “Some Account of the Present State of Saga Research”, *Scandinavica* 4 (1965), 115-126; Carol J. Clover, *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca, 1982).

Ironically, early scholarship condemned both skaldic verse and the *riddarasögur* alike – though for markedly different reasons. Margaret Schlauch described the romances as “lamentably inferior to the older type of narrative”,³³⁶ and W. P. Ker termed them “among the dreariest things ever made by human fancy”.³³⁷ As Marianne Kalinke has aptly summarized the situation, “[h]istoricity and verisimilitude have tended to be the criteria applied in both modern and medieval times to assess the *riddarasögur*”.³³⁸ Skaldic poetry, meanwhile, though often cited by the saga-authors themselves as proof of the historicity or accuracy of their accounts, was “tasteless”,³³⁹ and was “notorious for its often extremely complicated word order, which, rightly or wrongly, has been regarded as a deplorable consequence of the strict constraint of the *dróttkvætt* meter”.³⁴⁰

Parallels in the history of scholarship aside, however, poetry in the *riddarasögur* is perhaps most conspicuous by its absence: although the traditional distinction between the chivalric and legendary sagas has been increasingly questioned by scholars,³⁴¹ the sagas usually grouped together under the term *riddarasögur* are prose tales, remarkable among the other genres of saga narrative for – amongst other things – their general exclusion of verse fragments. Even in examples such as the *Strengleikar*, a collection of tales translated from Marie de

³³⁶ Margaret Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland* (London, 1934), 5.

³³⁷ W.P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (New York, 1957), 282.

³³⁸ Marianne E. Kalinke, “Norse Romance (Riddarasögur)”, in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, eds. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (London, 1985), 317.

³³⁹ Niels M. Petersen, “Til den gamle nordiske (islandske) poesi”, in *Samlede afhandlinger* (Copenhagen, 1874), 240.

³⁴⁰ Peter Hallberg, *Old Norse-Icelandic Poetry: Eddic Lay and Skaldic Verse*, trans. Paul Schach and Sonja Lindgrenson (London, 1962), 19.

³⁴¹ See, for instance, Judy Quinn, ed. “Interrogating Genre in the Fornaldarsögur: Round Table Discussion”, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006), 275-296. Also Ármann Jakobsson, “Le Roi Chevalier: The Royal Ideology and Genre of *Hrólfs saga kraka*”, *Scandinavian Studies* 71 (1999), 139-166; Marianne E. Kalinke, “Riddarasögur, Fornaldarsögur, and the Problem of Genre”, in *Sagas de Chevaliers (Riddarasögur): Congrès tenu en Juillet 1982* (Paris, 1982), 77-91; Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary Fiction in Medieval Iceland* (Reykjavik, 1971); Sigurður Nordal, *Um islenskar fornsögur*, trans. Árni Björnsson (Reykjavik, 1968).

France's *lais*, or the translated *Alexanders saga* and *Ívens saga*, again based on poetic originals, the translator or adaptor has chosen to render the story entirely in prose – neither retaining any hint of the original poetic form of the text, nor incorporating additional poetic material into the resultant adaptation. The *riddarasögur* may thus seem a strange reference point for an investigation of women's voices in poetry, but an understanding of the shifts that occurred in the representation of female characters between the original Old French romances and the Old Norse-Icelandic adaptations may nonetheless be helpful, as this chapter will endeavour to demonstrate, for understanding the function and literary effect of women's verses in sagas that were influenced by the chivalric tradition.

Skaldic, or skaldic-style, verses must also seem a difficult reference point for a study of women's voices in Old Norse-Icelandic poetry: court poetry was, by default, a male-dominated genre. Most often, women are relegated to “the sidelines, as helpers, instigators, and approvers of the masculine behaviour described in skaldic verse”.³⁴² Indeed, Judith Jesch has concluded that the composition of skaldic verse was “an important part of Viking Age life in which women played little or no part”.³⁴³ Women are frequently the *audience* to whom such verses are addressed,³⁴⁴ but they are rarely represented as the composers of their own stanzas. Complicating the picture are innumerable riddles of historicity: like most of the verses attributed to men, verses voiced by women primarily exist as insertions into later prose works, in contexts that range from clearly fictional to ostensibly (and potentially) historical. The saga writers could use such verse for dramatic and literary effect: characters not otherwise represented as skalds could, for instance, be represented as spontaneously composing and reciting a verse. Thus the actual verses

³⁴² Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 1991), 152.

³⁴³ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 151.

³⁴⁴ Roberta Frank, “Why Skalds Address Women”, *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages: Atti del 12o Congresso Internazionale de Studi sull'Alto Medineva* (Spoleto, 1990).

may or may not have been composed or spoken by the persons to whom they are attributed in the sagas; in many cases, the (usually anonymous) saga-author is incorporating these verses for effect, and may indeed have composed the verses themselves. For the purposes of this study, however, I shall temporarily dispense with possibly unanswerable questions of historicity, and focus on the literary value of those verses that survive, and of the literary effect of a saga author's choice to include – or not to include – stanzas of poetry placed in the mouths of (fictional) female characters.

In particular, *Víglundar saga* represents a sophisticated fusion of skaldic conventions and later romance tradition, wherein the heroine can spontaneously speak in *dróttkvætt* just as readily, and just as skillfully, as the titular hero. Though *Víglundar saga* is usually considered one of the *Íslendingasögur*, this chapter will demonstrate that the saga-author's portrayal of Ketilríðr – and in particular, her high level of education and learning – reflects many elements of the indigenous romance tradition. The writers of the translated and indigenous romances employ lavish descriptions of both heroes' and heroines' intelligence, wit, and learning in order to highlight the connection between them, and their compatibility; I shall argue that the author of *Víglundar saga* takes this to its logical conclusion when introducing stanzas of verse into the narrative, using Ketilríðr's verses not only in more conventional ways – as structural markers or as outlets for deep-seated emotion – but also as a subtle tool to establish a relationship between her and Víglundr. Therefore, although the *riðdarasögur* themselves provide little primary material for a study of women's voices in Old Norse-Icelandic poetry, it will be demonstrated that – in comparison with the Old French traditions that influenced them – the Old Norse-Icelandic texts present a reworked version of the stereotypical romance heroine that does have

bearing on the representation of women poets in other sagas, such as *Víglundar saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, that were undoubtedly influenced by the continental tradition of chivalric romance.

There is a good deal of temporal overlap between the earliest attested *riddarasögur* and the latest of the *Íslendingasögur*: the first known translations of French romance into Old Norse were commissioned by Hákon Hákonarson in the early portion of the thirteenth century; the oldest manuscript of such translations is De la Gardie 4–7, from approximately 1270.³⁴⁵ Marianne E. Kalinke traces the subsequent development of translated, and then indigenous, *riddarasögur* and demonstrates that “[b]y the beginning of the fourteenth century, the *riddarasögur* had become a flourishing literary genre in Iceland, distinguished by its successful conjoining of foreign and indigenous narrative matter”.³⁴⁶ *Víglundar saga*, meanwhile, is traditionally considered one of the youngest of the *Íslendingasögur*, even though it is nominally set during the reign of Haraldr inn hárfagri.³⁴⁷ The saga is usually dated no earlier than the late fourteenth century, well after the development of the genre of indigenous romance in Iceland, though the manuscripts that survive are from the fifteenth.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁵ For a much more detailed discussion of the early history of Norwegian translations of Old French material, see Marianne E. Kalinke, *Stories Set Forth with Fair Words: The Evolution of Medieval Romance in Iceland* (Cardiff, 2017), especially 1-18.

³⁴⁶ Marianne E. Kalinke, *Stories Set Forth with Fair Words: The Evolution of Medieval Romance in Iceland*, 163.

³⁴⁷ Marianne E. Kalinke has argued that it should be considered as an Icelandic bridal-quest romance rather than as part of the *Íslendingasögur*; see Marianne E. Kalinke, “Víglundar saga: An Icelandic Bridal-Quest Romance”, *Skáldskaparmál* 3 (1994), 119-143. Rather than attempt to assign the saga definitively to one genre or another, here I intend to analyze the mingling of genres within the text and the function of women’s verses. For more commentary on *Víglundar saga*’s representation of Haraldr, in comparison with earlier sagas, see Ármann Jakobsson, “Our Norwegian Friend: The Role of Kings in the Family Sagas”, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 117 (2002), 145-160.

³⁴⁸ See Jóhannes Halldórsson, “Formáli: Víglundar saga”, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, *Íslenzk Fornrit XIV* (Reykjavík, 1959), xxxii. Also see Guðrún Nordal, “Skaldic Citations and Settlement”, in *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions*, ed. Else Mundal (Copenhagen, 2013), 199.

The composition and performance of skaldic verse demanded not only considerable skill and intelligence, but also tact and political shrewdness. Roberta Frank has characterized *dróttkvætt* as a “product of a culture that did not waste syllables, where the shapes of stillness, of what is not uttered, had their own meanings. Wit and a ready tongue were prized when combined with lean, taut prose”.³⁴⁹ Throughout the corpus of extant Old Norse-Icelandic literature, it is made clear that these were qualities valued in both men and women: within the translated and indigenous *riddarasögur* – texts often written at a much later date than much of the skaldic verse that survives in the *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, and much more obviously influenced by both Christian and secular continental traditions – women characters do not lose the ability to engage in poetic and literary composition. Perhaps the most significant difference between the classic portrayal of a heroine of chivalric romance in the Old French tradition and in the Old Norse-Icelandic tradition, is the added – and repeated – emphasis on the Old Norse women’s intelligence, wit, and command of language(s), all undoubtedly essential qualities for any aspiring poet. Moreover, the heroine’s intelligence is not merely a clichéd description, but rather, usually has an important effect on the story, or at least a clear function in the plot. This chapter will thus examine an illustrative selection of Old French romances known to have been accessible to Norwegian and Icelandic writers, Old Norse-Icelandic translated *riddarasögur*, and Old Norse-Icelandic indigenous *riddarasögur*, in order to gain a more well-rounded understanding of the representation of women’s literary expression and linguistic ability in the Old Norse-Icelandic texts, before turning to a case study of the form and function of women’s verses in *Víglundar saga*.

³⁴⁹ Roberta Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry: The Dróttkvætt Stanza* (Ithaca, 1978), 23.

Translation and adaptation

Determining the exact sequence of changes between an Old French original and an Old Norse-Icelandic adaptation is no easy task, and in most cases impossible – but by examining a number of the translated *riddarasögur*, a general pattern does emerge. In Chretien de Troyes' *Erec and Enide*, our first introduction to the heroine is an extended and lavish description of Enide's beauty:

Povre estoit la robe dehors,
Mes desoz estoit biax li cors.
Mout estoit la pucele gente,
Car tote i ot mise s'antante
Nature qui fete l'avoit.
Ele meïsmes s'an estoit
Plus de cinc cenz foiz mervelliee
Comant une sole foiee
Tant bele chose fere sot,
Car puis tant pener ne se pot
Qu'ele poïst son essanplaire
An nule guise contrefaire.
De ceste tesmoingne Nature
C'onques si bele criature
Ne fu veüe an tot le monde.
Por voir vos di qu'Isolz la blonde
N'ot les crins tant sors ne luisanz
Que a cesti ne fust neanz.
Plus ot que n'est la flors de lis
Cler et blanc le front et le vis;
Sor la blanchor, par grant mervoille,
D'une fresche color vermoille,
Que Nature li ot donee,
Estoit sa face anluminee.
Si oel si grant clarté ranoient
Que deus estoiles ressanbloient.
Onques Dex ne sot fere mialz
Le nes, la boche ne les ialz.
Que diroie de sa biauté?
Ce fu cele por verité
Qui fu fete por esgarder,
Qu'an se poïst an li mirer
Ausi com an un mireor.

On the outside the clothing was poor, but the body beneath was lovely. The maiden was very beautiful, for Nature in making her had turned all her attention to the task. Nature herself had marvelled more than five hundred times at how she had been able to make such a beautiful thing just once, for since then, strive as she might, she had never been able to duplicate in any way her original model. Nature bears witness to this: never was such a beautiful creature seen in the whole world. In truth I tell you that Isolde the Blonde had not such shining golden hair, for compared to this maiden she was nothing. Her face and forehead were fairer and brighter than the lily-flower; contrasting marvellously with the whiteness, her face was illuminated by a fresh, glowing colour that Nature had given her. Her eyes glowed with such brightness that they resembled two stars; never had God made finer nose, mouth, nor eyes. What should I say of her beauty? She was truly one who was made to be looked at, for one might gaze at her just as one gazes into a mirror.³⁵⁰

In Daniel Poirion's introduction to his edition of Chrétien's works, he acknowledges that "[l]a beauté est première, nécessaire à la manifestation des toutes les autres qualités" (beauty is above all, necessary to the manifestation of all the other qualities).³⁵¹ Poirion has also catalogued some six hundred and sixty-four occurrences of either "bel" or "bele" in Chrétien's romances. Among the many virtues celebrated by the romances, beauty does seem to hold the principal place: "même parmi ces vertus cardinales, la beauté occupe un rang privilégié: la beauté est la seule qualité que Chrétien déclare innée à la noblesse". (Even among these cardinal virtues, beauty occupies a privileged position: it is the only quality that Chrétien declares innate to the nobility.)³⁵² In the Old Norse-Icelandic version, *Erex saga* – in which the heroine is named "Evida" rather than "Enide" – the above passage is completely cut, and replaced with two lines that include the reference to Nature, but introduce commentary on Evida's manners and

³⁵⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, "Erec et Enide", in *Chrétien de Troyes: Œuvres complètes*, ed. Daniel Poirion et al. (Paris, 1994), ll. 409-441. A few of the translations in this chapter (those from Old French) are not my own. Where this is the case, the translator is always referenced. In this instance, the translation is from: Chrétien de Troyes, "Erec and Enide", in *Arthurian Romances*, trans. Carleton W. Carroll, ed. William W. Kibler (London, 2004), 42.

³⁵¹ Daniel Poirion, "Introduction", in *Chrétien de Troyes: Œuvres complètes*, ed. Daniel Poirion et al. (Paris, 1994), xxxv.

³⁵² Karl-Heinz Bender, "Beauté, Mariage, Amour: La Genèse du Premier Roman Courtois" in *Amour, mariage et transgressions au Moyen Âge: actes du colloque des 24, 25, 26 et 27 mars 1983*, eds. Danielle Buschinger and André Crépin (Göppingen, 1984), 175.

comportment, in addition to her beauty: “Mærin var í einum línkyrtli fornum ok slit<n>um, en þó eigi að síðr var allr hennar líkami svá fríðr, at Erex þóttiz enga slíka sét hafa. Þar fylgðu allir líkamans burðir ok kurteisi, svá at sjálf náttúran undraðiz at hún var svá fríð sköpuð.” (The maiden was in an old and ragged linen dress, but nevertheless all of her body was so beautiful, that Erex thought he had never seen the like. Additionally, she had such gracious bearing and courtesy, so that nature itself was astonished that she was created so beautiful.)³⁵³ The construction of the second sentence is such that one must understand that her “burðr” and “kurteisi” added significantly to her beauty. The Old Norse-Icelandic text also abridges and subtly alters the description of Evida that her father gives Erex: while Chrétien’s version has the father note that “[m]out est bele, mes mialz asez / Vaut ses savoirs que sa biautez” (though beautiful, her good sense is worth even more than her beauty),³⁵⁴ *Erex saga* explicitly mentions her “vitr” – usually translated as ‘wisdom’ or ‘intelligence’: “En þess væntir mik at af viti ok kvennligum listum hafi mín dóttir eigi síðr en vænleik. Ok nú segi hún sinn vilja.” (But this I suspect, that of intelligence and womanly accomplishments, my daughter has no less of these, than of beauty. And now let her say what she desires.)³⁵⁵

This request for Evida’s own opinion of the proposed marriage is notable, since it is emphasized repeatedly in the Old Norse-Icelandic, but completely absent from Chrétien’s text:

‘Ja de moi n’iroiz escondiz:
 Tot a vostre comandemant
 Ma bele fille vos comant.’
 Lors l’a prise par mi le poing:
 ‘Tenez, fet il, je la vos doing.’

³⁵³ *Erex saga*, in *Norse Romance, II: Knights of the Round Table*, ed. Marianne E. Kalinke (Cambridge, 1999), 226.

³⁵⁴ Chrétien de Troyes, “Erec et Enide”, in *Chrétien de Troyes: Œuvres complètes*, ed. Daniel Poirion et al., ll. 537-538. Translation: Chrétien de Troyes, “Erec and Enide”, in *Arthurian Romances*, trans. Carleton W. Carroll, ed. William W. Kibler, 43.

³⁵⁵ *Erex saga*, in *Norse Romance, II: Knights of the Round Table*, ed. Marianne E. Kalinke, 228.

‘I shall never refuse your request: I entrust my beautiful daughter to you, just as you desire.’ Then he took her by the hand. ‘Here,’ said he, ‘I give her to you.’³⁵⁶

In contrast, the father’s approval in *Erex saga* is conditional upon Evida’s consent: “[O]k at engum kosti vil ek því neita at gipta þér mína dóttur, ef þat er hennar vili” (and on no account do I wish to refuse to give you my daughter in marriage, if that is her wish).³⁵⁷ The introduction of the doctrine of female consent in marriage is consistent with the changes that had entered Old Norse-Icelandic legal codes as a result of the advent of Christianity – Jochens has indeed argued that churchmen “privileged the idea of consent above all others in their program, because it exemplified the doctrine of the equality of the sexes”.³⁵⁸ More importantly, however, in the process of transmission and adaptation, it is clear that the Icelandic or Norwegian adaptor(s) have gradually reduced the emphasis on the heroine’s excessive beauty, and drawn attention to other, less visible attributes, such as intelligence and good manners. This is entirely consistent with the saga’s treatment of the hero: Erex is similarly introduced as “fríðr ... ok íþróttamaðr mikill” (handsome ... and a greatly accomplished man).³⁵⁹ In *Erex saga*, accomplishments and intelligence seem to be equally as important as physical beauty.

Erex saga is admittedly unique amongst the Norse adaptations of Chrétien’s romances: save for two vellum fragments from c. 1500, it exists solely in seventeenth-century Icelandic manuscripts, and represents “the most marked deviation not only from its source in respect to content and structure but also in respect to style from the other translations known or thought to

³⁵⁶ Chrétien de Troyes, “Erec et Enide”, in *Chrétien de Troyes: Œuvres complètes*, II. 674-678. Translation: Chrétien de Troyes, “Erec and Enide”, in *Arthurian Romances*, trans. Carleton W. Carroll, ed. William W. Kibler, 45.

³⁵⁷ *Erex saga*, in *Norse Romance, II: Knights of the Round Table*, ed. Marianne E. Kalinke, 226.

³⁵⁸ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, 1995), 44. See also Jenny Jochens, “Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life, and Literature”, *Scandinavian Studies* 58 (1986), 142-176.

³⁵⁹ *Erex saga*, in *Norse Romance, II: Knights of the Round Table*, ed. Marianne E. Kalinke, 222.

have been produced at the Norwegian court of King Hákon Hákonarson”.³⁶⁰ As Claudia Bornholdt notes, the “motivation for episodes as well as the characterization of some of the protagonists” have changed substantially, and the saga much more closely reflects the “laconic style” of the classical Icelandic sagas than do *Parcevals saga* or *Ívens saga*.³⁶¹ However, the subtle shifts in characterization that can be seen in the treatment of the heroine of *Erex saga* are also visible in *Ívens saga*, where Arthur’s queen “speak[s] with greater authority in the saga”:³⁶² her commands to the bickering knights are honoured swiftly and without question. Similarly, later in the saga, Íven turns down his host’s offer of his daughter: the man has offered Íven his daughter, castle, and kingdom if he successfully defeats two giants. Íven responds: “Guð láti mik eigi hana kaupa, heldr skal hún jafnan frjáls fyrir mér.” (“God let me not bargain for her; rather she shall always be free from me.”)³⁶³ In comparison with the Old French, as Marianne Kalinke has analyzed in some detail, Íven’s declaration “only reinforces the distinct impression that in the translated romances woman is considered equal to man and not at all subservient. She has a right to make her own decisions and man, on his part, respects her individuality by refusing to consider her an object for which he can bargain at will.”³⁶⁴ Similarly, in the Old Norse translation of Marie de France’s *Le Fresne* – the Old Norse version is known as *Eskia* – the adaptor, far from abridging the text, “expands his source with a great amount of

³⁶⁰ Marianne E. Kalinke, “Introduction”, *Erex saga*, in *Norse Romance, II: Knights of the Round Table*, 219.

³⁶¹ Claudia Bornholdt, “The Old Norse-Icelandic Transmission of Chrétien de Troyes’s Romances: *Ívens saga*, *Erex saga*, *Parcevals saga* with *Valvens Þáttur*”, in *The Arthur of the North: The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus’ Realms*, ed. Marianne E. Kalinke (Cardiff, 2011), 113.

³⁶² Marianne E. Kalinke, “Characterization in ‘Erex saga’ and ‘Ívens saga’”, *Modern Language Studies* 5.1 (1975), 17.

³⁶³ *Ívens saga*, in *Norse Romance, II: Knights of the Round Table*, ed. Marianne E. Kalinke (Cambridge, 1999), 86-87.

³⁶⁴ Marianne E. Kalinke, “Characterization in ‘Erex saga’ and ‘Ívens saga’”, 18.

amplification”.³⁶⁵ This amplification includes the description of Eskia: while the Old French lai is content with a description of Fresne’s beauty, good manners, and nobility, the Old Norse adaptor adds additional commentary on her intelligence and learning: “j ollo brætlande fannz ængi i kuænmannum hænnar make at orlæik ok at bliðlæti. ok at goðom kænningom margfallegrar kunnasto ... ok huerra sa er augom sa hana þa gærði hana lofsæla ok frægia i goðum frasogum seenna aþæta hænnar hygginna orða ok sœmelegra meðfærða. hinnar kurtæisazto kuensko”. (In all of Brittany, there was not found among women her equal in manners and kindness, and in good education in many sorts of knowledge ... and whoever saw her with their eyes, then gave her glory and fame with good accounts of her behaviour, and the thoughtful words and right actions of this most courteous woman.)³⁶⁶

Women in the indigenous riddarasögur

Turning to the indigenous *riddarasögur*, the trend continues: regardless of the saga-author’s overall treatment of the romance heroine, she is always competitive with the hero in accomplishments or intelligence. In *Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands*, the text appears to be far more interested in the accomplishments and character of Valdimar’s queen than in her physical attractiveness: “Valldimar kongur hafði feinged eina dijrðliga drottningu, systur kongssins af Miklagarde, er Clatiana hiet, hun hafði numed allar sjó hófudlister, hier med allar kvennmans lister” (King Valldimar had in marriage a queen, the sister of the king of Miklagarðr, who was called Clatiana; she had learned all seven liberal arts, together with all womanly skills).³⁶⁷ Later,

³⁶⁵ *Strengleikar: An Old Norse Translation of Twenty-one Old French Lais*, ed. and trans. Robert Cook and Mattias Tveitane (Oslo, 1979), 42.

³⁶⁶ *Strengleikar: An Old Norse Translation of Twenty-one Old French Lais*, ed. and trans. Robert Cook and Mattias Tveitane, 52.

³⁶⁷ *Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances, Volume 5*, ed. Agnete Loth (Copenhagen, 1965), 112.

when the young Sigrgarðr (son of Florida and another protagonist, also named Sigrgarðr), has been finally crowned king over the lands of his maternal grandfather, his advisor Gustr suggests a bride who is both beautiful and skilled: the princess Þorfila, whose father, Qvinatus, rules over Ungaria.³⁶⁸ Interestingly enough, Þorfila is then presented as significantly more knowledgeable about the world than her father, and the doctrine of female consent is again invoked after Gustr has presented Sigrgarðr's suit to Qvinatus: "Ok sem Gv(stur) hæti sinv mali svarar k(ongur) 'Þessi ungi herra er þier fra seigit er mier okunnur suo af honum hefvi ek alldri spurn haft. Enn þo skaltu heyra ansuor minnar dottur vm þitt erindi'." (And when Gustr had made his speech, the king answered: 'This young lord of whom you speak is unknown to me; I have never heard news of him. Nevertheless, you shall hear the answer of my daughter concerning this matter.')³⁶⁹ Qvinatus has Þorfila called in, and asks "huort hun vill ja edur nei" (whether she wants [to say] yes or no)³⁷⁰ to the proposal, and the saga tells us that although Qvinatus may not have heard of the hero, Þorfila most assuredly has, and she readily assents. As though this in itself is not sufficient, Qvinatus later double-checks before the betrothal occurs, and she again confirms her assent.³⁷¹

An emphasis on the importance of scholarly study is characteristic of many of the *riddarasögur*, and it is a requirement of both men and women that they gain facility in foreign languages: "if the corpus can be said to be underpinned by a defining ethos, it is that knowledge acquired and exercised within its proper sphere is both power and virtue."³⁷² Women are not

³⁶⁸ *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances, Volume 5*, ed. Agnete Loth, 187-188.

³⁶⁹ *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances, Volume 5*, ed. Agnete Loth, 189.

³⁷⁰ *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances, Volume 5*, ed. Agnete Loth, 189.

³⁷¹ *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances, Volume 5*, ed. Agnete Loth, 192.

³⁷² Geraldine Barnes, *The bookish Riddarasögur: writing romance in Late Medieval Iceland* (Odense, 2014), 19.

excluded from this requirement that they be well tutored in the medieval liberal arts, and if a saga chooses to emphasize the intelligence or learning of the primary hero, it is generally the case that the text also notes the intelligence or learning of the heroine. Both Philotemia and Dínus, of *Dínus saga drambláta*, are exceptionally well educated: Philotemia is peerless in her knowledge of the “bókligar listir” (liberal arts).³⁷³ Furthermore, although Barnes sets up a division between the learning ascribed to princesses and heroes in her introduction to *The bookish riddarasögur* – “[w]hereas a command of foreign languages is the prerogative of heroes, expertise in astronomy is the province of princesses”³⁷⁴ – Kalinke’s analysis of “The Foreign Language Requirement in Medieval Icelandic Romance” provides ample evidence to support the claim that linguistic ability is not solely the province of romance heroes: noble women “receive no waiver from the high educational standards imposed on fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons”.³⁷⁵ Semerana, of *Adonias saga*, is famous for her book-learning as well as for her knowledge of astronomy: “hon het Semerana. hon hafði numit allar bókligar listar” (She was called Semerana. She had learned all the liberal arts).³⁷⁶ Queen Silkisif, of *Yngvars saga víðförla*, is fluent in Latin, Greek, Norse, and German, as well as many other unnamed languages;³⁷⁷ extraordinary linguistic ability is similarly attributed to Mathilda, of *Konráðs saga keisarasonar*, and Grátiana, of *Dámusta saga*: “Graciana kongs dottir ... uar hun algiaurr í þessum iþrottum, at í klerkdómi sigrudu hana eigi enu beztu klerkar; tunngr kunni hun ok allar at tala” (Gratiana, the king’s daughter ... was so perfect at these skills, that in learning she overcame the wisest scholars; and she knew how to

³⁷³ *Dínus saga drambláta*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík, 1960), 12.

³⁷⁴ Geraldine Barnes, *The bookish Riddarasögur: writing romance in Late Medieval Iceland*, 20.

³⁷⁵ Marianne E. Kalinke, “The Foreign Language Requirement in Medieval Icelandic Romance”, *The Modern Language Review* 78.4 (1983), 855.

³⁷⁶ *Adonias saga*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances, Volume 3*, ed. Agnete Loth (Copenhagen, 1963), 77.

³⁷⁷ *Yngvars saga víðförla: jämte ett bihang om yngvarsinskrifterna*, ed. Emil Olson (Copenhagen, 1912), 15.

speak all languages).³⁷⁸ Marianne Kalinke has noted that “the affinity of Gratiana and Dámusti is suggested not only by the juxtaposition of their verbal portraits but also by the similar wording: in their appearance, their learning, and their accomplishments they are compeers. As if to emphasize their kinship – and as a form of anticipation – the author concludes his portrait of Dámusti by drawing Gratiana into the account.”³⁷⁹

The stock figure of the ideal heroine, in short, is not beautiful and noble – as in the Old French tradition – but beautiful and wise, or beautiful and skilled. Admittedly, her intelligence is not necessarily portrayed as a positive trait – in the group of bridal-quest romances that feature a *meykongr*, or maiden-king, for instance, the heroine’s intelligence is usually presented as a trait that leads to excessive pride and arrogance. The authors of *Klári saga* and *Nítíða saga* differ radically in their treatment of female characters, but both include intelligence and learning as traits explicitly associated not only with the sagas’ respective heroes, but with their heroines as well. Serena, of *Klári saga*, is so intelligent that Klári’s tutor tells him that she will think herself greatly superior to him because of it: “Svo mjög er hún prydd vizku og klerkdómi, að eigi sinnaði hún meira þínu næmi en eins akurkarls.” (So much is she adorned with wisdom and learning, that she will consider your study no better than that of a field-worker.)³⁸⁰ Her magic and cunning – “sínu kukli og klógskap”³⁸¹ – are equally well known, and cement her position as a woman to be reckoned with. When Þornbjörg of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* – who temporarily masquerades as a man and insists upon being addressed as a king – is initially introduced, “vitr”

³⁷⁸ *Dámusta saga*, in *Þjalar Jóns saga: Dámusta saga. I teksten*, ed. Louisa Frederika Tan-Haverhorst (Haarlem, 1939), 50-51.

³⁷⁹ Marianne E. Kalinke, *Bridal Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland* (Ithaca, 1990), 125.

³⁸⁰ *Clari saga*, in *Riddarasögur: Volume 5*, ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík, 1954), 7.

³⁸¹ *Clari saga*, in *Riddarasögur: Volume 5*, ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 8.

is a quality ascribed both to her and to her mother.³⁸² Þórir's wife Ingibjörg is similarly “bæði vitr ok væn” (both wise and beautiful).³⁸³ In the cases of Serena and Þornbjörg, intelligence is then associated with excessive arrogance – arrogance that leads the heroines to embrace misogamy, and to treat their suitors in a manner that is represented as dishonourable and disgraceful. The suitors then resort to trickery and cunning in order to humiliate the maidens, just as they themselves have previously been humiliated.

The introduction of Nítíða, in contrast, both fulfills the expectations that a reader or audience member would have of a romance heroine, and subverts them, by focusing particularly on her intelligence and wisdom as attributes that enable her to rule her kingdom in peace and prosperity. The first comment the narrator of the saga makes is that she “styrði sinu ríki meður heidur og soma” (ruled her kingdom with honour and distinction).³⁸⁴ Kalinke has argued that the subsequent description of Nítíða's physical beauty is “in the best tradition of courtly romance”.³⁸⁵ True, but this is immediately followed by an equally elaborate description of Nítíða's intelligence and wisdom: “[H]un var suo buen ad viti sem hinn frodasti klerkur. og hinn sterkasta borgarveggur mætti hun giora med sinu viti yfir annara manna vit og byrgja suo vti annara ræd. og þar kunni hun .x. ræd er adrer kunnu eitt.” (She was as prepared with knowledge as the wisest clerk. And she could make the strongest wall of a fortress with her knowledge, (which was) greater than all other men, and might so outwit the counsel of others. And she knew ten courses of action when others knew one.)³⁸⁶

³⁸² *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, in *Zwei Fornaldarsögur (Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar und Ásmundarsaga kappabana nach Cod. Holm. 7, 4to)*, ed. Ferdinand Detter (Halle, 1891), 3, 7.

³⁸³ *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, in *Zwei Fornaldarsögur (Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar und Ásmundarsaga kappabana nach Cod. Holm. 7, 4to)*, ed. Ferdinand Detter, 4.

³⁸⁴ *Nitida saga*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances, Volume 5*, ed. Agnete Loth (Copenhagen, 1965), 3.

³⁸⁵ Marianne E. Kalinke, *Bridal Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*, 73.

³⁸⁶ *Nitida saga*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances, Volume 5*, ed. Agnete Loth, 3.

The process of Christianization may have introduced the doctrine of consent, but the legal requirement for *jafnræði*, an equal match between husband and wife, significantly predates the arrival of the Christian church. This equal match was usually understood to refer “both to social standing and wealth”,³⁸⁷ but in the imaginative world of the *riddarasögur*, the concept can be expanded: the suitor and his prospective bride are also equally matched in intelligence and wisdom. Nítíða, for instance, receives Liforinus hospitably on his second visit, even though she sees through his disguise, and asks him to stay through the winter because from speaking with him, she sees his wisdom: “virdist henne hann vitur madur” (she considered him a wise man).³⁸⁸ He then wins her approval and respect through his musical abilities and his knowledge of the world: “[hann] kemr jaffnann til drottningar þuj hann uar listamadur a horpuslátt og oll hlioodfære, hann kunne aff huoriu lande ad seigia nockud. Drottning þotte ad honum hin mesta glede.” (He comes often to the queen, because he was a skilled man at striking the harp and at all musical instruments, (and) he was able to speak something about each land. The queen thought (that there was) from his presence much entertainment.)³⁸⁹ Florida, of *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands*, demands that Sigrgarðr perform two feats before she will grant him her hand: the first is a more conventional requirement that he defeat Valbrandr in battle, but the second is that he must challenge and defeat her in a contest of skill – in this case, harp-playing.³⁹⁰

The difference between ‘beautiful and noble’ and ‘vænn ok vitr’ (beautiful and wise) might seem a minor one, but the pervasive shift that can be observed as we move from the Old

³⁸⁷ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 24.

³⁸⁸ *Nitida saga*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances, Volume 5*, ed. Agnete Loth, 29.

³⁸⁹ *Nitida saga*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances, Volume 5*, ed. Agnete Loth, 29. Notably, Liforinus’ success is directly a result of the fact that he sought advice from another wise woman – his aunt, Alduria – on how to woo Nítíða.

³⁹⁰ *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances, Volume 5*, ed. Agnete Loth, 131; 146-149.

French romances, through the Old Norse and Icelandic translations, to the indigenous *riddarasögur* is indicative of deeply rooted cultural convictions that the writers and translators may very well not have been aware of themselves, but which are visible from a distance. The shift towards romance heroines who are capable of engaging with their suitors as equals – thus expanding the concept of *jafnræði* – in intelligence and learning no less than in beauty or wealth, occurs even in sagas that are otherwise thoroughly misogynistic: *Klári saga* and *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* surely come to mind. Geraldine Barnes has noted that the “idealistic underpinning of European chivalric romance with its code of service, especially to women, is often conspicuously lacking”.³⁹¹ This is true, and one has only to peruse the maiden-king sagas to understand how little of the sense of chivalry towards women has been retained in the episodes in which the *meykongr* is routinely abused, shamed, and humiliated. The “chivalric ethics”³⁹² that Carolyne Larrington has argued for in some of the *fornaldasögur*, and particularly in *Örvar-Odds saga*, seem to have very few parallels in the *riddarasögur*. A number of suggestions have been put forward to explain this: Astrid van Nahl, for instance, contends that both the indigenous and translated *riddarasögur* demonstrate that their authors did not have a complete or accurate understanding of courtly, chivalric values,³⁹³ while Þorkil Damsgaard Olsen argues the opposite – that precisely because the Scandinavian nobility, the main audience for the *riddarasögur*, were already so thoroughly familiar with continental traditions, there is little time or space devoted to emphasizing them or explaining them in the sagas themselves.³⁹⁴

³⁹¹ Geraldine Barnes, *The bookish Riddarasögur: writing romance in Late Medieval Iceland*, 12-13.

³⁹² Carolyne Larrington, “A Viking in Shining Armour? Vikings and Chivalry in the *Fornaldarsögur*”, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 4 (2008), 270.

³⁹³ Astrid van Nahl, *Originale Riddarasögur als Teil altnordischer Sagaliteratur* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1981).

³⁹⁴ Thorkil Damsgaard Olsen, “Den høviske litteratur”, in *Norrøn Fortællekunst: kapitler af den norsk-islandske middelalderlitteraturs historie*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Thorkil Damsgaard Olsen, and Ole Widding (Copenhagen, 1965), 92–117.

Although much further study of the relationship between the Old French chivalric tradition, the translated *riddarasögur*, and the native *riddarasögur*, is undoubtedly needed to form firm conclusions, neither of these explanations seems entirely convincing. It is perhaps more likely that the Old Norse and Icelandic redactors – consciously or unconsciously – rewrote and adapted the texts to conform to their own values and cultural context, reworking (and in some cases, eliminating) many of the ideals of chivalry as they did so. Certainly Marianne Kalinke’s analysis of *Erex saga* and *Ívens saga* allows her to conclude that “the Norse redactors did not seem to be interested in acquainting their Scandinavian audiences with an unadulterated Continental import” and that “[b]y omitting or adding certain details to characterization, and by subtly changing others, they molded the behaviour of various characters into a form more in keeping with their own code of ethics”.³⁹⁵ As Sif Ríkharðsdóttir notes in her detailed study of medieval English and Scandinavian transformations of French literary material, “translations are a unique medium for observing such cultural transformations as they capture in essence the encounter between the two distinct and separate cultural traditions and the subsequent effort at literary adaptation.”³⁹⁶

Looking specifically at the representation of women in the genre, after the Old Norse-Icelandic texts remove their heroines from the protections that chivalry might have granted them, they also significantly change the dynamics between suitor and beloved: the woman receiving the suit is presented as equally skilled, equally learned, and equally intelligent, as her suitors. This emphasis that both the translated and indigenous *riddarasögur* collectively place on women’s learning makes sense in the context of the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus as a whole, where women’s power is so often dependent on their facility with words, and their ability to

³⁹⁵ Marianne E. Kalinke, “Characterization in ‘Erex saga’ and ‘Ívens saga’”, 18.

³⁹⁶ Sif Ríkharðsdóttir, *Medieval Translations and Cultural Discourse: the Movement of Texts in England, France and Scandinavia* (Cambridge, 2012), 3.

persuade, goad, entice, deceive, or reason with the men who had legal authority over them. Although the commentary was written explicitly with reference to the figure of the goading woman as an historical reality, Else Mundal's explanation that "[o]nly a strong wife with qualities that matched the man's own qualities would secure the future of the family", is relevant.³⁹⁷

Ólof and Ketilríðr, and the poetry of *Víglundar saga*

With this in mind, the relationship between the *riddarasögur* and sagas that do include skaldic verse only becomes clear when we consider that the traditional distinctions between the different saga-genres have been increasingly questioned, and with valid reason: rather than a purely 'native' or purely 'imported' tradition, there is now ample evidence to suggest that a number of the *Íslendingasögur* were influenced by the chivalric tradition, just as both the translated and indigenous *riddarasögur* did not pass through the hands of their adaptors unaltered. Although Roland Barthes was undoubtedly not thinking of Old Norse-Icelandic sagas in particular when he wrote "The Death of the Author", his theory is nonetheless pertinent for thinking about the sagas – and in particular, the sagas that we can date to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when it is clear that translated versions of Latin, French, and German works were indeed available to Norwegian and Icelandic scholars: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture."³⁹⁸ Turning finally to *Víglundar saga*, the text presents a particularly intriguing series of dilemmas: like most

³⁹⁷ Else Mundal, "The Position of Women in Old Norse Society and the Basis for Their Power", *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 1 (1994), 11.

³⁹⁸ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in *Image, music, text*, ed. Stephen Heath (London, 1977), 146.

of the sagas, it is anonymous, and as one of the latest of the *Íslendingasögur*, it fits neatly neither into the conventions of the genre, nor into the bridal-quest romance tradition of the *riddarasögur* and *fornaldasögur*. It has by a number of scholars³⁹⁹ been linked with the *skaldasögur*, and certainly draws on the conventions associated with sagas of the warrior-poets; it also shares a number of similarities with *Kormáks saga*, which is believed to be one of the earliest of poets' sagas, as well as one of the earliest of the Sagas of Icelanders – and it is certainly not implausible to conjecture that the author of *Víglundar saga* may have been familiar with the earlier text.

Guðrún Nordal further connects the saga with a group of others – including *Grettis saga*, *Gísla saga súrssonar*, *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, *Þórðar saga hreðu*, and *Víga-Glúms saga* – that emphasize the “history of a fighter-poet’s family”,⁴⁰⁰ and in which “the portrayals of the saga hero seem to be modelled on the sagas of the court poets, but in fact these sagas focus on very different themes from the skalds’ sagas. All of them deal with personal loss – the loss of land or the loss of freedom, as in the outlaw sagas – and some end on a tragic note. There is a strong tendency ... to deepen the portrayal of the hero by linking him to the family’s past in Norway.”⁴⁰¹ The guiding principle behind Nordal’s classification “is prosimetric, whether or not there is one principal poet (or speaker of verse) in the saga, and how many stanzas, if any, there are in the saga”⁴⁰² but – though Nordal does not mention this – there is evidence to suggest that this grouping may not be entirely a modern invention, as the manuscripts show that *Víglundar saga* often appears with these texts. AM 160 fol^x (160^x), for instance, contains *Gísla saga*, *Harðar saga*, *Hávarðar saga*, and *Víga-Glúms saga* as well as

³⁹⁹ Diana Whaley, “Introduction”, in *Sagas of Warrior-Poets*, ed. Diana Whaley (London, 2002), xxix; Guðrún Nordal, “The Art of Poetry and the Sagas of Icelanders”, in *Learning and Understanding the Old Norse World*, ed. Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout, 2007), 223-225.

⁴⁰⁰ Guðrún Nordal, “The Art of Poetry and the Sagas of Icelanders”, 205.

⁴⁰¹ Guðrún Nordal, “The Art of Poetry and the Sagas of Icelanders”, 205.

⁴⁰² Guðrún Nordal, “The Art of Poetry and the Sagas of Icelanders”, 222.

Víglundar saga; AM 486 4^{ox} includes *Harðar saga*, *Þórðar saga hreðu*, and *Víglundar saga*; AM 551 a 4^o contains *Víglundar saga* and *Grettis saga* (the only two sagas in this manuscript); AM 568 4^{ox} includes not only most of the sagas in this grouping, but also a number of other *riddarasögur*, such as *Nítíða saga*.

Pálsson and Edwards described *Víglundar saga* as “highly romantic”,⁴⁰³ and Marianne Kalinke classes it as a bridal-quest romance, arguing that the text is unique, in that it represents a fusing of the courtly bridal-quest romance with the more ostensibly ‘historical’ tradition of the *Íslendingasögur*: “The bridal-quest pattern underwent such thorough acculturation in *Víglundar saga*, however, as to mimic some of the characteristic features of the *Íslendingasögur*, both in matter, primarily in the expression of conflict, and in form, mainly through the inclusion of occasional stanzas”.⁴⁰⁴ The opening two chapters may be an apt illustration: the opening of the saga contains the same sort of names, genealogies, and references to real-world locations that we might expect of any of the sagas of Icelanders, and Hólmkell (Ketilríðr’s father) is indeed named in the Book of Settlements. In the second chapter, however, the text first betrays the influence of continental romance, with the fanciful description of the earl’s precautions: to keep Ólof away from all suitors, he “let gera heinni eina skemmu; þat hús lét hann vanda mjök at allri smið. Skemman var víða grafin ok gagnskorin ok rennt gull í skurðina. Þetta herbergi var þakit blyi ok steint allt innan. Skíðgarðr hár var um skemmuna ok læst grindhlið með sterkum járnhurðum.” ([He] had a bower built for her; he had that house made with much care and every skill. The bower was made of wood and carved all over and gold was set in the channels. This building was roofed with lead and the inside was all painted. A high wooden fence was around the bower, and

⁴⁰³ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary Fiction in Medieval Iceland* (Reykjavik, 1971), 13.

⁴⁰⁴ Marianne E. Kalinke, “Fathers, Mothers, and Daughters: ‘Hver er að ráða?’” in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, eds. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 168.

the gate was held with strong locks.)⁴⁰⁵ This is reminiscent of a number of Old French tales, including Marie de France's *Guigemar*, translated into Old Norse-Icelandic as part of the *Strengleikar*, in which the hero's (married) beloved has been confined to a castle by her jealous husband.⁴⁰⁶

Like the *riddarasögur*, *Víglundar saga* has been harshly condemned as poor in style, originality, and content: Paul Schach considered the “characterization and motivation in this romance [to be] equally inane”.⁴⁰⁷ Jóhannes Halldórsson includes *Friðþjófs saga*, *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, *Flóvents saga*, and *Barðar saga Snæfellsáss* among the texts to which the author likely had access.⁴⁰⁸ In the introduction to her collection of warrior poets' sagas, Diana Whaley writes that “the most important single source of the prose narratives is the poetry cited within them”,⁴⁰⁹ but she tellingly exempts *Víglundar saga* from this generalization: “[I]t seems likely that the verses were inherited by the saga authors rather than fabricated by them, though the *Víglund's Saga* verses may, exceptionally, be contemporary with the prose.”⁴¹⁰ The saga-author's deployment of skaldic stanzas throughout the text must certainly – by comparison with the other *Íslendingasögur* – seem unusual: the twenty-three stanzas in *dróttkvætt* measure are unique not only for the possible late date of the verses. Scholars have long distinguished between two particular contexts in which a saga-author might choose to

⁴⁰⁵ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson (Reykjavík, 1959), 64.

⁴⁰⁶ *Strengleikar: An Old Norse Translation of Twenty-one Old French Lais*, ed. and trans. Robert Cook and Mattias Tveitane, 18-19.

⁴⁰⁷ Paul Schach, *Icelandic Sagas* (Boston, 1984), 159.

⁴⁰⁸ Jóhannes Halldórsson, “Formáli: Víglundar saga”, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson (Reykjavík, 1959), XXIII-XXXIII.

⁴⁰⁹ Diana Whaley, “Introduction”, in *Sagas of Warrior-Poets*, xxxviii.

⁴¹⁰ Diana Whaley, “Introduction”, in *Sagas of Warrior-Poets*, xxxviii.

incorporate stanzas of poetry: a distinction made “between verses which corroborate what is stated in the prose, so functioning as a footnote to the narrative, and those which, broadly speaking, ornament it – most often, by serving as the direct speech of the characters in the narrative”.⁴¹¹ Referring specifically to stanzas in the highly complex metre of *dróttkvætt*, Roberta Frank has characterized the latter function as follows: “Whatever was suppressed in the controlled, impersonal prose of the sagas – words of defiance, triumph, hope, obscenity, or despair – might surface in *dróttkvætt*. The poet’s central task was to catch and keep those fleeting moments of triumphant joy, of heightened consciousness, in which man seemed illumined by a divine force and his whole person enveloped in a new confidence”.⁴¹²

Though *Víglundar saga* has been compared with the poets’ sagas, however, at no point in the saga prose is the hero actually identified or characterized as a poet. We are told that Ketill, Þorgrímur’s principal rival for Ólǫf’s hand, speaks very well, but are told nothing about any potential gift for poetic composition, and Ketill speaks none of the verses incorporated into the saga. Similarly, none of the stanzas are presented as corroborating evidence for the surrounding saga prose, nor are any of them attributed as excerpts from longer poems. It is perhaps worth noting that though the rest of the heroes of the poet’s sagas are, indeed, referred to by Snorri as historical poets in either *Heimskringla* or *Skáldskaparmál*, there is no reference to Víglundur, Ketilríðr, Trausti, Ólǫf, or to any of their verses. The only external reference to the verses contained in *Víglundar saga* is a very brief line in *Barðar saga*: “Með Bárði var ok Íngjaldr Alfarinsson, Válasonar bródur Hólmkels, föður Ketilríðar, er Víglundur orti flestar vísur um.” (And with Bárðr there was Íngjaldr, son of Alfarinn, son of Váli, brother of Hólmkell, father of

⁴¹¹ Heather O’Donoghue, *Skaldic verse and the poetics of saga narrative*, 3.

⁴¹² Roberta Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry: The Dróttkvætt Stanza*, 24.

Ketilríðr, about whom Víglundr composed most of his poems.)⁴¹³ The verses, then, do not appear to function as corroborative evidence for the saga – Whaley has indeed characterized the text as “blithely fictitious”.⁴¹⁴

The majority of the verses in *Víglundar saga* do not influence the action directly, but rather serve as outlets for tumultuous emotions experienced by the various characters. The notable exceptions are Trausti and Víglundr’s verses to each other when Víglundr debates whether or not to kill the farmer, who is actually his uncle Helgi in disguise. Structurally, the verses are also unusual: while the exact placement of chapter divisions differs between editions of the saga, and while one of Ketilríðr’s verses does not exist in all manuscripts, an analysis of the positioning of the verses within the saga as a whole makes it clear that the frequency of their appearance increases dramatically towards the climax in chapter twenty-two, a chapter in which there is almost as much verse as prose. (Depending on the manuscript, there are either twenty-two or twenty-three verses inserted into the text of *Víglundar saga* – one eight-line stanza in each of chapters six, twelve, and thirteen, then two stanzas in chapter fifteen, two or three in chapter eighteen, five in chapter twenty-one, and ten in chapter twenty-two. This parallels the rise in dramatic tension – as the emotional stakes rise for the characters, the saga-author appears to be more and more inclined to represent their speech in heightened language.)

On a much smaller scale, the verses also help to reinforce parallels, as can be seen in the first two stanzas, spoken by Ólof and Ketilríðr after they believe that their respective beloveds have been lost to them. Within the prose narrative, the story of Þorgrímr and Ólof in Norway prefigures and in many ways parallels the later story of Víglundr and Ketilríðr in Iceland, and the description of Ólof herself echoes that of romance heroines. Although exceptional at a young

⁴¹³ *Bárðar saga*, eds. Jón Skaptason and Phillip Pulsiano (London, 1984), 14.

⁴¹⁴ Diana Whaley, “Introduction”, in *Sagas of Warrior-Poets*, xxxvi.

age is more often ascribed to saga-heroes, Ólof's introduction establishes that she was noted for both her praiseworthy behaviour and her beauty from a young age: “[H]on var þegar á unga aldri furðu kurteis. Hon var allra kvenna fríðust sköpuð, þeirra er þá váru í Noregi, ok því var lengt nafn hennar, ok var hon kölluð Ólof geisli.” (She was already, in her younger years, very courteous. She was of all women the most beautiful, who were then in Norway, and thus she was given a nickname, and she was called Ólof the Radiant.)⁴¹⁵ This beauty is clearly not in itself sufficient; her father takes particular pains to ensure that she receives an education: “Jarl sendir ok eptir þeim konum sem hann vissi kurteisastar, ok lætr kenna dóttur sinni allar þær kvennlistir, er burðugum konum byrjaði at kunna. Þat hugsaði jarl sèr sem honum gafst, at svo skyldi hans dóttir bera af öllum konum hannyrðir, sem hún var hverri þeirra fríðari, en þegar hún hafði aldr til.” (And later the jarl sends for those women whom he knows to be the most courteous, and has them teach his daughter all the womanly skills, those suitable for noble women to know. The jarl thought that in this way his daughter should exceed all other women in handicrafts, as she did in beauty, and so in later years she did.)⁴¹⁶

The introduction of verse into the saga is, notably, not through the lens of the hero, but through the words of the heroine's foster-mother, and then from the hero's beloved. Víglundr, who will speak a majority of the stanzas (sixteen of twenty-three), has not yet been born, when Ólof is betrothed against her will to Ketill, and the saga-author records the following:

... ok er kaupit skyldi fram fara, þá kvað Ólof vísu þessa:
 Veit ek, at gullhrings gætir
 glaðr kveðr betr en aðrir;
 sá mun hljómr í heimi
 hauklanda mér granda.
 Engi er hirðir hringa

⁴¹⁵ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjls*, 64.

⁴¹⁶ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjls*, 64-65.

hvítr svá, at ek til lita;
einum vann ek eiða;
ann ek vel björtum manni.

And when the marriage contract was to be settled, Ólǫf spoke this verse:
I know that the glad keeper of gold rings [=Ketill]
speaks better than others;
the sound will do sharp injury
to me, of the hawk-land, in this abode.
No guardian of rings
is so fair, that I wish to see him;
To one [=Þorgrímr] I pledged my oath;
I loved well that bright man.⁴¹⁷

An interpretation of the first two lines of the stanza is not aided by most of the extant translations: Magnússon and Morris' somewhat fanciful translation gave "Sure glad ring-warder singeth / Sweeter than any other",⁴¹⁸ while Sandra Ballif Straubhaar elects for "I know that the glad guardian-of-the-gold-ring speaks poetry better than others".⁴¹⁹ The verb "kveða" can be used to refer to the act of reciting or performing poetry, but can also simply be translated as "to speak" – which, in the context of the saga prose, is a much clearer reference to Ketill, since when he is first introduced, back in chapter three, one of his defining characteristics is his ability to speak convincingly in the law courts: "Ketill var málamaðr svá mikill, at aldri átti hann því máli at skipta, at hann ynni eigi, við hvern sem hann átti at skipta, því at þegar hann tók at tala, þá þótti svá sem hann talaði." (Ketill was a lawyer so great, that regardless of whom he had dealings with, he was never concerned in a matter where he did not win, because when he took to speaking, then others thought as he said.)⁴²⁰ The only characters to speak poetry in the saga are

⁴¹⁷ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Þúasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, 71-72.

⁴¹⁸ "The story of Viglund the Fair", in *Three northern love stories, and other tales*, trans. Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris (London, 1875), 130.

⁴¹⁹ Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women's Poetry: the Voices of Female Skalds*, 35.

⁴²⁰ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Þúasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, 66.

Víglundur, Ketilríðr, Ólof, Trausti, and Helgi – and Ketill is nowhere mentioned as a poet. In addition to the syntax, the echoing of “gullhrings gætir” (keeper of gold rings) and “hirðir hringa” (guardian of rings) is likely meant to refer to the same person – Ketill. Ólof’s reference to “í heimi” (in this abode / in the home) is therefore presumably meant to refer to her marital home with Ketill, where she may envision having to listen to him talk, frequently and at some length. This adds complexity to the saga’s portrayal of Ketill (and to Ólof’s predicament): this is clearly a man who is used to getting his own way, and perhaps enjoys hearing himself speak a bit too much.

More importantly, the verse has clear structural and literary functions: 1) it allows the focal character to express herself in heightened language at a moment of heightened emotion; 2) it marks a turning point, a point at which a peaceful solution no longer exists, since Ólof is now betrothed to Ketill, and Ketill will be honour-bound to avenge any attempts by Þorgrímr to gain access to her; and 3) it fits neatly into a pattern that allows the saga-author to reveal the extent of Ólof’s commitment to Þorgrímr slowly, since the verse alludes to what the saga-author had previously refused to state explicitly – that Ólof has indeed pledged herself to Þorgrímr. The prose previously indicates only that “segja nökkurir menn, at þá hafi þau bundit sitt eiginorð” (some men said, that they had bound themselves with a promise to marry).⁴²¹ The delayed reveal – expressed only cryptically in the poetry – continues, as the saga-author builds to the anticipation of the scene in which Þorgrímr interrupts the marriage celebrations and declares before both the king and Ketill: “Þat segir ek, at vit Ólof höfum eiða bundit, at hon skyldi öngvan mann eiga nema mik, ok segi hon, hvárt eigi er svá.” (This I declare, that Ólof and I have

⁴²¹ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, 71.

promised to each other, that she should marry no man but me, and let her say, whether this is so.)⁴²² Ólof then confirms it explicitly: “En Ólof kvað þat satt.” (Ólof said that was the truth.)⁴²³

In addition to the larger, structural parallels between the story of Þorgrímr and Ólof in Norway and Víglundr and Ketilríðr in Iceland that Whaley has already noted,⁴²⁴ the saga also establishes a particular link between Ólof and Ketilríðr. Hólmkell, for instance, displays a very similar concern for his daughter’s education: when Þorbjörg does not want to teach her daughter, Hólmkell arranges for Ketilríðr to be fostered in the home of his friend Þorgrímr: “Leitaði Hólmkell þangat fóstrs dóttur sinni til Ólofar, at hon kenndi henni hannyrðir, því at Ólof var kölluð bezt mennt allra kvenna á Íslandi.” (Holmkell desired his daughter to be fostered there with Ólof, so that she would teach her handicrafts, because Ólof was said to be the best in accomplishments of all women in Iceland.)⁴²⁵ Similarly, Ólof’s father seeks out the women “sem hann vissi kurteisastar” (whom he knows to be the most courteous)⁴²⁶ to take charge of her instruction. Both women also defer explicitly to their father’s authority when asked about marriage, and the author keeps their final answers to their suitors similarly ambiguous – just as Ólof and Þorgrímr’s pledges to each other are initially concealed, so too the outcome of Víglundr’s repeated requests of Ketilríðr: “Opt kom Víglundr á þetta mál við Ketilríði, en hon svarar æ inu sama; en þó segja menn, at þau muni eiðum hafa bundit sitt eiginorð.” (Often

⁴²² *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, 73.

⁴²³ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, 73.

⁴²⁴ Diana Whaley, “Introduction”, in *Sagas of Warrior-Poets*, xvi.

⁴²⁵ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, 75.

⁴²⁶ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, 64.

Víglundr brought up this topic with Ketilríðr, but she always answered the same way; but nevertheless, men said that they must have bound themselves with a pledge to marry.)⁴²⁷

It is perhaps not surprising that Ketilríðr is – like her foster-mother – granted the ability to turn to poetry to express herself in a moment of heightened emotion. At the end of chapter twelve, poetry is introduced into the second half of the saga, once again through the voice of the heroine; there have been no references yet either to Víglundr or Trausti (or any of the other men in the saga) as composers of verse. Instead, the saga-author gives us Ketilríðr's reaction to the news that Víglundr and Trausti are presumed dead at sea:

En er sagt var Ketilríði, at þá hefði undan rekit ok þeir væri dauðir, þá sé á hana ómegin.
En er hon raknaði við, kvað hon vísu þessa, er hon leit til sjóvarins:

Eigi má ek á ægi
ógrátandi líta,
sigt er málvinir mínir
fyr marbakkann sukku;
leiðr er mér sjóvar sorti
ok súgandi bára;
heldr gerði mér harðan
harm í unna farmi.

When it was said to Ketilríðr, that they had been driven away from shore and that they were dead, then she fell unconscious. But when she awoke, she spoke this verse, while she looked towards the sea:

I cannot look to the sea
without weeping,
since my speech-friends
sank next to steep shores;
hateful to me is the dark sea
and the sucking of the waves;
severe sorrow was caused to me
in the waves' burden.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁷ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, 76.

⁴²⁸ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, 84.

Sandra Ballif Straubhaar has characterized Ketilríðr's verses as "charming ornaments to *Víglundar saga*'s romantic-comedy narrative",⁴²⁹ but while there is certainly an ornamental function to this verse, there is also a structural function, marking both the end of Jökull and Einarr's first concerted attempt on Víglundr's life, and a geographical shift – immediately afterwards, the saga-author leaves the stories of Ketilríðr and Víglundr aside and moves to follow the Norwegians.⁴³⁰

The attribution of Ketilríðr's second verse is debatable – unlike the other verses in the saga, this one only appears in two of the extant manuscripts of *Víglundar saga*, AM 510 and AM 511. Immediately after Víglundr has departed into exile, Hólmkell comes into his daughter's room and finds her weeping. The majority of the texts have her respond to her father's query with the simple explanation that she is weeping "því at mér kemr í hug fall braeðra minna" (because into my thought comes the death of my brothers).⁴³¹ AM 510 and AM 511, however, have her respond with a cryptic and irregular stanza of *dróttkvætt*, and the subsequent episode relies on the implication that Hólmkell does not understand Ketilríðr's verse – in fact, he has inferred the exact opposite of her intent – and so when Hólmkell raises the possibility of seeking revenge on Víglundr and Trausti, Ketilríðr is then obliged to explain herself (in prose). Again, like the previous two verses, where the stanza does appear it seems to mark a transition, as a new (and less joyous) status quo erases a former hope, and expresses the speaker's emotional upheaval as a result of this change.

⁴²⁹ Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women's Poetry: the Voices of Female Skalds*, 36.

⁴³⁰ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, 84.

⁴³¹ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, 99.

Even without the inclusion of this verse, the text has also reversed a more common conflict in the chivalric sagas, between the heroine's wishes and her father's will. By establishing Þorbjörg as the main opponent of the lovers, the saga-author would undoubtedly have made Ketilríðr both less threatening and more sympathetic for a male audience: throughout the saga, she is particularly attentive to her father's wishes, and the writer takes some pains to note that she considers Hólmkell's word as law. When Víglundr first begins to court her, for instance, Ketilríðr dissuades him, providing three reasons for her hesitation:

...þat fyrst, at þér megi þetta ekki í hug vera, er þú ert fulltíða; verði þér jafnan hverflyndir karlmenn um slíka hluti. Þá er annat, at mér stendr þat ekki, enda vil ek þat ekki, at fara eigi ráðum föður míns fram. En þat it þriðja, at fyrir má bíta, at ek sé mín eigi ráðandi, ok veit ek, at þar ganga mest at ráð móður minnar; hefir hon lítit ástriki á mér. En öngvan veit ek þann, at ek vilda heldr eiga en þik, ef ek skylda ráða, en hitt segir mér hugr um, at þar muni meinbugir stórir við liggja, hversu sem at lyktum gengr.

First, that you may not be in this mind, when you are full-grown; you men always become fickle-minded in such things. There is also, that it is not proper for me (nor do I wish it) to go against the counsel of my father. But third, and that is decisive, that I cannot do what I wish, and I know that most things go in accordance with my mother's desire; she has little love for me. But even so, I know that I would rather have no one but you, if I should choose, but my thought says to me that great impediments will lie in the way, however matters go in the end.⁴³²

That Ólof and Ketilríðr speak openly about their love and longing for men they believe lost to them is not entirely surprising, within the context of either the Icelandic sagas or the chivalric romances; that they do so in *dróttkvætt* is more notable. However, despite the clear association of skaldic verse with court culture, politics, and masculinity, skaldic poetry did not belong only to that milieu. There is also significant overlap between the sagas that prominently feature poets, and those that feature outlaws – and a poet's creativity can be viewed as highly destructive: “[p]oets, then, are creative beings, but their very creativity makes them unruly as

⁴³² *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, 76.

well as powerful [...] The product of their creativity, poetry, is a powerful force for social good as well as social disturbance and, in their own lives, they often play ambivalent social roles.”⁴³³ In the context of *Víglundar saga*, however, Ketilríðr’s verses fit into neither of these paradigms. She is not presented as challenging societal norms. In fact, at first glance she is remarkably passive throughout the saga, deferring to her father’s will and consistently declining to challenge her mother openly. (Her mentor, Ólof, in contrast, not only defies her father’s will, but is also more than capable of defending herself – when Jökull and Einarr arrive at her farm, intending to rape her, she devises an elaborate ruse, dresses as a man in black, and scares them off. Ketilríðr demonstrates no such initiative when her own safety is put in danger; instead, she seeks the protection of her father or of Víglundr.)

Nonetheless, the saga-author chooses to build the relationship between Víglundr and Ketilríðr through the inclusion of poetry, creating symmetry between them as they both turn to heightened and at times cryptic language to express their feelings. Víglundr’s verses are, similarly, not presented as corroborative evidence for any “real” or “historical” basis for the saga prose, but as direct speech, spoken spontaneously in response to stressful or emotionally trying circumstances. That Ketilríðr is otherwise relatively passive does not, in *Víglundar saga*, seem to pose any conflict with, or contradiction to, her ability to speak spontaneously in *dróttkvætt* when she so desires. Furthermore, it is not only the form of skaldic verse that Ólof and Ketilríðr successfully emulate. In the first two verses in *Víglundar saga*, the women not only adhere closely to the metre, but are also as cryptic as one would expect from skaldic stanzas – even in verses that ostensibly allow them to express their feelings, the true names of the players and the true circumstances are hidden behind allusions and kennings. The inclusion of not one but two

⁴³³ Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, 93.

female poets serves to normalize their verses further: neither Ketilríðr nor Ólǫf are ever described as exceptional or abnormal because of their poetic ability. Instead, within the context of the saga, occasional verses seem to be a standard medium for the expression of heightened emotion – and the ability to speak such verses is assumed in both men and women.

Just as the women of the chivalric sagas are not exempt from the requirements of education, intelligence, and wisdom that are imposed upon their male counterparts, perhaps the inclusion of “women’s verses” demonstrates the potential for an equal match between the poets and their beloveds. Steingerðr Þórketilsdóttir is the only female character in *Kormáks saga* to speak a word of poetry – and the saga-author gives her only one four-line stanza – but it is eminently fitting that her response to Kormákr’s verse proposal is also in verse. Her cryptic four lines demonstrate that she is capable of not only understanding the poet, but interacting with him in his own chosen mode of language, in his own art form. In the case of *Víglundar saga*, Ketilríðr’s verses – interspersed throughout the saga – fulfill not only the more typical functions of signaling structural shifts, or allowing for the revelation of inner conflict, but also tie her all the more closely to Víglundr. If the author of *Dínus saga dramláta* can establish the suitability of the ultimate match between Philotemia and Dínus through descriptions of their education and book-learning – and their worthiness as each other’s opponents – and if the author of *Damústa saga* can choose to emphasize the close relationship between Gratiana and Dámusti through descriptions of their similar achievements and knowledge, then it seems natural that the author of *Víglundar saga* might choose to attribute verses to the heroine – or incorporate verses attributed to her – as one more way of subtly building up the relationship between her and her beloved. In this instance the author is clearly working under the influence of the *riðdarasögur* – a genre

which, as we have seen, conventionally attributes equal intelligence, wit, and learning to both protagonists.

Space does not, unfortunately, permit me to discuss all of the verses in *Víglundar saga* here, but in conclusion, I wish to turn briefly to the last half-stanza that Ketilríðr speaks. After she has been seemingly married off (in actuality, a ruse devised by her father, with the intent of keeping her safe and away from her mother's influence), Víglundr returns from exile. He stays for a time with Ketilríðr and her new husband, and on one occasion, the two men play a game of chess. Víglundr is losing badly, and Ketilríðr's response is as follows:

Ok í því kom húsfreyja í stofuna ok sá á taflit ok kvað þenna víshelming:
Þoka mundir þú Þundar
þinni töflu inn gjöfli,
ráð eru tjalda tróðu,
teitr at öðrum reiti.

And at this the housewife [=Ketilríðr] came into the room and looked at the board and spoke this *visuhelmingr*:

Generous one, you should
move your piece
– it is the counsel of the branch of tapestries [= woman] –
to another square.⁴³⁴

In short, she is giving advice to her beloved, in front of her husband, on playing chess, in *dróttkvætt*. The lines are suitably ambiguous: she does not specify precisely to whom she is speaking, nor exactly what move the listener should make. Nonetheless, she is simultaneously demonstrating both her ability to communicate privately with Víglundr in a form that they both understand – poetry – and her superior knowledge of the game. Indirectly, this also suggests both her intelligence and her ability to strategize effectively. (As a result, the saga-author tells us that

⁴³⁴ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, 111.

Víglundr makes a sensible move, and the game ends in a draw.) Ketilríðr’s earlier description of Víglundr as one of her “málvinir” – literally, speech-friends – was clearly no accident.⁴³⁵

Thus, even though the primary female protagonist is unable to shape her own fortunes directly, and is otherwise placed in a fairly passive role, the saga-author’s portrayal of both Ketilríðr and her foster-mother Ólof is a skillful fusion of skaldic tradition and indigenous romance. The leading women of *Víglundar saga* display the same linguistic ability, the same wisdom, and the same learning as their male counterparts. Within the saga, this serves to underline the suitability of Víglundr and Ketilríðr as partners, and it could indeed be read as part of the reason for their eventual success, since their marriage will entirely fulfill the requirements of “jafnræði” – they are equals not only in birth and wealth, but also in mind.

⁴³⁵ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þáttur Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjells*, 84.

Chapter 4 Skáldkonur

In this chapter, we finally turn to verses spoken by and attributed to women, in contexts that suggest at least the pretense of historicity: verses spoken by a woman in an ostensibly realistic context. This does include many verses that might, plausibly, have actually been composed by a woman in medieval Iceland or Norway. As the foregoing chapters have hopefully demonstrated, women's representation as speakers of Old Norse-Icelandic verse was very much not limited to such contexts, and it is of course impossible to ascertain the true authorship of many of the verses discussed in this chapter. Nonetheless, this chapter will examine these verses in their prose context, and analyze the literary effects and structural functions achieved by their inclusion in prose texts. I will conclude with a discussion of the range of verses found in *Njáls saga*, and the implications this has for future study.

The problem of “women’s language”: modern debates

It will be found that the overall effect of ‘women’s language’ – meaning both language restricted in use to women and language descriptive of women alone – is this: it submerges a woman’s personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly, on the one hand, and encouraging expressions that suggest triviality in subject-matter and uncertainty about it; and, when a woman is being discussed, by treating her as an object – sexual or otherwise – but never as a serious person with individual views.⁴³⁶

In her essay on “Language and Women’s Place”, quoted above, Robin Lakoff is primarily concerned with English-speaking (predominantly American and British) women of her own time, and the differences between men and women’s speech in contemporary American English – and she is far from the only critic to be concerned with this difference. The existence of distinct, gender-specific patterns of speech have often been observed (and debated) by

⁴³⁶ Robin Lakoff, *Language and Women’s Place*, 2nd edition (Oxford, 2004), 42.

contemporary sociologists and linguists, and any search for a distinctive “women’s voice” in Old Norse-Icelandic poetry must reckon with the existing research on women’s speech and perceptions of women’s speech. In addition, recent work in the political arena (that illuminates a dramatic gulf between the results of a quantitative analysis and subjective perception, when it comes to gender-based differences – or similarities – in speech) may give some insight into the hazards scholars have faced when analyzing verses spoken by women in the sagas.

The linguist William Labov summed up some of his findings in two distinct principles: that in “stable sociolinguistic stratification, men use a higher frequency of nonstandard forms than women”,⁴³⁷ and that “in the majority of linguistic changes, women use a higher frequency of the incoming forms than men.”⁴³⁸ Deborah Tannen, meanwhile, found widespread public acclaim in the early 1990s with her popular book *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, in which she argued that there was a fundamental difference between men and women’s goals in conversation: “[f]or most women, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport: a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships ... For most men, talk is primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. This is done by exhibiting knowledge and skill, and by holding center stage through verbal performance.”⁴³⁹ John Gray’s (in)famous *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* was similarly well-received by the public, and has to date sold well over fifteen million copies. Some scholars⁴⁴⁰ then reframed these perceived differences in a positive light,

⁴³⁷ William Labov, “The intersection of sex and social class in the course of linguistic change”, *Language Variation and Change* 2 (1990), 205.

⁴³⁸ William Labov, “The intersection of sex and social class in the course of linguistic change”, 206.

⁴³⁹ Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (London, 1990), 77.

⁴⁴⁰ For instance, Jennifer Coates, “Women’s cooperative talk: A new kind of conversational duet?” *Proceedings of the Anglistentag 1990 Marburg* (Tubingen, 1991), 296-311. Also see Janet Holmes, “New Zealand women are good to talk to: an analysis of politeness strategies in interaction”, *Journal of Pragmatics* 20 (1993), 91-116.

emphasizing “the positive aspects of what was described as women’s unique communicative style.”⁴⁴¹

These early attempts to describe and define gender-based differences in speech were not without significant controversy: Brenneis and Macaulay observe that “the question supposes that there are differences, and as a result many scholars have been so preoccupied with locating differences that they have sometimes exaggerated the importance of the differences they have found and ignored the similarities.”⁴⁴² Alice Freed implicitly critiques Tannen when she writes that “[researchers] have come to understand that many of the claims that linguists and others had been prepared to accept about the speech and communicative styles of women and men were overgeneralized conclusions drawn from specific speakers’ practices in narrowly defined contexts and are not descriptive of all women or all men in all contexts”⁴⁴³ – she goes on to remark specifically that “[a] woman or man in the same role, with the same status, engaged in the same activity may well use the same form of language.”⁴⁴⁴ Much more recently, Deborah Cameron took direct aim at Gray’s central premise in her book *The Myth of Mars and Venus*, in which she debunks a number of popular assumptions about men and women’s communication styles, and shows that “there is a great deal of similarity between men and women, and the differences within each gender-group are typically as great as or greater than the difference between the two. Many differences are context-dependent: patterns which are clear in one context may be muted, non-existent, or reversed in another, suggesting that they are not direct reflections of invariant sex-specific traits.”⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴¹ Alice Freed, “Language and Gender”, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 15 (1995), 6.

⁴⁴² Donald Brenneis and Ronald Macaulay (eds.), *The matrix of language: contemporary linguistic anthropology* (Boulder, 1998), 75.

⁴⁴³ Alice Freed, “Language and Gender”, 8.

⁴⁴⁴ Alice Freed, “Language and Gender”, 9.

⁴⁴⁵ Deborah Cameron, *The Myth of Mars and Venus* (Oxford, 2007), 163-164.

A similar debate exists on the question of women's literature – Elaine Showalter, for instance, when introducing her landmark study of women novelists in Victorian England, spoke of an “indistinct but persistent impression of a unifying voice in women's literature”.⁴⁴⁶ That indistinct impression that there is a difference between women's and men's voices when writing literature, or political speeches, or poetry, or anything else for that matter enjoys some acceptance in the popular mindset at the time this thesis is being written, and yet it remains an impression that scholars have found difficult to substantiate, and even more difficult to describe in a way that holds up to robust critique.

In forms of speech often characterized as aggressive and confrontational, such as contemporary political debates, or (in the United Kingdom) Prime Minister's Questions, it is clear that the popular reception of women's performances may be very different from the results of a quantitative analysis. For instance, in their book *Gender, Power, and Political Speech*, Deborah Cameron and Sylvia Shaw look in detail at the televised political debates during the 2015 UK General Election. Cameron and Shaw's quantitative analysis concludes: “the analysis we have presented ... does not support the belief that women do political leadership, or political communication, ‘in a different voice’. The picture we have drawn of women's participation in the national TV debates which were the centrepiece of the GE2015 campaign is more complicated than that. It is a picture in which individual differences, and differences in role and status reflecting the position of a leader's political party, loom larger than gender differences as an influence on linguistic behaviour. It is also a picture in which male-female similarities appear more numerous than male-female differences.”⁴⁴⁷ However, Cameron and Shaw also provide

⁴⁴⁶ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London, 2014), 5.

⁴⁴⁷ Deborah Cameron and Sylvia Shaw, *Gender, Power, and Political Speech: Women and Language in the 2015 UK General Election* (Basingstoke, 2016), 144-145.

extensive examples of media coverage that suggest that female party leaders' speech was frequently *perceived* differently, and note: “[i]t is also important to consider the other side of the communication coin, the reception of their performances. The gendering of language is accomplished not only through speakers' own linguistic behaviour, but also through the assumptions and expectations which addressees may bring to bear on interpreting speakers' behaviour. Even if female politicians do not, objectively, speak ‘in a different voice’ from their male counterparts, they may still be constructed as different in representations of their speech.”⁴⁴⁸

Outside of an electoral context, the peculiarly British ritual of Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) provides another contemporary example of a highly stylized, performative, aggressive, verbal duelling arena: “MPs gain or lose peer and media respect on the basis of their performances at question time, hence it constitutes a pressure on them and affects the way they view themselves as parliamentarians. Its public and widely reported nature make PMQs amenable to empirical study.”⁴⁴⁹ The aggressive, combative nature of PMQs is part and parcel of the appeal to the audience: as Halvor Høvring Hansen writes, “[t]he awareness of and interest in PMQs is largely a consequence of the impolite behaviour it contains ... it might be described as impoliteness as political entertainment.”⁴⁵⁰

Joni Lovenduski, meanwhile, characterizes the ritual of PMQs as “a manifestation of a parliamentary gender regime in which norms of appropriateness and standards of performance favour an exaggerated traditional masculinity”,⁴⁵¹ and consequently, PMQs are often seen as off-

⁴⁴⁸ Deborah Cameron and Sylvia Shaw, *Gender, Power, and Political Speech: Women and Language in the 2015 UK General Election*, 148.

⁴⁴⁹ Joni Lovenduski, “Prime Minister's Questions as Political Ritual”, *British Politics* 7.4 (2012), 316.

⁴⁵⁰ Halvor Høvring Hansen, *Impoliteness and Power Strategies at Prime Minister's Question Time: a Comparison of Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May*, MA thesis (Stavanger, 2018), 5.

⁴⁵¹ Joni Lovenduski, “Prime Minister's Questions as Political Ritual”, 329.

putting to women, both as participants and as observers. Sarah Childs found that there was a widespread perception, by women Members of Parliament after the 1997 UK General Election, that “women politicians have a different style of politics” – one that was “less combative and aggressive, more collaborative”.⁴⁵² (This is also up for debate: Cameron cites Margaret Thatcher alongside Winston Churchill as particularly “skilled exponents of adversarial politics.”)⁴⁵³ The rise in the number of women MPs in recent years (particularly since 1997) has been credited with the “disruption of male dominance and associated hegemonic masculinity permeating parliament”,⁴⁵⁴ but this perceived shift has yet to be verified quantitatively; Mary K. Nugent instead describes it as a “sentiment of a change in the atmosphere”⁴⁵⁵ or “ways in which parliament *feels* different.”⁴⁵⁶

I raise the example of women’s voices in contemporary political debates, and the modern controversy over women’s communication styles in politics, because the highly adversarial, stylized, performative nature of these confrontations is a surprisingly apt modern analogue to the Old Norse poetical tradition of flyting, and the pitfalls and dilemmas that scholars have encountered in striving to analyze gender-based differences in modern political speech may provide some insight for this study of women’s poetic voices in similarly adversarial Old Norse contexts. Many of the verses that shall now be discussed in this chapter occur in striking and dramatic confrontations, where women’s poetic skills are directed towards active intervention in political, religious, or social conflicts.

⁴⁵² Sarah Childs, “A Feminised Style of Politics? Women MPs in the House of Commons”, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6.1 (2004), 19.

⁴⁵³ Deborah Cameron, *The Myth of Mars and Venus*, 38.

⁴⁵⁴ Mary K. Nugent, *When Does He Speak for She? Men Representing Women in Parliament*, PhD thesis (Rutgers, 2019), 177.

⁴⁵⁵ Mary K. Nugent, *When Does He Speak for She? Men Representing Women in Parliament*, 179.

⁴⁵⁶ Mary K. Nugent, *When Does He Speak for She? Men Representing Women in Parliament*, 178. (emphasis in original)

Politics and history: Hildir and Jórunn

We return, therefore, to a question posed at the beginning of this work: how might we investigate whether a distinctive ‘women’s voice’ can be found within the skaldic corpus? We might also ask, given the complexity and formality of *dróttkvætt*, how much scope there is for any individualized voices within the requirements of the form – especially since any deviations from the strict formal requirements have long been seen by scholars as flaws, or due to errors in transmission, rather than poetic license.

Named women skalds, in ‘historical’ or ‘realistic’ contexts, can seem difficult to find. *Dróttkvætt* was certainly not a medium that women used to communicate with each other – if we now confine our attention to the selection of stanzas that are attributed to women within the family sagas, ostensibly in a realistic or historically plausible context, the corpus is much reduced, and we also find that the audience of these verses is exclusively male. This is not surprising, since *dróttkvætt* is most associated with the formal context of the court poet, advisor to a king who would reward or punish the poet based on the quality of his verses. Of the many poets named in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, only two are women – Hildir Hrólfsdóttir and Jórunn skáldmær. Both appear in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, a saga whose only other named female characters are a seemingly endless succession of Haraldr’s various wives and consorts, who are given very little to say for themselves (with the exception of Gyða Eiríksdóttir, whose defiant refusal to marry Haraldr unless he first becomes king of all Norway is presented as the inciting incident that leads to Haraldr’s subsequent conquests). Most of the poetry in the saga is attributed to Þórbjörn Hornklofi, Eyvindr skáldaspillir, Einarr Rognvaldason (Torf-Einarr), or Þjóðólfr of Hvinir, and recalls and commemorates significant battles throughout Haraldr’s reign.

Both Hildir and Jórunn use verse to engage in the political sphere, and both are certainly stepping into roles usually reserved for men – Hildir as she defends her son, and Jórunn as a poetic witness to the king’s great deeds. Is there any objective difference between the structural function of their verses, and the verses of other (male) poets included in the saga? What about their use of poetic vocabulary and style? And do their verses seem to be perceived any differently by their audience, as a result of their gender? A detailed comparison with Snorri’s use of poetic stanzas elsewhere in *Heimskringla* may help to answer some of these questions.

Much of the verse quoted in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* is, at least on the face of it, evidentiary – a source for the prose, and a corroboration of the saga’s accounts of Haraldr’s great deeds. This is highly typical of the use of verse stanzas in other Old Norse-Icelandic historical texts: as Heather O’Donoghue writes, “[t]he primary role of the verses in Norse historical writings is thus a dual one: to provide source material for the author of the prose, and often, at least in vernacular texts, to be quoted as evidence, ostensibly corroborating what is said in the saga prose.”⁴⁵⁷ Bjarni Einarsson saw a clear difference between the role of verses in the *konungasögur* and the *Íslendingasögur*: “In the former stanzas are mainly quoted as sources and may as a matter of course be treated as such by scholars. In the latter stanzas are included as a part of the story and are to be considered an integral part of the artistic fabric of the context.”⁴⁵⁸ However, O’Donoghue convincingly also demonstrates Snorri’s “evident appreciation of the power of a skaldic strophe to provide a weighty and authoritative conclusion to a dialogue”⁴⁵⁹ and identifies a “structural pattern characteristic of Snorri’s prosimetrical technique: a significant exchange is rounded off with the quotation of a verse, and the scene then changes.”⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁷ Heather O’Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford, 2005), 11.

⁴⁵⁸ Bjarni Einarsson, “On the rôle of verse in saga-literature,” *Mediæval Scandinavia* 7 (1974), 124.

⁴⁵⁹ Heather O’Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, 63.

⁴⁶⁰ Heather O’Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, 71.

This structural pattern is frequently visible in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, and many of Þórbjörn Hornklofi's verses are introduced in a similar manner: the prose recounts a substantial battle, in which Haraldr distinguishes himself; Snorri introduces a verse by Hornklofi that dramatizes the battle and backs up the prose account; the scene is then changed and Snorri moves on to the next episode in Haraldr's life. For instance, after an extended prose account of Haraldr's fight with Auðbjörn and Sölvvi, the scene is neatly rounded off with a stanza:

Þar fell ok Auðbjörn konungr, en Sölvvi kom á flóttu. Svá segir Hornklofi:

Háði gramr, þars gnúðu,
geira hregg við seggi,
rauð fnýsti ben blóði,
bryngögl í dyn Sköglar,
þás á rausn fyr ræsi,
réð egglituðr, seggir,
æfr gall hjörr við hlífar,
hnigu fjörvanir, sigri.

Þar fellu ór liði Haralds konungs Ásgautr ok Ásbjörn, jarlar hans, Grjótgarðr ok Herlaugr, mágar hans, synir Hákonar jarls.

And there King Auðbjörn died, but Sölvvi fled. So Hornklofi says:

The king waged a spear-storm (=battle) against men, where feathered arrows roared in the din of Sköglul (=battle), red wounds spurted blood, as men fell lifeless before the king on the prow; the angry sword rang against shields; the stainer of blades (=warrior) gained victory.

There died, of King Haraldr's followers, Ásgautr and Ásbjörn, his earls, and Grjótgarðr and Herlaugr, his brothers-in-law, the sons of Earl Hákon.⁴⁶¹

Snorri's inclusion of Jörunn skáldmær's verse appears to fulfill a very similar function in the narrative, although it is not introduced with the characteristic phrase 'svá segir':

Guthormr var skáld mikit. Hann hafði ort sitt kvæði um hvárn þeira feðga. Þeir höfðu boðit honum laun, en hann neitti ok beiddisk, at þeir skyldi veita honum eina bæn, ok höfðu þeir því heitit. Hann fór þá á fund Haralds konungs ok bar sættarorð millum þeira ok bað þá hvárn tveggja þeira bænir ok þess, at þeir skyldi sættask, en konungar gerðu svá mikinn metnað hans, at af hans bæn sættusk þeir. Margir aðrir göfgir menn fluttu þetta mál með honum. Varð þat at sætt, at Hálfðan skyldi halda ríki öllu, því er áðr hafði hann haft, skyldi hann ok láta óhætt við Eirík, bróður sinn. Eptir þessi sögu orti Jörunn skáldmær nokkur ørendi í Sendibít:

⁴⁶¹ *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, in *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík, 1941), 105-106.

Harald frák, Hálfðan, spyrja
herðibrögð, en lögðis
sýnisk svartleitr reyni
sjá bragr, enn hárfagra.

Guthormr was a great skald. He had made poems about both father and son. They had offered him rewards, but he refused and had asked, that they should grant him a boon, and they had pledged this. Then he went to meet King Haraldr and bore words of peace between them, and then asked each of them for his boon: that they should make peace, and the kings held him in so great esteem, that because of his request they made peace. Many other noble men pleaded this cause with him. The agreement was made that Hálfðan should hold all the kingdom, which he had held before, and he should leave Eiríkr, his brother, unassailed. Concerning these events, Jórunn skáldmær composed some verses in *Sendibítr*:

Hálfðan, I have learned that Haraldr the fair-haired heard of your harsh deeds, and they seemed black-faced to the tester of the blade (=warrior).⁴⁶²

The saga then immediately moves on to a different scene and a different episode. It is not clear when Jórunn's verse was composed, relative to the events she describes; although Sandra Straubhaar describes her as "the only named woman skald who seems to have naturally filled the role of king's adviser, common for male skalds at court",⁴⁶³ there are a few elements of *Sendibítr* that have led some other scholars⁴⁶⁴ to hypothesize that her verses may have been a later composition.⁴⁶⁵ It remains entirely possible, however, that she may have been a contemporary of both Þórbjörn Hornklofi and Guthormr sindri. At the very least, she was familiar with their poetry (or, perhaps, to flip the usual assumption on its head, they were familiar with hers): she

⁴⁶² *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 141-142.

⁴⁶³ Sandra Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women's Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds* (Cambridge, 2011), 13.

⁴⁶⁴ See Bjarne Fidjestøl, *Det norrøne fyrstediktet* (Øvre Ervik, 1982), 181.

⁴⁶⁵ Judith Jesch provides an excellent summary of the currently inconclusive scholarship in "Jórunn skáldmær", *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1* (Turnhout, 2012), 143-144.

shares one line with Þórbjörn,⁴⁶⁶ and Judith Jesch has noted that there are “faint echoes” of Guthormr’s vocabulary in *Sendibítr*.⁴⁶⁷

If Snorri’s intention was solely to provide evidence for the preceding prose, the inclusion of this particular stanza seems an odd choice: the narrative prose focuses on Guthormr’s role in peacemaking, whereas Jórunn’s stanza makes no mention of Guthormr and is focused on Hálfðan’s role in creating the conflict. This is particularly noteworthy since we have recorded elsewhere, in one manuscript of the separate saga *Ólafs saga helga*, that there were other verses of *Sendibítr* that did celebrate Guthormr’s role.⁴⁶⁸ However, the half-stanza Snorri quotes in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* does still function as a capstone to the reconciliation episode, and it places the emphasis firmly back on Hálfðan’s misdeeds and Haraldr’s wisdom (and thus underscores the justice of the resolution that has been arranged – namely, that Hálfðan should hold exactly as much of the kingdom as he already had, and that he should stop attacking his brother). The “herðibrögð” (harsh deeds) referenced in the stanza may be intended to recall an earlier statement in the prose that Hálfðan had “brennu upp bæinn ok allt lið, þat er inni var” (burnt the house, and all the people who were in it), in an attempt to kill his brother Eiríkr.⁴⁶⁹ The alliteration of “Harald,” “Halðan,” and “herðibrögð” in the first two lines only furthers the emphasis. The division of Haraldr’s name (with the epithet “inn hárfagra” bookending the excerpt) underlines his power: his name both opens and concludes the stanza.

⁴⁶⁶ The line “hreggs döglinga tveggja” (storm of two princes), attributed to Jórunn in *Ólafs saga helga*, also appears in Þórbjörn’s *Glymdrápa*.

⁴⁶⁷ Judith Jesch, “Jórunn skáldmær”, in *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, 144.

⁴⁶⁸ Most manuscripts of the separate saga *Ólafs saga helga* include the same half-stanza of *Sendibítr* quoted above. AM 75c fol, however, not only includes this half-stanza, but follows it with three others.

⁴⁶⁹ *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 141.

At least in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, Jórunn's verse does not seem to be treated much differently than, say, the verses of Þórbjörn Hornklofi or Guthormr sindri. The citation from *Sendibitr* fulfills a very similar structural function to other verses elsewhere in the saga – neatly concluding an episode, providing corroborating evidence for the prose, and emphasizing a moral judgement against Haraldr's enemies. For Snorri, her gender would appear to be irrelevant to the merits of her poetry as a piece of documentary evidence.

If her verses fulfill a similar structural purpose, what of their actual content? One might contrast Jórunn's emphasis on peace-making with the extensive celebration of violent battles that we see elsewhere in the verses of *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, but this is an individual trait and not one that can necessarily be generalized. Within the very same saga Þjóðólfr of Hvinir also uses skaldic verse to entreat his king to make peace. Jórunn's other verses (although ostensibly concerned with celebrating skaldic peacemaking) do make liberal use of kennings and imagery associated with war – the majority of her kennings refer to warriors, blood, swords, and battles:

Þvít ríkr konungr rekka,
reyr undlagar dreyra
morðs þás merkja þorðu
magnendr, bjósk at fagna.

The mighty king of warriors prepared to rejoice, when the quickeners of slaughter (=warriors) dared to mark the reed (=sword) of the wound-sea (=blood) with blood.⁴⁷⁰

This is entirely expected – it is generally agreed that there is only “a group of about one hundred referents for which kennings patterns or types exist”,⁴⁷¹ and these sorts of kennings are consistent with those used by Þórbjörn Hornklofi and Þjóðólfr of Hvinir. So if we were expecting a

⁴⁷⁰ “Jórunn skáldmær”, *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, 147; also published, non-normalized, in *Saga Olafs konungs hins Helga: den store saga om Olav den Hellige, efter pergamenthandskrift i Kungliga biblioteket i Stockholm nr. 2 4to med varianter fra andre handskrifter*, Volume I (Oslo, 1941), 12.

⁴⁷¹ “General Introduction”, *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, lxxi.

woman's poetic vocabulary to be significantly less martial in character, Jórunn's verses would be a disappointment. Rather, it is clear that she has adopted – skillfully and enthusiastically – the vocabulary and style of Haraldr's court, and of the other (male) skalds who composed in that environment.⁴⁷²

Unlike documentary verses, dialogue verses are frequently presented as the spontaneous composition of their speakers, and while these are less common in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, they do make an appearance. As Heather O'Donoghue writes, “we must not automatically assume the fictionality of such dialogue, nor attribute the creation of the effect to the latest of the saga authors. It is possible, for example, that a poet actually did compose, or at least recite, his verse on the spot, and that the author of the prose is simply recording a possible, plausible event.”⁴⁷³ While Jórunn's verses are specifically described as “orti” (composed), Hildir Hrólfsdóttir's stanza is presented as spontaneous speech, in a scene that parallels Þjóðólfr of Hvinir's more successful exchange with King Haraldr earlier in the saga. Þjóðólfr seeks out the king's house in the evening, intending to make peace between Haraldr and his sons by Snæfríðr. After overhearing some lines spoken by the king, Þjóðólfr replies in verse, and then identifies himself and makes his request, and Haraldr responds favourably.

⁴⁷² As I hope is clear by now, any idea that there is a distinctive and inherent “masculine” or “feminine” way of composing verses in Old Norse-Icelandic literature ought to be called into serious question; see Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, on the many and varied types of masculinities present within the sagas. It follows that a verse using a traditionally “masculine” vocabulary ought *not* to be considered valid evidence to argue against a verse's potential female authorship. Heather O'Donoghue's work on *Eyrbyggja saga* also includes a detailed analysis of the verses of Þórarinn svarti, a male poet who has a clear aversion to violence. O'Donoghue notes that “[m]uch of the force of Þórarinn's verses arises from the remarkable tension between the traditional style and content of skaldic verses glorifying battle, with their harsh exultation in bloodshed and bizarre asides ... and Þórarinn's own manifest abhorrence of the whole business”. Jórunn's verses do not display that aversion to violence, but the tension inherent in verses composed to glorify peacemaking – but in a form that celebrates violence – is similar. See Heather O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, 100; also 93-98.

⁴⁷³ Heather O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, 55-56.

Hildir's entreaty to the king is not so successful. Her son, Gǫngu-Hrólfr, is first introduced in a way that seems favourable: his father, Rognvaldr, is said to be Haraldr's "mesti ástvinr" (most beloved friend), and of Hrólf himself, the prose tells us that he "var víkingr mikill" (was a great raider).⁴⁷⁴ Unfortunately, he conducts a raid on Vík, and earns himself the anger of the monarch. The subsequent account of the meeting between Hildir and Haraldr is worth quoting in full:

Konungr lýsti því á þingi, at hann gerði Hrólf útlaga af Nóregi. En er þat spurði Hildir, móðir Hrólfs, þá fór hon á fund konungs ok bað friðar Hrólfi. Konungr var svá reiðr, at henni týði ekki at biðja. Þá kvað Hildir þetta:

Hafnið Nefju nafna,
nú rekið gand ór landi
horskan hǫlða barma.
Hví bellið því, stillir?
Illt's við ulf at ylfask
Yggs valbríkar slíkan,
muna við hilmis hjarðir
høgr, ef hann renn til skógar.

The king convened an assembly, and he made Hrólf outlawed from Norway. But when Hildir, Hrólf's mother, heard that, she went to meet the king and asked him for peace for Hrólf. The king was so angry, that her request was of no avail. Then Hildir said this:

You have now banished Nefna's namesake [=Hrólf], the wise brother of landholders, from the land. Why do you dare this, king? It is unwise to threaten a wolfish enemy of the Óðinn-of-the-slaughter-board [=Haraldr]; he will not be kind to the prince's flocks, if he runs to the woods.⁴⁷⁵

For a saga that is otherwise fairly enthusiastic about Haraldr's deeds, it is noteworthy that Hildir's characterization of Haraldr's decision as "illr" (unwise, bad) is unchallenged by the surrounding prose, and her characterization of Hrólf as "horskan hǫlða barma" (the wise brother of landholders) is also allowed to stand without criticism. The stanza functions partly as a question (to which Haraldr is shown to make no reply), but also as a warning against the possibility of

⁴⁷⁴ *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 123.

⁴⁷⁵ *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 123-124.

future strife. Hildir is engaging directly with the political sphere, at the highest level, and using verse in order to do so when her first request is unsuccessful. Although spontaneous, there is no reason to assume on that basis that it is fictional: the “ability of Icelanders to compose skaldic strophes impromptu is deeply rooted in Icelandic tradition”,⁴⁷⁶ and it is also possible that this was a verse she composed in advance for the occasion.

From a narrative perspective, the inclusion of the stanza allows Snorri to write Gǫngu-Hrólfr out of the saga in a neutral, even slightly positive, way – despite his ongoing dispute with Haraldr. After the stanza, the prose continues:

Gǫngu-Hrólfr fór síðan vestr um haf í Suðreyjar, ok þaðan fór hann vestr í Valland ok herjaði þar ok eignaðisk jarlsríki mikit ok byggði þar mjök Norðmönnum, ok er þar síðan kallat Norðmandí. Af Hrólfs ætt eru komnir jarlar í Norðmandí. Sonr Gǫngu-Hrólfs var Viljálmr, faðir Ríkarðar, fǫður annars Ríkarðar, fǫður Roðerts lǫngumspaða, fǫður Viljálms bastarðar Englakonungs. Frá honum eru síðan komnir Englakonungar allir.

(Afterwards, Gǫngu-Hrólfr went west over the sea to the Hebrides, and then he went further west to Valland, and there he plundered and took for himself a great kingdom, and settled it with many Northmen, and it was afterwards called Normandy. From Hrólfr are come the earls of Normandy. Gǫngu-Hrólfr’s son was Viljálmr [William], father of Ríkarðr [Richard], who was the father of another Ríkarðr [Richard], who was the father of Roðert lǫngumspaða [Robert Long-spear], who was the father of the English king Viljálmr [William] the bastard. From him are come all the English kings.)⁴⁷⁷

The extended genealogy highlights the fact that Gǫngu-Hrólfr’s descendants were men of renown, and of significant political importance, even if their actions no longer form part of this particular saga.⁴⁷⁸

Gǫngu-Hrólfr does not reappear in the saga, nor does Hildir. If the aim of her speech was solely to secure a peace deal, she was certainly not successful. Guthormr and Þjóðólfr successfully use their skill in poetic composition to influence Haraldr to reconcile with people he

⁴⁷⁶ Heather O’Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, 56.

⁴⁷⁷ *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 124-125.

⁴⁷⁸ The link between Gǫngu-Hrólfr and William the Conqueror is one that is made in a number of Norwegian and Icelandic texts, but is difficult to substantiate.

has previously perceived as enemies; Hildir is unable to establish the same rapport. Given the scarcity of verses dedicated to peace-keeping in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, it is impossible to draw any broader conclusions about how her gender may have influenced the reception of her verse. However, if part of her purpose is to defend her son's honour (and if part of the prose author's purpose is to leave a positive impression of Gøngu-Hrólf, while neatly removing him from the saga and the conflict with Haraldr), the verse is significantly more effective. The prose gives us no hint of Haraldr's response to the verse; Hildir gets the last word. For a reader of the saga, then (even if not for Haraldr), Hildir's stanza carries weight, and brings honour to her family.

Bringing honour to one's family, or one's king, through the medium of poetry is not, however, a particularly feminine phenomenon in Old Norse-Icelandic poetry. On the contrary – two of the main themes of court poems singled out as most important by Sigrún Davíðsdóttir are “the munificence of chiefs” and “voyages and battles”.⁴⁷⁹ In her analysis of commemorative verse (predominantly that composed by male skalds), Erin Michelle Goeres describes it as a “potent mixture of poetry and politics. The skalds who craft such stanzas are keenly aware of the public role they play in the consolidation of royal power, and many of the skalds discussed in this book exhibit a high degree of self-awareness and even self-interrogation as they memorialize their patrons in verse.”⁴⁸⁰ Jórunn's verses in commemoration of Haraldr and Guthormr conform to the norms of the form she uses to compose them. Hildir, similarly, deftly adopts the medium of *dróttkvætt* for her own purposes.

⁴⁷⁹ Sigrún Davíðsdóttir, “Old Norse Court Poetry: Some Notes on its Purpose, Transmission, and Historical Value”, *Gripla* 3 (1979), 187.

⁴⁸⁰ Erin Michelle Goeres, *The Poetics of Commemoration: Skaldic Verse and Social Memory, c. 890-1070* (Oxford, 2015), 171.

If there are common factors that we may observe between the verses of Jórunn skáldmær and Hildir Hrólfsdóttir, one is that they both adopt a form of speech traditionally coded as masculine in order to engage in political affairs. Both make extensive use of kennings, wordplay, heightened or poetic vocabulary, internal rhyme, and complex syntax. A list of objective differences between (on the one hand) Jórunn and Hildir's vocabulary, syntax, and style, and their male counterparts' (on the other) might make for a more compelling final chapter to this thesis. However, Jórunn and Hildir's verses have at least as much in common with the verses of their fellow (male) skalds as they do with each other's. Nor is either sanctioned for adopting this medium.

Power, prophecy, and Gunnhildr

Gunnhildr konungamóðir, meanwhile, is a highly controversial figure in the sagas, and unlike Jórunn and Hildir, we know quite a lot about her background, some of it contradictory. She is sanctioned so regularly by saga-writers that Theodore M. Andersson has memorably described her as “the most notorious sorceress and evildoer in the early annals of Norwegian history.”⁴⁸¹ Sandra Straubhaar describes her usual presentation in saga narratives as “a colorful and vindictive sexual predator, skilled in magical arts.”⁴⁸² She is blamed repeatedly by the author of *Ágrip* for her husband Eiríkr's cruelty: “gerðisk þar enn með róðum Gunnhildar konu sinnar svá grimmr ok greypr við lýð sinn at hann þóttisk varla bera mega.” (Yet he became, with the counsels of his wife Gunnhildr, so cruel and savage with his people that he was thought to be

⁴⁸¹ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Sagas of Norwegian Kings (1130-1265): An Introduction* (Ithaca, 2016), 29.

⁴⁸² Sandra B. Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women's Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*, 16. For a more detailed analysis of Gunnhildr's sexual exploits, see William Sayers, “Power, Magic and Sex: Queen Gunnhildr and the Icelanders”, *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 8 (1995), 57-77.

scarcely bearable.)⁴⁸³ She often figures, in the same text, as opposition to Hákon jarl: “Hann hafði enn at nýfengnu ríki gagnstöðu í fyrstunni af Gunnhildi konungamóður, ok lá hvárt umb annat með illum prettum, þvíat þat skorti hvárki þeira.” (He had, in the beginning of his kingdom, resistance from Gunnhildr konungamóðir, and they often acted against each other with evil trickery, because neither of them was lacking in that.)⁴⁸⁴ The accounts of her behaviour in *Heimskringla* are more neutral, and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir concludes that “Gunnhildr’s unusually active involvement in politics makes her unique within *Heimskringla*; the hostile accounts elsewhere of her sexual deviance and practice of witchcraft must be regarded as a fictionalization by authors working within the historical genre, whatever their reason.”⁴⁸⁵ R. D. Fulk, meanwhile, who edited the *helmingr* attributed to Gunnhildr for *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, judges it impossible to determine the extent to which the negative portrayal of Gunnhildr is fictional: “Whether she was in fact disliked in her own day or whether her legend simply attracted the venom so often directed against powerful women, it is impossible to say.”⁴⁸⁶

In addition to her many roles in the political life of Norway, Gunnhildr is also – in one manuscript of *Fagrskinna*⁴⁸⁷ – a poet, who speaks a half-stanza of *dróttkvætt* to her husband, telling him that his brother and enemy Hákon has not, in fact, died at sea:

At þeim gørði veðr illt í hafi, ok skilðisk liðit, týndisk sumt, en sumt tók Nóreg, ok þeir er næstir kvámu því, er Eiríkr konungr var, fóru á fund hans ok sǫgðu hǫnum, at Hákon bróðir hans myndi farizk hafa í hafi. Þessa sǫgu bar konungrinn fyrir Gunnhildi ok lét vera vel orðit, þat at hann skyldi eigi óttask Hákon at konungdómi sínum. Hón svaraði á þess lund:

⁴⁸³ *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasǫgum: A Twelfth-century Synoptic History of the Kings of Norway*, ed. Matthew James Driscoll (London, 1995), 16.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasǫgum: A Twelfth-century Synoptic History of the Kings of Norway*, 20.

⁴⁸⁵ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*, 84.

⁴⁸⁶ R. D. Fulk (ed.), “Gunnhildr konungamóðir”, in *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1* (Turnhout, 2012), 150.

⁴⁸⁷ Gunnhildr’s verse is absent from the B-text of *Fagrskinna*, but this is due to a lacuna in the text.

Hó- reið á bak bóru
borðhesti -kon vestan;
skorungr léta brim bíta
börð, es gramr hefr Fjörðu.

Af vísendum sínum vissi hón, at Hákon hafði fjör, ok kom hann sínu skipi heilu við Nóreg...

Bad weather overtook them on the sea, and the troops were separated, and some perished, and some made it to Norway, and those who came nearest to where Eiríkr the king was, went to find him and said to him, that Hákon his brother must have died at sea. This story the king bore to Gunnhildr, and said it had turned out well, that he should not need to fear Hákon as a threat to his reign. She answered in this manner:

From the west, Hákon rode the plank-horse (=ship), on the back of the wave; the leader did not let the surf bite his ship; the warrior has reached Firðir.

From her knowledge she knew that Hákon was alive, and he came safely with his ship to Norway.⁴⁸⁸

Gunnhildr, like the prophetesses of the Edda, is credited with supernatural knowledge by the surrounding prose. The verse itself, however, does not speak of magic, but of material facts: Hákon is alive and has reached Firðir. The prose attributes this knowledge to a supernatural source, furthering the characterization of Gunnhildr as one who uses magical knowledge for questionable ends. (The prose text goes on to praise Hákon's behaviour at some length, and contrasts it with the tyranny and lawlessness prevalent under Eiríkr, for which the inhabitants – and, it would seem, the prose author – blame Gunnhildr.)⁴⁸⁹

Gunnhildr's *helmingr* is characterized by concrete, vivid details about Hákon's ship and the sea; by lively use of alliteration; and by the tmesis that splits Hákon's name – none of which should be particularly remarkable characteristics (given the abundance of other verses, by male poets, that treat the sea and sailing as their subject, and the centrality of alliteration to Old Norse poetry). However, these same characteristics have been taken by some scholars as reason to

⁴⁸⁸ *Fagrskinna – Nóregs konunga tal*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson (Reykjavík, 1985), 75-76.

⁴⁸⁹ *Fagrskinna – Nóregs konunga tal*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, 76.

doubt whether or not Gunnhildr could have actually composed the verse. Magnus Olsen, for instance, writes:

Er det virkelig dronning Gunnhild som har diktet den? [...] Gunnhild var opvokset i Danmark og dér uten tvil kommet lite i berøring med diktning i visens versemål. I Norge kan hun nok ha gitt sig av med norrøn diktekunst, men det er lite trolig at hun har kunnet dikte om seilas over Nordsjøen med en slik festivitas, at så sprudlende lune og end slik opfinnsomhet som vår visedikter har evnet. Visen er maskulin i utpreget grad, og den hører sannsynlig hjemme i et miljø hvor mange var fortrolige med Nordsjøseilas og innseilingene til de norske bygder, og hvor Båra og Kolga og de andre Ægesdøtre kunde gi kjærkommen underholdning.

Was it really Queen Gunnhildr who composed it? [...] Gunnhildr had grown up in Denmark and there, no doubt, had little contact with poetry in this metre. In Norway, she could have been exposed to Norse poetry, but it is unlikely that she could compose about sailing over the North Sea with such festivity, such sparkling warmth, and such ingenuity as our poets have been able to. The verse is distinctly masculine, and probably belongs in an environment where many were familiar with travelling the North Sea, and with sailing to the Norse villages, where Båra and Kolga and the other Ægesdøtre could provide welcome entertainment.⁴⁹⁰

Notably, Olsen characterizes the verse as “maskulin i utpreget grad” – distinctly masculine – and sees this as evidence against Gunnhildr’s authorship. Fulk, meanwhile, comments that “[t]he witty use of the ship-kenning and tmesis might appear surprising from someone otherwise unknown as a skald, but it is not known how widespread the ability to compose in *dróttkvætt* was in the tenth century.”⁴⁹¹ However, it is likely that Gunnhildr, if she did compose verse, would adopt the traditional forms of skaldic poetry (and thus the traditional subject matter and vocabulary). It would be hard to substantiate the argument that she was *not* familiar with court politics, given her extensive and well-documented involvement in court life and her influence over Eiríkr.

⁴⁹⁰ Magnus Olsen, *Har dronning Gunnhild diktet om Håkon den Gode?* Avhandlingar utgitt av Det Norske videnskaps-akademi i Oslo, II Hist.-filos. kl. 1944 (1), 11.

⁴⁹¹ R.D. Fulk (ed.), “Gunnhildr konungamóðir”, *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1, 151.

A fuller outline of the authorship debate has been provided elsewhere, by R. D. Fulk,⁴⁹² and I merely wish to remark that it is particularly intriguing that the verse has attracted such comment on the basis that it has seemed, perhaps, *too* good – too adept, too accomplished, too comfortable in a milieu and with a subject matter that has been coded as traditionally masculine. However, this is *not* the only connection made between Gunnhildr and poetry in the text, since a chapter later the prose includes this: “Eptir fall Eiríks lét Gunnhildr yrkja kvæði um hann, svá sem Óðinn fagnaði hönnum í Valhöll, ok hefr svá” (After the death of Eiríkr, Gunnhildr had a poem made about him, as Óðinn welcomed him into Valhalla, and it begins thus).⁴⁹³

Regardless of the provenance of the verse, its inclusion, and its attribution to Gunnhildr in *Fagrskinna* serve a number of clear purposes in the text. *Fagrskinna* is particularly notable for its extensive citation of skaldic verses (nearly three hundred stanzas), many of which are clearly intended to serve a documentary purpose. Furthermore, Alison Finlay aligns with much previous scholarship when she writes “it is generally accepted that – with the exception of skaldic poems that he may have known in oral versions – the author of *Fagrskinna* was a conservative arranger of earlier written sources.”⁴⁹⁴ Certainly the author or compiler of *Fagrskinna* frequently cites skaldic verses to provide evidence for the prose narrative: the first stanzas, from *Hrafnsmál*, are specifically attributed to Hornklofi with the following introduction: “svá sem segir Hornklofi skáld, gamall vinr konunga, er jafnan hafði í hirðum verit frá barnæsku” (so says the poet Hornklofi, an old friend of kings, who had been in courts since childhood).⁴⁹⁵ The quotations from *Hrafnsmál* are clearly intended to attest to Haraldr’s behaviour: “Hér er þat sýnt í þessi

⁴⁹² R. D. Fulk (ed.), “Gunnhildr konungamóðir”, *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1, 151.

⁴⁹³ *Fagrskinna – Nóregs konunga tal*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, 77.

⁴⁹⁴ Alison Finlay, “Introduction”, in *Fagrskinna, a Catalogue of the Kings of Norway* (Leiden, 2004), 2.

⁴⁹⁵ *Fagrskinna – Nóregs konunga tal*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, 59.

frásögu, hverr siðr var Haralds konungs þá hríð, en hann ruddi <ríki> fyrir sér.” (Here it is shown in this account, what the custom of King Haraldr was, when he was conquering his kingdom.)⁴⁹⁶

Gunnhildr’s verse is actually the first verse in *Fagrskinna* presented as spontaneous speech, and her foreknowledge of Hákon’s fate is attributed to her “vísendum”, a word often translated as “magic arts” but which can also refer to knowledge or intelligence.⁴⁹⁷ Although the framing of the verse as direct speech (“[h]ón svaraði” – she answered) might suggest some artifice, the consistent use of verses for documentary purposes elsewhere in *Fagrskinna* also suggests that the author or compiler saw no inherent contradiction in attributing a verse of such accomplishment and such subject matter to a woman. The brief exchange between husband and wife encapsulates Gunnhildr’s hold over Eiríkr, demonstrating her greater knowledge of events, and her sober judgment: although Eiríkr is quick to assume Hákon has died, she knows better. It also establishes Gunnhildr’s power behind the throne, since she has the ear of her husband and is able to provide him with information on his enemies. Although the verse could be interpreted as praising Hákon, this is not necessarily a barrier to her authorship of it: Gunnhildr is warning her husband that his enemy still lives, and downplaying Hákon’s prowess as a warrior would undermine that warning. The verse also lends her statement weight, in contrast to the (false) statements of those who reported Hákon lost at sea.

Religious debate: Steinunn

None of the women discussed thus far go so far as to engage in rhetorical *flyting* – but more confrontational examples of women’s poetry are not difficult to find, and while Hildr’s

⁴⁹⁶ *Fagrskinna – Nóregs konunga tal*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, 61.

⁴⁹⁷ “vísendi”, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, ed. Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon (Oxford, 1874), 718.

poetry does imply a threat, other women skalds are more direct about challenging their listeners. Perhaps most well-known is Steinunn Refsdóttir's challenge to the Christian missionary Þangbrandr, which effectively and quickly silences him. Her verses, like Jórunn's, are recorded in multiple sources, and have been repeatedly praised by scholars for their rhythm, kennings, and command of the *dróttkvætt* metre.⁴⁹⁸ *Njáls saga* includes a prose introduction that sets the scene:

Hjalti fór utan um sumarit ok Gizurr hvíti. En skip Þangbrands braut austr við Búlandsnes, ok hét skipit Vísundr. Þangbrandr fór allt vestr um sveitir.

Steinunn kom í mót honum, móðir Skáld-Refs; hon boðaði Þangbrandi heiðni ok talði lengi fyrir honum. Þangbrandr þagði, meðan hon talaði, en talaði lengi eptir ok sneri því qllu, er hon hafði mælt, í villu. “Hefir þú heyrt þat,” sagði hon, “er Þórr bauð Kristi á hólmi, ok treystisk hann eigi at berjask við Þór?” “Heyrt hefi ek þat,” segir Þangbrandr, “at Þórr væri ekki nema mold ok aska, þegar guð vildi eigi, at hann lifði.” “Veiztú,” segir hon, “hverr brotit hefir skip þitt?” “Hvat segir þú til?” segir hann. “Þat mun ek segja þér,” segir hon:

Braut fyrir bjöllu gæti,
bõnd ráku Val strandar,
mõgfellandi mellu,
móstalls, Vísund allan;
hlífðit Kristr, þá er kneyfði
knõrr, málmfeta varra;
lítt ætla ek, at guð gætti
Gylfa hreins at einu.

Aðra vísu kvað hon:

Þórr brá Þvinnils dýri
Þangbrands ór stað lõngu,
hristi búss ok beysti
barðs ok laust við jõrðu.
Muna skíð um sjá síðan
sundfært Atals grundar,
hregg því at hart tók leggja,
hánum kennt, í spánu.

Eptir þat skilðusk þau Steinunn ok Þangbrandr, ok fóru þeir vestr til Barðastrandar.

Hjalti went abroad that summer and Gizurr the white with him. But Þangbrandr's ship was wrecked east near Búlandsnes, and the ship was called Vísundr. Þangbrandr went throughout the west district.

⁴⁹⁸ Sandra B. Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women's Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*, 19. Also Siân Grønlie, “‘No Longer Male and Female’: Redeeming Women in the Icelandic Conversion Narratives”, *Medium Aevum* 75.2 (2006), 293.

Steinunn came to meet him, the mother of Skáld-Refr; she preached heathen practice to Þangbrandr and spoke to him for a long time. Þangbrandr was silent while she spoke, but he spoke for a long time afterwards, and turned around everything that she had said falsely. “Have you heard,” she said, “that Þórr challenged Christ to a duel, and he did not dare to fight with Þórr?” “I have heard,” says Þangbrandr, “that Þórr would be no more than earth and ash, if God had not willed, that he should live.” “Do you know,” she says, “who wrecked your ship?” “What can you say about it?” he says. “I will tell you,” she says:

The killer of the son of the giantess (=Þórr) broke the bison (=ship) of the gulls’ rest (=sea); the gods drove the horse of the sea (=ship) of the bells’ guardian (=priest) onto the shore; Christ did not help the metal-footed one (=horse) of the sea (=ship), when the ship was swamped; little, I think, did God protect the reindeer of Gylfi (=ship).

She spoke another verse:

Þórr drove Þangbrandr’s long beast of Þvinnil (=longship) far from its place, and shook and beat and struck the horse of the prow (=ship) against the earth. Never again will the ski-of-Atall’s-field (=ship) be able to swim on the sea, because a storm, caused by him (=Þórr) set about smashing it into pieces.

After that, Steinunn and Þangbrandr parted, and they [Þangbrandr and his men] went west to Barðaströnd.⁴⁹⁹

This sort of confrontation, played out through scathing verses, is striking but not unusual.

Jonathan Grove has written that “the adversarial poise of the poet appears to have been an essential feature of the skaldic art, and one that governed the relationship of the poets to their craft and their fellow practitioners”.⁵⁰⁰ It is, however, remarkable in that the Christian missionary does not get the last word. The exchange takes place in a saga that otherwise takes a highly favourable view of the Christian faith. Two chapters previously, Njáll – presented throughout as a wise man – disagrees with those who want to keep the old faith: “Njáll sagði þá: ‘Svá lízk mér sem inn nýi átrúnaðr muni vera miklu betri ok sá mun sæll, er þann fær heldr. Ok ef þeir menn koma út hingat, er þann sið bjóða, þá skal ek þat vel flytja.’” (Then Njáll said: “It seems to me that this new faith is much better, and that he will be happy, who accepts it. And if the men come

⁴⁹⁹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól Sveinsson (Reykjavík, 1953), 264-267.

⁵⁰⁰ Jonathan Grove, *The Contest of Verse-Making in Old Norse-Icelandic Skaldic Poetry*, 8.

out here, who preach about it, then I shall intercede in favour of it.”⁵⁰¹ Many of those who oppose Þangbrandr are killed, or otherwise silenced – the earth itself splits open under Heðinn the sorcerer, for instance, and his horse is swallowed up, not long before a proponent of the new Christian faith throws a spear through him.⁵⁰² Vetrliði and his son Ari both speak against Þangbrandr, and they too are swiftly slain.⁵⁰³ Siân Grønlie describes Steinunn as “the pagan equivalent of a missionary: she travels to meet Þangbrandr with the express purpose of converting him to paganism”,⁵⁰⁴ but unlike the men who speak out against Þangbrandr and Christianity, she is not punished for doing so. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir posits that “the safe distance in time and benefit of hindsight gave Christian saga authors scope to explore what they imagined their ancestors to have thought and felt about the changing belief system”,⁵⁰⁵ yet it remains clear in *Njáls saga* that only certain individuals can challenge the new faith without consequence, and the saga hesitates – outside of this confrontation with Steinunn – to criticize Þangbrandr in any meaningful way. Zoe Borovsky comments that “[t]he saga writer seems to imply a tacit approval of Steinunn’s behaviour by preserving her verbal performance even though he refrains from explicitly praising her heathen preaching.”⁵⁰⁶ This is particularly interesting because in *Kristni saga*, the reader is given significantly more context that explains why some of the Icelanders may not have taken too kindly to Þangbrandr’s tactics. Gizurr hvíti, in fact, seems to believe that Iceland is less likely to convert if Þangbrandr continues to be in charge of proselytizing:

⁵⁰¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól Sveinsson, 255.

⁵⁰² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól Sveinsson, 259-260.

⁵⁰³ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól Sveinsson, 260.

⁵⁰⁴ Siân Grønlie, “‘No Longer Male and Female’: Redeeming Women in the Icelandic Conversion Narratives”, *Medium Aevum* 75.2 (2006), 293.

⁵⁰⁵ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World* (Oxford, 2020), 197.

⁵⁰⁶ Zoe Borovsky, “Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature”, 11.

Gizurr sagði at honum þótti ván at kristni mundi við gangask á Íslandi ef ráðum væri at farit; – “en Þangbrandr fór þar sem hér heldr óspakliga; drap hann þar menn nokkura, ok þótti monnum hart at taka þat af útlendum manni.”

Gizurr said that it seemed to him that Christianity would prevail in Iceland if wise counsel was followed; – “but Þangbrandr behaved there, as here, unwisely; he killed several men there, and men thought that hard to take from a foreigner.”⁵⁰⁷

In both accounts (*Kristni saga* and *Njáls saga*) Þangbrandr has a distinct tendency to arrange or personally ensure the deaths of those who oppose him – but only in *Kristni saga* is this called out as specifically negative and unhelpful.

In *Kristni saga*, the confrontation between Steinunn and Þangbrandr is also omitted.

Instead, her verses are included in a way more reminiscent of documentary or evidentiary verses:

En er Gizurr inn hvíti spurði þessi tíðendi bauð hann Þangbrandi til sín, ok var hann þar inn þriðja vetr. Þan vetr tók út skip Þangbrands ór Hítará ok braut mjök ok rak á land fyrir sunnan Kálfalæk. Þar um orti Steinunn, móðir Skáld-Refs, þetta[.]

And when Gizurr hvíti heard these tidings, he bade Þangbrandr stay with him, and he (=Þangbrandr) stayed there the third winter. That winter Þangbrandr took his ship out from Hítará and it was much damaged and came to land south of Kálfalæk. Steinunn, the mother of Skáld-Refr, composed this about it[.]⁵⁰⁸

After quoting Steinunn’s verses (in the opposite order, compared to how they appear in *Njáls saga*), the narrative immediately moves on to a confrontation between Þangbrandr and a berserker. The framing of *Kristni saga* also suggests that her verses were *composed* (orti) rather than the product of spontaneous speech, as they are in *Njáls saga*.

The effect of the same verses thus can differ markedly from one text to another. The text of *Kristni saga* is not altogether favourable towards Þangbrandr, who is portrayed as a troublemaker, and perhaps Steinunn’s verses in that context were not so remarkable. The text of

⁵⁰⁷ *Kristni saga*, in *Biskupa sögur I*, eds. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Peter Foote (Reykjavík, 2003), 29.

⁵⁰⁸ *Kristni saga*, in *Biskupa sögur I*, eds. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Peter Foote, 23.

Njáls saga, by contrast, seems reluctant to criticize any of the Christian missionaries directly in the prose – but does evoke a powerful and dramatic confrontation between the old and the new beliefs through the medium of poetry.

There is perhaps one more layer to this story. Steinunn’s kennings include the ski of Atall’s land (for a ship), the beast of Þvinnill (also a ship), and the reindeer of Gylfi (again, a ship). These are particularly memorable and lively kennings, and these names are not overly common in skaldic verse. (The constructions “ski of the sea” or “ski of [a sea king]” are, however, common, as are “reindeer of the sea” or “reindeer of the boatshed” or similar variations.) These verses are also not the only occasion in which they all appear in close proximity. There is another Christian skaldic poem, traditionally dated before either *Njáls saga* or *Kristni saga* (but not before Steinunn is believed to have lived), that includes some strikingly similar kennings. *Plácitusdrápa*, which survives in a manuscript dated to c. 1200, includes all three of these names in seafaring kennings within a few stanzas. We have, for instance, “Þvinnils víðrar foldar vigg” (horse of the wide land of Þvinnill, = ship) in stanza 30;⁵⁰⁹ “grundar Gylfa glaðríðandi” (rider (=seafarer) of the horse of the land of Gylfi (=ship)) in stanza 35;⁵¹⁰ and “útbeiti skíðs Áta” (steerer (=seafarer) of the ski of Áti (=ship)) in stanza 38.⁵¹¹ (The poem concerns the Roman general Placidus – Old Norse Plácitus – who converted to Christianity after a vision, and recounts the subsequent trials he endured on account of his faith.)

While it is perhaps impossible, given the uncertainty surrounding the dating of some of these texts, to demonstrate any direct influence, either of Steinunn’s verses on subsequent

⁵⁰⁹ “Plácitusdrápa”, ed. Jonna Louis-Jensen and Tarrin Wills, in *Poetry on Christian Subjects, Part 1: The Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 7 (Turnhout, 2007), 200.

⁵¹⁰ “Plácitusdrápa”, in *Poetry on Christian Subjects, Part 1: The Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, 203.

⁵¹¹ “Plácitusdrápa”, in *Poetry on Christian Subjects, Part 1: The Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, 204.

Christian poets or of contemporary Christian poets' verses on Steinunn, it does seem clear that sea-faring, and control of the sea, became a source of considerable tension, and the subject of an ongoing poetic conversation that exemplified the struggle between new and old religions. Steinunn's verses are, additionally, recorded in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, and they are not the only occasion in the saga in which a Christian missionary's ship troubles prove a fruitful topic for poetic composition by his rivals. Earlier, before Þangbrandr enters the saga, Stefnir Þorgilsson is sent by Óláfr to convert the Icelanders, and causes similar problems – attacking and burning sites of pagan worship. The Icelanders (including some of Stefnir's own relatives), none too pleased, take him to task in front of the *alþingi*, prosecute him, and have him declared *utlaga*, outlawed.⁵¹² His ship is then swept out to sea in a bad winter storm, which is attributed to the anger of the gods: “[R]ak skipit til hafs. þotti heiðingium þa að synt at goðin voro reið Stefni ok þa mundi vallda þessum atburð. þar vm kuaðu þeir visv þessa.” (The ship was swept out to sea. The pagans thought that clearly the gods were angry at Stefnir and that this was the cause of this event. About that they spoke this verse.)⁵¹³ The shipwreck, and the subsequent verse, are included both in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and in *Kristni saga*, and the similarity to accounts of Þangbrandr's missionary endeavours has led Siân Grønlie to remark that “[s]ome of the stories about Þorvaldr and Stefnir in particular may have been modelled on earlier traditions about Þangbrandr. The events of Þorvaldr's mission recall those of Þangbrandr's (battles with berserks, libel, killings) and Stefnir's shipwreck may also be in imitation of Þangbrandr's.”⁵¹⁴ Judith Jesch has also suggested that there may have been an “established tradition of anti-

⁵¹² *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, volume 1 (Copenhagen, 1958), 310.

⁵¹³ *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, volume 1, 311.

⁵¹⁴ Siân Grønlie, “Introduction”, *Íslendingabók: The Book of the Icelanders. Kristni Saga: The Story of the Conversion* (London, 2006), xxxvi.

missionary propaganda in poetic form in late heathen Iceland”, to which both the anonymous verse about Stefnir and Steinunn’s verses would belong.⁵¹⁵

What also seems to be clear, and what I believe has attracted far less attention, is the extent to which Christian poets – perhaps in response – devoted time and energy to emphasizing their (Christian) rulers’ command of the sea, in terms that parallel the language Steinunn uses to mock Christ and Þangbrandr. This is clear in *Plácitusdrápa*, where kenning after kenning describes the Christian hero Plácitus in terms of the sea – in addition to the examples already mentioned, the sefarer is “Vinnils viggpollr” (tree of the horse of Vinnill)⁵¹⁶ and “vǫrðr fránskiðs Vánar” (warder of the gleaming ski of Vǫn).⁵¹⁷ It is also, however, true of many poets who wrote about Óláfr Tryggvason, the king who had sent missionaries to Iceland in the first place. *Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar*, which comprises twenty-eight stanzas of poetry inserted immediately following *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* in one manuscript (Bergsbók, dated between 1400-1425), contains a rubric that ascribes it to Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld (likely a contemporary of Steinunn’s), though many modern scholars reject this attribution.⁵¹⁸ Whoever the author may have been, they take pains to praise Óláfr’s command of the sea, both through elaborate kennings for the mighty sefarer, and through explicitly describing Óláfr’s adventures on the waves. There are far too many examples to discuss all of them in detail, but the following two stanzas will hopefully prove sufficient:

Reggstrindar bað randir

⁵¹⁵ Judith Jesch, “Women Poets in the Viking Age: an Exploration”, *New Comparison* 4 (1987), 12.

⁵¹⁶ “Plácitusdrápa”, in *Poetry on Christian Subjects, Part 1: The Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, 184.

⁵¹⁷ “Plácitusdrápa”, in *Poetry on Christian Subjects, Part 1: The Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, 187.

⁵¹⁸ Kate Heslop, for instance, writes that “the poem’s similarity to Einarr Skúlason’s *Geisli* ... and its striking parallels with another skaldic life of Óláfr Tryggvason, Hallar-Steinn’s *Rekstefja*, indicate it was composed no earlier than the twelfth century, and stylistic features such as appeals for God’s help in composing poetry (st. 1) and modesty topoi ... would support this view.” Kate Heslop, ed., “Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar”, in *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1: From Mythic Times to c. 1035, Part 2*, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2012), 1031.

ráðfimir bera snimma
jóskreytandi ýta
auðmildir á skip rauðar.
Frá reist framr, en s*ýjur
flóð kǫnnuðu góðar,
foldar hring til fengjar
fóstrjorð konungr þorðum.

The steed-adorned of the boat-land [=seafarer], swift in counsel, liberal with riches, soon bade men carry red shields on the ship. From his foster-land, the great king drove apart the ring of the earth [=sea] with prows, and good ships traversed the flood.⁵¹⁹

Later on, the poet gives this description, after Óláfr has won a great battle:

Ok andvǫnum Endils
ítrskíð á dreif síðan
sann-Njorðungum seima
sveif hundruðum undir,
svát glójarðar gerði
Gylfa skíðs of víði
– búkr hné margr fyr mæki –
meinfært of lög hreinum.

And afterwards, hundreds of lifeless, true Njorðungar of gold [=men] drifted, strewn about under the excellent ski of Endill [=ship], so that it became dangerous to pass across the sea, for reindeer of the gleaming earth of the ski of Gylfi [=ships]; many bodies fell to the sword.⁵²⁰

Could the similarities be coincidental? Of course; it is impossible to say for certain. Use of similar kennings (especially ones for such popular and frequently celebrated topics as ships and seafarers) cannot prove influence one way or another.⁵²¹ What can be said is that seafaring prowess was taken very seriously; that Christian leaders wished to be regarded as well-

⁵¹⁹ “Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar”, in *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1: From Mythic Times to c. 1035, Part 2*, 1036.

⁵²⁰ “Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar”, in *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1: From Mythic Times to c. 1035, Part 2*, 1054.

⁵²¹ For another view, Judith Jesch notes that “[i]n praise poetry it was usual to show the king making a successful sea-journey in spite of bad weather, storms and high seas ... What could be more natural than to turn this convention on its head and make a mockery of the missionaries by writing verses about their less successful voyages, at the same time demonstrating the powers of the heathen gods?” See Judith Jesch, “Women Poets in the Viking Age: an Exploration”, 12-13.

accomplished commanders of ships; and that Steinunn's verses are, absolutely, participant in an ongoing conversation about whether the Christian deity or the pagan ones truly ruled the waves. Whether later writers, aware of her verses, felt obliged to respond to her scathing and memorable rebuke by emphasizing Christian naval accomplishments is unclear, but what is clear is that the language and kennings and word choice and style of her verses are all squarely within the compass of other skaldic verse on the same topic, including other verses recorded in the same manuscript or even the same saga (in the case of *Bergsbók* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* respectively). Her verses do not just adopt a traditional masculine form; they come across as a brilliant demonstration of her mastery of that form.

In fact, the degree of tension that must have existed between the various factions is particularly apparent not only in Steinunn's verses, but also in the other stanzas that make up the episode in *Njáls saga*. Steinunn's two stanzas are part of a cluster of six that dramatize the conflict: a verse by an unknown poet recounts the death of Vetrliði; Þorvaldr and Ulfr Uggason exchange verses on the subject of whether or not Þangbrandr should be killed; Hjalti Skeggjason (one of the proponents of Christianity) speaks a *kviðlingr* that characterizes Freyja as a bitch and gets himself outlawed for blasphemy as a result; and then Steinunn confronts Þangbrandr. In other words, although Steinunn's stanzas are memorable and striking and justly have attracted a great deal of attention, they do not appear to function in a way that is unique or markedly special due to the gender of their author. Þorvaldr, too, can speak against Þangbrandr in verse.

The *reception*, however, of her verses certainly did differ from that of her male contemporaries, and it seems that her identity as a woman may have afforded her some protection. The result of Þorvaldr's plots against Þangbrandr? A spear through his body and his arm cut off at the shoulder. The result of Steinunn's challenge? As far as the text is concerned,

she would appear to get off scot-free. So while she may act, as Straubhaar suggests, as “a skönuṅgr among other skönuṅgr”,⁵²² and while the content and imagery of her verses does treat traditionally masculine themes, and draws on traditional poetic vocabulary, it would appear that the reception of her verses – as depicted in the world of the saga – may still have been influenced by her gender.

Ásdís, Þorbjörg, and Þuríðr

Jórunn, Hildir, and Steinunn are hardly the only women to be represented as turning to *dróttkvætt* as a way of accessing or wielding influence, and there is some limited evidence to suggest that when women did use *dróttkvætt*, it could bring even more honour to their male relatives than a verse that had been composed by a man. Just as was the case with Steinunn, this does not mean that the content or imagery in the verses themselves must be distinctly feminine in some way, merely that the reception of the verses within their prose context is shaped in some way by the speaker’s gender. We see this, for instance, in a verse by Ásdís, mother of Grettir, after her son’s death:

Ǫngull kemr nú til Bjargs með tuttugu menn; þeir hǫfðu hǫfuð Grettis með sér. Þá váru enn eigi komnir allir þeir, sem henni hǫfðu liði heitit. Þeir gengu inn í stofu með hǫfuðit ok settu niðr á gólf. Húsfreyja var í stofu ok margir menn aðrir. Ekki varð at kveðjum við þá. Ǫngull kvað þá vísu:

Fluttak upp ór eyju
ómett hǫfuð Grettis;
þann grætr nála Nauma
nauðig hára rauðan;
hér mátt, gjalfrs, á golfi
griðbíts hǫfuð líta,
þat mun fagrlogs Fríði
fúna allt, nema salti.

Húsfreyja sat kyrr, á meðan hann kvað vísuna; eptir þat kvað hon vísu:

⁵²² Sandra Straubhaar, “Ambiguously Gendered: The Skalds Jórunn, Auðr and Steinunn”, in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (London, 2002), 268.

Mundut síðr en sauðir,
Sýrar gráps, fyr dýri,
komit es norðr at Njörðum
nýtt skaup, á sjá hlaupa,
ef styrviðir stæði,
stála Freyr, í eyju,
verit hefk lofs of lýði
létt, ósjúkan Gretti.

Þá mælti margir, at eigi væri undarligt, þó at hon ætti hrausta sonu, svá hraust sem hon var, þvílík skapraun sem henni var gǫr.

Ǫngull comes now to Bjarg with twenty men; they had Grettir's head with them. At that time not all of the people had come, who had pledged her [Ásdís] their support. They came into the room with the head and set it down on the floor. The housewife was in the room, and many people as well. There was no greeting between them. Then Ǫngull spoke a verse:

From the island I have carried
Grettir's insatiable head;
The needle-woman is forced to weep
for the red-haired one;
here on the floor see
the outlaw's head;
it will rot quickly before the
goddess of gold (=woman), without salt.

The housewife sat quietly while he spoke this verse; after that, she spoke this verse:

You would have, no less than a sheep,
fled from the beast, to leap into the sea;
mockery in the north has come
to the warrior,
if the warlike man had stood
on the island, steel of Freyr;
if Grettir was not sick;
I have been light with praise.

Then many said, that it was not surprising, that she had a brave son, as brave as she was, even with such a trial as she had gone through.⁵²³

Ásdís' verse, and her comportment, bring honour to her son after his death. Her own grief is understated: there are no tears, and no outward expressions of sorrow. The prose text calls attention to what is not said – noting that there is *no* greeting between Þorbjörn Ǫngull and

⁵²³ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1936), 265-266.

Ásdís, and that she sits quietly while Þorbjörn taunts her with the death of her son. Her sole response is this one stanza, in which she turns Þorbjörn's taunts into Grettir's praise, and her own – at times turbulent – relationship with Grettir fades into the background.

It also allows her to fight back in a situation where Þorbjörn unquestionably has the upper hand. He has killed Grettir, and come in force to Ásdís' house, bringing the severed head of her son, which has been kept in salt for several *months* beforehand. The cruelty – and the arrogance – are astounding. The prose notes that although Ásdís has the support of many local people, not all of her supporters had arrived; Þorbjörn feels secure in his position, and is not expecting an immediate martial response. His verse, meanwhile, is clearly intended to be insulting: he characterizes Ásdís as a “nála nauma” (needle-woman), who is forced to weep (“grætr”). The insults are highly gendered, and seem intended to place Ásdís in a subservient position: Þorbjörn describes her as “nauðig” (unwilling). The alliteration merely twists the knife.

However, Þorbjörn is about to discover that matters will not proceed in his favour, and from a structural perspective, Ásdís' verse marks the beginning of the shift. She ignores all of the insults that have been aimed at her, and instead of spending any breath defending herself chooses to focus instead on Grettir's bravery and martial prowess. Þorbjörn is compared to a “sauðr” (sheep) and contrasted with Grettir, the “dýr” (beast, a word often used for a wolf). She also includes several kennings for warrior: Grettir is a “styrviðr” (tree of battle) who would have stood for much longer if not for Þorbjörn's sorcery. The implication is that Þorbjörn cheated: he would not have been able to defeat Grettir in a fair fight. Shortly thereafter, Ásdís' supporters arrive, including Gamli and Skeggi, and Þorbjörn realizes he will not be able to take Illugi's possessions as he had planned. He retreats, and the matter is brought to the *alþingi*, where he is condemned for the use of sorcery and himself outlawed.

Ásdís is not the only woman in the sagas to find herself in such an unfortunate situation. There are some parallels to Þorbjörg's reaction to the news of her brother Hǫrðr's death in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* – though Þorbjörg is not content with words alone when the news reaches her. Her reaction to Hǫrðr's death is foreshadowed early; Þorbjörg is only fifteen when she first promises a sixteen-year-old Hǫrðr that she will enact vengeance for him if he should be killed:

En er Hǫrðr kom heim, þá mælti hann við Þorbjörgu: “Þér vil ek gefa hring þenna, er Illugi gaf mér, því at ek ann þér mest allra manna; en þú mun þessa gjöf eptir mik dauðan, því at ek veit, at þú munt lifa lengr en ek.” Þorbjörg svarar ok kvað þetta:

Verðir þú,
svá ek víta gerla,
vápnum veginn
eðr í val fallinn,
þeim skulu manni
mín at sönnu
bitrlið ráð
at bana verða.

When Hǫrðr came home, then he said to Þorbjörg: “I want to give you this ring, which Illugi gave me, because I love you the most of all people; and you will remember this gift after my death, because I know, that you will live longer than I.” Þorbjörg answered and spoke this:

If I learn
that you be
slain with weapons
or fallen in battle,
to that man
my biting counsels
will become
his bane.⁵²⁴

This exchange proves to be prophetic. Hǫrðr's statement proves true, and although at the time, Þorbjörg's words can easily be read as a promise, rather than a prophecy, she clearly keeps her word. When her husband, Indriði, returns home in the company of the men who have killed

⁵²⁴ *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík, 1991), 32.

Hörður, Þorbjörg leaps to her brother's posthumous defense – first with poetry, and then with a sword:

Þenna aptan kom Indriði ok margt manna með þeim. Ekki fann á Þorbjörgu, ok bar hon mat fyrir gesti. En er þeir sögðu henni tíðindin ok þat, at Þorsteinn gullknappr hafði vegit Hörð ok gengit aptan at honum, en hinn staðit kyrr fyrir, þá kvað Þorbjörg vísu:

Varð í hreggi hörðu
Hörður felldr at jörðu,
hann hefir átta unnit,
Unns, ok fimm at gunni;
heldr nam grimmra galdra
galdr ramliga at halda;
mundi enn bitra branda
brandr elligar standa.

En er þau kómu í sæng um kveldit, þá brá Þorbjörg saxi ok vildi leggja á Indriða, bónda sínum, en hann tók í móti ok varð sárr mjök á hendi. Hann mælti þá: “Bæði er nú, Þorbjörg, at ór hörðu er at ráða, enda villtu mikít at gera, eðr hvat skal nú vinna til sátta með okkr?” “Ekki annat en þú færir mér höfuð Þorsteins gullknapps.”

Then afterwards Indriði came home and many men with him. None of them encountered Þorbjörg, and she brought food for the guests. But when they told her the tidings, and that Þorsteinn gullknappr had killed Hörður and gone after him, when he stood still, then Þorbjörg spoke this verse:

In a hard storm of Óðinn (=battle)
Hörður was felled to earth;
in the fight he had defeated
eight and five men;
grim spells took hold
of him strongly,
else the staff-of-sharp-blades (=warrior)
would yet stand.

And when they came to bed in the evening, then Þorbjörg branished a short sword and intended to attack Indriði, her husband, and he resisted and became wounded in the hand. Then he said: “Now we must, Þorbjörg, take counsel for a hard situation, and you desire to do much, but what shall now win peace between us?” “Nothing else, but that you bring me the head of Þorsteinn gullknappr.”⁵²⁵

The deaths of both Grettir and Hörður are partially attributed to the use of strange magic against them; Þorbjörg directly singles out the “grimmir galdrar” (grim spells) that are responsible. This may be intended to diminish any fame that Þorsteinn might win for the killing, since – as

⁵²⁵ *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 89-90.

Þorbjörg frames the account in this verse – he was not able to kill Hǫrðr in a fair fight. In other words, it was a dishonourable killing. Unlike with Ásdís, the saga does not tell us how Þorbjörg's verse was received. However, it seems clear that since Hǫrðr cannot defend his own honour any longer, it has fallen to his sister to defend his legacy and ensure that he is avenged.

Both of these verses (by Ásdís and Þorbjörg) can also, of course, be read as a natural expression of grief, and even denial, at what has happened to their loved ones. However, in both cases the verses also signal that these women will not let the matter rest – that they will continue the feud and determinedly oppose the slayers of their kinsmen. Þorbjörg, like Guðrún in *Atlakviða*, chooses her blood family over her husband, going so far as to take up a sword and personally attack Indriði, before he consents to prosecute the case. Their tactics differ slightly (Ásdís, in her verse, focuses more on the killer's own cowardice, while Þorbjörg places more emphasis on Hǫrðr's valiant fight), but both aim to bring honour to their kinsmen even after their deaths.

Þorbjörg's two verses also represent one of the few examples of a woman speaking in different poetic metres depending on what would be most suitable for the subject of the poem in question. Whether it was the choice of the compiler of the saga or of Þorbjörg herself or of someone else entirely, it is surely no accident that her first verse, which speaks of the future, is in a more commonly eddic-style metre, and her second, which celebrates her brother's martial prowess and denigrates his enemies, is in *dróttkvætt* – with end rhyme, no less.

A much more aggressive example of a woman wielding verse in order to bring honour to her family is found in *Heiðarvíga saga*, when Þuríðr declaims a stanza as part of an extended whetting sequence in which she convinces her remaining sons to avenge their brother Hallr, who has been ambushed and killed by the Harekssons because he helped an enemy of theirs named

Kolskeggr. The saga notes that when Guðmundr, Þuríðr's husband, relates the news of Hallr's death to her, he does so in verse, and that she replies with another – though unfortunately neither verse is included in the surviving saga.⁵²⁶ Guðmundr is stricken by grief, and the one verse of Þuríðr's that we do have occurs after Barði, her second son, has tried to pursue the case at the *alþingi* repeatedly but has not been able to obtain compensation. Þuríðr is unsatisfied that she does not have vengeance for Hallr's death, and proceeds to stage an elaborate meal to provoke her remaining sons to action: she begins by serving them the shoulder of an ox, cut into pieces as Hallr's body was cut into pieces, and then plates up three large stones, claiming that the food will do them no more good than eating stones, since they have not dared to avenge Hallr. The verse provides the climax to the scene:

Gekk hon útan ok innar eptir gólfínu eiskrandi ok kvað vísu:

Brátt munu Barða frýja
 beiðendr þrimu seiða;
 Ullr, munt ættar spillir,
 undlinns, taliðr þinnar,
 nema lýbrautar látir
 láðs valdandi falda,
 lýðr nemi ljóð, sem kvóðum,
 lauðrhys boða rauðu.

Nú hrinda þeir fram borðum ok ollu því, er á var, ok ganga til hesta sinna ok búask hvatliga.

She walked up and down the room, raging, and spoke a verse:

Soon will the demanders of the fish of battle (=warriors) reproach Barði; the Ullr of the wound-serpent (=warrior, = Barði) will be spoken of as the destroyer of your family, unless you, holder of the road of the land fish, cause the offerers of sea fire (=gold, =men) to be covered with red hoods (= have bloody heads). Let the people hear the verse that I have spoken.

Now they push away the tables, and everything that was on them, and go to their horses, and quickly prepare to leave.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁶ See *Heiðarvíga saga*, chapter 14. It is very possible that Þuríðr's verse on hearing the news of the death of her son was originally included in *Heiðarvíga saga*; unfortunately, the early portion of the text (comprising the first twelve leaves, or roughly the first fifteen chapters) was lost in a fire and the opening survives only in a summary written by the (eighteenth-century) copyist. The copyist's notes indicate that trying to reconstruct or remember the skaldic verses gave him no small amount of difficulty.

⁵²⁷ *Heiðarvíga saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1938), 277-278.

Þuríðr wields shame as a weapon here, as she invokes the reputational consequences of Barði's inaction. (Barði has, on advice of a friend, presented his case for compensation three times at the *alþingi* at this stage of the saga.) Comparing Þuríðr and Þorbjörg's verses, Carol Clover has commented that "Þuríðr's ... is an explicit revenge poem, whereas Þorbjörg's resembles, in itself, nothing so much as the sort of skaldic obituary poem or *erfíkvæði* that persons elsewhere compose over fallen comrades."⁵²⁸ L. L. Bjarnason has characterized Þuríðr as a "woman of tremendous force, great pride, and unyielding determination", all of which seems a very fair description, but to insist that she "thinks only of revenge"⁵²⁹ seems an exaggeration: she is also thinking of the reputation of her kinsmen, both dead and alive, and – in particular – of how people will speak of them in the future.

Þuríðr does not get everything she wants: her attempt to follow her sons (to ensure that they actually follow through with achieving vengeance) is scuppered by a servant pushing her off her horse into a brook, at her sons' behest. Her verse is, however, highly effective as motivation, and the penultimate line – "lýðr nemi ljóð, sem kvóðum" (let people hear the verse that I have spoken) – indicates that she is aware that her taunt will be more memorable for having been spoken in poetic form.

Verses countered by verses: *Harðar saga* and *Egils saga*

Getting the poetic final word, as Steinunn does, and as Ásdís and Þorbjörg do, can grant women a measure of authority, influence, or power within a given situation. Similarly, dramatic

⁵²⁸ Carol J. Clover, "Hildigunnr's Lament", in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, eds. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (New York, 2002), 21.

⁵²⁹ L. L. Bjarnason, "Character Delineation of Women in the Old Icelandic Sagas", *Scandinavian Studies* 28.4 (1956), 146.

poetic confrontations where a woman’s verse is immediately rebuked or countered by another character can enrich characterization, reveal power dynamics, and heighten the emotional impact of a confrontation. This is clear, for example, in another pair of verses in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*: Signý, Hǫrðr’s mother, is desperately unhappy in her marriage, which was arranged by her father, Valbrandr, and her husband, Grímkell, without her knowledge or consent. Signý had already been married once; the saga relates that her first husband had died before the events of the story. When she learns of the upcoming arrangements, the saga-writer tells us that she is not impressed, nor is her brother, Torfi. In an effort, nonetheless, to keep the peace, she makes plans with Torfi to give him much of her property, reserving only two treasures that she says she values above all else: a beautiful pendant, and a horse named Svartfaxi. Svartfaxi is found dead during the journey to the wedding, and Signý is so upset by this omen that she wants to call the whole thing off. This is not permitted, and after her marriage to Grímkell, the saga relates that “gerðist þar nú fátt á milli. Grímkell var stirðlyndr, en Signý var fálát, ok varð fátt um með þeim, því at þau máttu ekki vini saman eiga.” (Coolness arose between them. Grímkell was obstinate, yet Signý was reserved. And the coolness became greater between them, because they were not able to make friends in common.)⁵³⁰

Signý has a prophetic dream that her foster-mother, Þordís, interprets to mean that she will have a child, but that child’s future will not be as bright as Signý and Grímkell might wish.⁵³¹ Signý then gives birth to Hǫrðr, an unusual child who does not start to walk until the age of three. It is then that the saga relates the following exchange:

Ok þann dag, er hofhelgi var haldin at Ölfusvatni, því at Grímkell var blótmaðr mikill, sat Signý á stóli sínum á miðju stofugólfi; bjóst hon þá um, ok lá men hennar it góða í knjám

⁵³⁰ *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 12.

⁵³¹ The prophetic tree dream is common in Christian legends and saints’ lives, and possible parallels exist in both classical and Celtic literature; see Paul Schach, “Symbolic Dreams of Future Renown”, *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 4.4 (1971), 51-73, especially 62-64.

henni. Sveinninn Hörðr stóð við stökk ok gekk nú í fyrsta sinni frá stokkinum ok til móður sinnar ok rasaði at knjám henni; menit hraut á gólfít fram ok brast í sundr í þrjá hluta. Signý reiddist mjök ok mælti: “Ill varð þín ganga in fyrsta, ok munu hér margar illar eptir fara, ok mun þó verst in síðasta.” Hon kvað vísu:

Braut í sundr fyr sætu
Sírnis hljóða men góða;
ýta, trú’ek, at engi bæti
auðar hlíði þat síðan;
gangr varð ei góðr ins unga
gulls lystis inn fyrsti,
hverr man heðan af verri,
hneppstr mun þó inn efsti.

Grímkell kom í því í stofuna ok heyrði, hvat hon kvað. Hann greip upp sveininn þegjandi ok reiddist mjök þessum orðum ok kvað vísu:

Auðs hefir átta beiðir
ógóða sér móður;
hann nam fyrst at finna
fljóðs nýgenginn jóða
bræðiorð, þau er beiðir
brennu sjós mun kenna;
atkvæði lifa lýða
lengr en nökkurr drengja.

Svá var Grímkell reiðr orðinn, at hann vildi eigi, at sveinninn væri heima þar.

On that day, when a temple ceremony was held at Ölfusvatn (because Grímkell was a very devout man), Signý sat on her chair in the middle of the floor of the main room; she was preparing herself, and her lovely necklace lay in her lap. The boy, Hörðr, stood up by the wall and now walked for the first time from the wall to his mother, and stumbled at her knees; the necklace tumbled to the floor and broke asunder, into three pieces. Signý became very angry and said: “Badly went your first walking, and many more ill ones will come after it, and nevertheless, the worst will be the last.” She spoke a verse:

He broke asunder, before the woman, the good necklace of Sírnir’s voice (=gold); no man, I believe, can later repair it for the mountain-side of riches (=woman); the first walking of the young one, eager for gold, became not good, hence each [next step] will be worse; nevertheless, the worst will be the last.

Grímkell came into the main room then, and heard what she said. He picked up the boy quietly, and became very angry at these words, and spoke a verse:

The seeker of riches has not had a good mother; the first child, newly-walking, of the woman has felt the angry words, those which the seeker (=man) of the sea’s burning (=gold) will know; people’s words live longer than some great men.

Grímkell had become so angry, that he would not have the boy remain at home.⁵³²

⁵³² *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 16-18.

Reading Signý's verse in isolation, there are elements of the situation that are not dissimilar to those male poets encounter: in a moment of extremely heightened emotion, when only verse will do to express those emotions, a character is presented as spontaneously composing and reciting a stanza. Nonetheless her verse also has elements reminiscent of a prophecy or even of a curse, since she speaks of Hǫrðr's future walks, the worst of which will be the last.

Grímkell's verse, meanwhile, appears to echo elements of Signý's: whereas she describes her necklace as "góða" (good) and herself as an "auðar hlíði" (mountain-side of riches), Grímkell's lines shift this around, directly claiming that Signý is an "ógóða" (not-good) mother and describing Hǫrðr as "[a]uðs ... beidir" (a seeker of riches). In fact, Grímkell uses two very similar kennings to describe Hǫrðr, both of which would seem to be in response to Signý's description of the child as eager for gold. It would also seem that the form of Signý's outburst has influenced the form of Grímkell's response. He is particularly upset, it appears, not only because of the possibly prophetic nature of her poem, but also because her words may live "lengr en nökkurr drengja" (longer than some great men). He does not express any concern for Signý's emotional state or attempt to enquire about the circumstances that have prompted her verse; instead, he is concerned above all with the potential repercussions for his son's future.

The saga establishes earlier that Grímkell is particularly bothered by criticisms expressed in verse; Signý's brother Torfi (who strongly disagreed with his father Valbrandr about the merits of his sister's marriage arrangements) had earlier composed a poem about Grímkell that called him "einfelldri" (simpleton, one of weak intellect) and stated "get ek, at gera mun lítit / gamalmenni þat henni" (I believe that the old man will be little use to her).⁵³³ Grímkell learns of the poem immediately before the saga-author introduces the coolness that arose between husband

⁵³³ *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 9-10.

and wife: “spurði hann ok vísuna Torfa ok gat ekki at gert” (he learned of the verse of Torfi and could do nothing about it).⁵³⁴ When he hears Signý’s verse, however, Grímkell is able to respond, and indeed to have the last word. The prose does not suggest that Grímkell is angry with Hǫrðr (even though he sends Hǫrðr away, he evidently does so in order to foster Hǫrðr with a family he deems better suited to bringing the boy up, since his opinion of Signý’s behaviour as a mother is so low).

Signý’s loyalties are not quite so obviously divided as Guðrún Gjúkadóttir’s, or as Þorbjörg’s, but the conflict between brother and husband, and the effect it could have on a woman’s life, is a common theme in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus.⁵³⁵ In this case, however, Grímkell’s ability to respond in verse emphasizes the power that he holds over his wife and child. It also, curiously, highlights the power of Signý’s initial verse. While we cannot know for certain, one is certainly obliged to wonder: would Grímkell have been anywhere near as angry if Signý had expressed her frustration and fury at the breaking of her necklace in only ordinary (non-poetic) speech? Grímkell’s concern is clearly that her words will be remembered, and that they have done injury to Hǫrðr’s future; they would have been far less memorable had they not been in verse. The episode is thus a demonstration both of the weight a woman’s poetry could carry within a narrative, especially a potentially prophetic stanza such as Signý’s (especially since the prose text of the saga eventually bears out her prophecy), and of the immediate unease and anger (and retaliation) that such a verse could arouse in a (male) listener.

The inclusion of both verses also immediately serves to heighten the tension between husband and wife: what was a general simmering of unhappiness has suddenly erupted into the

⁵³⁴ *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 12.

⁵³⁵ See Ruth Mazo Karras, “Marriage and the Creation of Kin in the Sagas”, *Scandinavian Studies* 75.4 (2003), 473-490; especially 476-479.

exchange of sharp words, and the feud continues to escalate from there. Grímkell and Torfi are certainly not finished using Signý and her children against each other to score points, nor is Grímkell yet been able to respond to Torfi's original verse. After Signý dies in childbirth (while visiting her brother), Torfi tries to have her infant daughter Þorbjörg left out to die. When this plan is thwarted, he hands the girl off to a wandering beggar named Sigmundr, and the prose text of the saga indicates that this was in order to disgrace Grímkell. When Sigmundr finally brings the child to Grímkell's house, Grímkell recites another verse in which he blames Torfi for Signý's death, and vows to have vengeance on Torfi for this.

Regardless of whether or not Signý, Grímkell, and Torfi's verses can be considered "authentic", their inclusion in the saga has a clear purpose, and the verses have both impact on the plot, and structural significance. They aptly highlight dynamics and tensions that play out in the prose text. Moreover, it can be observed that women's poetic speech is not always condoned – particularly not when it represents a direct challenge to a man's honour or fortunes. The poetic exchange between Egill and the (unnamed) daughter of Jarl Arnfiðr in *Egils saga* is similarly enlightening. Egill and his brother, Þórofr, have arrived at a land ruled by the jarl, who has sent messengers to meet them and find out their purpose. Þórofr has declared to the messengers that the new arrivals have no need to raid the land, and the jarl has consequently invited them to a feast, at which lots are drawn to determine the seating arrangements. The saga then relates the following exchange:

Jarl átti dóttir allfríða ok þá vel frumvaxta; svá sagði hlutr til, at Egill skyldi sitja hjá jarlsdóttur um kveldit; hon gekk um gólf ok skemmti sér. Egill stóð upp ok gekk til rúms þess, er dóttir jarlsins hafði setit um daginn. En er menn skipuðusk í sæti sín þá gekk jarlsdóttir at rúmi sínu; hon kvað:

Hvat skaltu, sveinn, í sess minn?
þvítt þú sjaldan hefr gefnar
vargi varmar bráðir,
vesa vilk ein of mína;

sáttaðu hrafn í hausti
of hræsolli gjalla,
vastaðu at, þars eggjar
á skelþunnar runnusk.

Egill tók til hennar ok setti hana niðr hjá sér; hann kvað:

Farit hefk blóðgum brandi,
svát mér benþiðurr fylgði,
ok gjallanda geiri;
gangr vas harðr af víkingum;
gerðum reiðir róstu,
rann eldr of sjöt manna,
létum blóðga búka
í borghliðum sæfask.

Þá drukku þau sama um kveldit ok váru allkát.

The jarl had a daughter, very beautiful and then come into her prime; the drawing of the lots said that Egill should sit with the jarl's daughter for the evening; she walked about the room and entertained herself. Egill stood up and went over to the place where the jarl's daughter had sat during the day. And when men took up their seats, then the jarl's daughter went to her place; she said:

What do you want, boy, in my seat? Since you have seldom given warm flesh to the wolf, I wish to be alone with myself; you did not see the raven shriek over the carrion in autumn, you were not there when edges (=swords), thin as shells, clashed.

Egill took hold of her and set her down beside him; he said:

I have gone with a bloody sword and a shrieking spear, so that the wound bird (=raven) followed; the onslaught of the Vikings was severe; we fought battles, in anger; fire ran over the homes of men; we let bloody bodies sink down in the gates of cities.

Then they drank together throughout the evening and were very merry.⁵³⁶

Sandra Straubhaar comments that “[t]his imperfect *dróttkvætt* stanza and its surrounding episode seem to have no other purpose, in a saga otherwise studded with poetry, than to goad the youthful saga-hero, Egil Skalla-Grimsson, to further deeds. Its authenticity is thus suspect, but the scene is no less memorable.”⁵³⁷ The scene is certainly memorable, and not just because it may inspire Egill to accomplish further deeds. Edel Maria Porter reads these stanzas as “a sort of verbal duel between the two young people; the first strophe being a challenge to which Egill

⁵³⁶ *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík, 1933), 120-121.

⁵³⁷ Sandra Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women's Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*, 24.

responds.”⁵³⁸ It is certainly a verbal contest; however, the emphasis both Porter and Turville-Petre⁵³⁹ place on the relative youth of the two in their interpretations may miss the uncomfortable and somewhat suggestive tone of the passage. It is difficult to read “vel frumvaxta” as anything other than an indication that Jarl Arnfiðr’s daughter has reached sexual maturity – Bernard Scudder, for instance, translates this as “nubile”.⁵⁴⁰ Egill, according to the timeline of the saga, would be about fifteen at the time, and the jarl’s daughter addresses him in a manner that suggests two things: one, that he is somewhat younger than she is, and two, that his initial attention, and the lots that have assigned them to sit together, are both decidedly unwelcome news from her point of view. The saga suggests, in fact, that she is actively trying to avoid sitting with him, by walking about the rest of the room. Jochens points out that “skemmt sér” can also have sexual connotations – the phrase often “most often refers to a couple’s pleasurable activities, denoting a card game or innocent conversation as well as illicit intercourse”.⁵⁴¹ In this particular passage, Jochens construes it to mean that the jarl’s daughter walked about the room flirting with others.⁵⁴² Egill, undeterred, sits down in her seat, and waits for her to be obliged to return (which she only does once everyone else is also taking their seats). When she does return, she immediately challenges Egill, addressing him as “sveinn” (boy) in the opening line of her verse, and clearly stating that she wishes to be alone (“vesa vilk ein of mína”). Her vocabulary is highly martial in character, and describes the battlefield in detail.

⁵³⁸ Edel Maria Porter, “Translating the Untranslatable: A Comparative Study of Two Modern Language Translations of the Verses of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*”, PhD thesis (Leeds, 2007), 194.

⁵³⁹ On Egill’s verse, Turville-Petre writes: “The form is irregular, and the imagery and the syntax of a kind which a young girl could understand.” Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford, 1976), 19. Why the (relatively) straightforward syntax must be a reflection on the maiden’s ability to comprehend skaldic verse and not on a young Egill’s still-developing poetic skill is unclear to me.

⁵⁴⁰ Bernard Scudder, trans., “Egil’s saga”, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders I* (Reykjavík, 1997), 88.

⁵⁴¹ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 69.

⁵⁴² Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 202 (note 25).

Egill, however, is not taking no for an answer. His response can be read as a detailed rebuttal of her stanza. She began by claiming he has never given warm flesh (*varmar bráðir*) to the wolf; Egill's verse concludes by describing the bloody bodies (*blóðga búka*) he claims to have left behind him. She said he had not seen the raven shriek over the carrion; Egill asserts that the wound-bird (*benþiðurr*, a kenning for raven) followed his shrieking spear. She stated he was not there when swords clashed (*eggjar ... runnusk*); Egill's retort includes both a description of his bloody sword (*blóðgum brandi*) and of battles fought in anger (*reiðir róstu*).

The jarl's daughter is not given the opportunity to respond, so it is hard to judge what exactly her thoughts are on this, but Egill's poem does apparently silence her objections: the saga remarks that "Þá drukku þau sama um kveldit ok váru allkát" (then they drank together throughout the evening and were very merry).

Who gets the last word in a poetic duel clearly indicates where the power lies in a relationship, and the interaction between Egill and the jarl's daughter also points to Egill's lack of concern for matters like consent (even though the saga-author indicates that the jarl's daughter was eventually won over by Egill's verse, there is no evidence to suggest that she had changed her mind at the moment Egill picked her up and sat her next to him). While the saga-author's purpose in including the exchange may well be to spur Egill on to further deeds, or to dramatize the hero's first conquest, or to demonstrate his masculinity via his ability to win over a scornful woman, it also reveals aspects of a youthful Egill's attitude towards women. The episode also underlines a more general trend: women's use of verse is most often sanctioned when that verse is aimed at honouring, advising, praising, or celebrating a male associate. When that verse *challenges* a male relative, it is usually countered or undermined by the surrounding text in some way.

Women and *dróttkvætt*

It is evident that when women speak in verse in “realistic” or historically plausible contexts in the *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*, that they are generally portrayed as doing so to a male audience. There are very, very few documented instances of a woman speaking verse to another woman – Guðrún and Jóreiðr in *Sturlunga saga*, discussed in chapter two, is one, and Signý and Heiðr in *Hrólfs saga kraka* is another – though there are plenty of examples where there is no apparent audience at all, the verses being spoken as a sort of spontaneous expression of emotion to no one in particular (as is the case for some of Ólof and Ketilriðr’s verses in *Víglundar saga*, for instance.)

This chapter has examined many (although not all) of the verses spoken by women in ostensibly realistic or historically plausible contexts in the *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*, and it is evident that there is a great deal of variety in the purpose and effect of these verses within the surrounding prose narrative. Overall, it is clear that women’s verses can be strikingly martial in character, and treat many subjects more commonly associated with masculine pursuits. Jórunn’s verses, though they document a peaceful interaction, nonetheless use aggressive, martial, kennings throughout. Gunnhildr and Steinunn both make excellent use of elaborate kennings related to ships and seafaring. References to dangerous animals such as wolves (Ásdís and Hildir) and snakes (Jarl Arnfiðr’s daughter and Þuríðr), and to battles (Ásdís and Þorbjörg) and warriors abound in these verses.

While the form and content (vocabulary, kennings, syntax) of their verses does not necessarily depart from established norms, or from what we might expect from a male poet, the reception of their verses (as portrayed within the text) is clearly, in many cases, influenced by

their gender. This is apparent in a number of ways, but perhaps one of the most obvious is the function that these verses have within a prose text. Heather O’Donoghue has described a “fundamental distinction between verses which corroborate what is stated in the prose, so functioning as a footnote to the narrative, and those which, broadly speaking ornament it – most often, by serving as the direct speech of the characters in the narrative.”⁵⁴³ Bjarni Einarsson summarizes this distinction as follows:

In general it is made quite clear by the preceding prose whether a stanza is quoted as evidence or is to be considered as a part of the story. A stanza of the former kind is usually preceded by the words: *Svá segir N. N.* [the name of the scald], or: *Þess getr N. N.*, or: *Sem N. N. segir* (and more variants of the same content). On the other hand a stanza of the latter kind is preceded by: *Þá kvað N. N.*, or: *Þá kvað N. N. visu* (and many other variants of that type) – and these stanzas are often simply a rhymed reply to a question.⁵⁴⁴

In fact none of the verses spoken by women are introduced with this stock phrase “svá segir”, which is so often used to introduce documentary verse. This includes women’s verses in the king’s sagas, such as the quotation from Jórunn skaldmær’s *Sendibitr*, in *Haralds saga ins hárfagr*, and the inclusion of Steinunn Refsdóttir’s verses in both *Kristni saga* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. In all three cases, although the verses do appear to have a documentary or evidentiary function, the prose uses “orti” (composed) to introduce the stanzas. With such a small sample size it is difficult to draw firm conclusions, but it seems important to note that verses spoken by women may fulfill similar structural functions to verses spoken by men, and may use similar vocabulary and syntax, and *still* are introduced in a subtly different way by the surrounding prose. (In *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, verses by Þorbjörn Hornklofi and Eyvindr skáldaspillir are universally introduced with the verbs “segir” and “gefr”; “orti” is only used to refer to Jórunn’s verse.) Is it possible that the saga-author felt that Jórunn skaldmær would be

⁵⁴³ Heather O’Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, 3.

⁵⁴⁴ Bjarni Einarsson, “On the Role of Verse in Saga Literature”, *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 7 (1974), 118.

less familiar to his audience or his reader, and introducing her verse thus required more explanation? Or that using her verse as evidence necessitated more justification than using a verse from a more established or more famous court poet? It is, alas, impossible to know.

Most of the verses discussed in this chapter function at least partly as dialogue or narrative verses, but within that broad category we can see a wealth of different functions and purposes. As Heather O’Donoghue writes, “this method necessarily involves a degree of what we may call fictionality, or better *littérarité* – that is, put simply, that authors who present their characters as speaking their dialogue in *dróttkvætt* are, with certain important caveats, (re)producing a textual illusion for literary effect, rather than relating a naturalistic event.”⁵⁴⁵ Bjarni Einarsson rightly argues that stanzas included for artistic effect “should not be lightly taken out of their context and interpreted contrary to the meaning they obviously have in that context”.⁵⁴⁶ Early in the study of skaldic verse, many of women’s verses were removed from their prose context – such as in Finnur Jónsson’s *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning* – and regarded as inauthentic, being classed separately in the edition. As Margaret Clunies Ross comments, “[h]is reasons for so classifying the verses are rarely given, and seem to rest upon an unexamined assumption that women were less likely than men to compose *lausavísur*.”⁵⁴⁷ There are two problems with that approach: one, that it is evident that women did compose *lausavísur*, and two, that removing the verses from the surrounding prose context removes relevant information about how and why the verses were preserved, and about the enduring literary and artistic value that saga-authors found in them. Women’s verses foreshadow future events; build tension; dramatize conflict; express lament; reveal deep emotions; bring honour to their kin;

⁵⁴⁵ Heather O’Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, 12.

⁵⁴⁶ Bjarni Einarsson, “On the Role of Verse in Saga Literature”, 124.

⁵⁴⁷ Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, 60.

highlight relationships between characters; spark conflict; set key events in motion; structure episodes of sagas; and cap or dramatically conclude sections of a story. There are very few attested functions in the family sagas for *dróttkvætt* that we do *not* have evidence for women adopting, and equally very few types of literary effect that are the province of only one gender.

Women's voices in the verses of *Njáls saga*

While this thesis has, up until now, organized itself primarily around the degree or type of fictionality of various verses, it is necessary to emphasize that these verses do not appear in isolation, and are interwoven alongside many others. One text may contain “historical” evidentiary verses spoken by women, and also include verses voiced by a woman but attributed to a male author – that include clearly fictional scenarios. For instance, *Heimskringla* includes not only the verses of Jörunn and Hildir, but also part of the *Haraldskvæði* or *Hrafnsmál* (usually attributed to Þorbjörn Hornklofi, though some of the stanzas are sometimes attributed to Þjóðólfr of Hvínir; both were contemporaries of Jörunn at the court of Haraldr hárfagri), which comprises a lengthy conversation between a valkyrie and a raven. Peter Hallberg suspects that “the poet received his surname – *hornklofi* is one of many designations, with uncertain meaning, for the black bird of the battlefield – from precisely this poem”.⁵⁴⁸ *Fagrskinna*, similarly, includes no shortage of potentially “historical” verses (including the half-stanza of Gunnhildr’s that survives), and also includes many more stanzas of *Hrafnsmál*. The metre of *Hrafnsmál* is *máláháttur*, not *dróttkvætt*, and certain similarities in metre and diction have led to comparisons with *Atlakviða* – with Genzmer⁵⁴⁹ and Reichardt⁵⁵⁰ going so far as to argue for Þorbjörn

⁵⁴⁸ Peter Hallberg, *Old Icelandic Poetry: Eddic Lay and Skaldic Verse* (Lincoln, 1975), 117.

⁵⁴⁹ Felix Genzmer, “Der Dichter der *Atlakviða*”, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 42 (1926), 97-133.

⁵⁵⁰ Konstantin Reichardt, “Der Dichter der *Atlakviða*”, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 42 (1926), 323-326.

Hornklofi's authorship of *Atlakviða* as a result. (Ursula Dronke is unconvinced, pointing to "fundamental differences of style"⁵⁵¹ and noting also that "*Haraldskvæði* shows none of the stylistic variation, the interplay between simple and rich phrasing, so characteristic of *Atlakviða*".⁵⁵²)

What we can say is that poets – both male and female – were perfectly capable of treating supernatural material one moment, and real-life battles the next, and of blending images and vocabulary from both, and of choosing to vary the style or form of their verses to best suit the artistic demands of their topic. We can also, surely, say that artificially cordoning off so-called eddic-style verses on the one hand, from *dróttkvætt* on the other, may be counterproductive when it is clearly documented that individuals (be they named, "historical" poets, or fictional characters) could use both eddic and skaldic styles, or a blend of the two. Saga-authors were equally capable of selecting different types of verses from a variety of sources and arranging them in such a way as to produce particular effects – and the same verse could easily have a different function when included in a different text (for clear evidence of this, we can, for instance, compare the framing of Steinunn's verses in *Njáls saga* to that in *Kristni saga* or *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*).

What, then, should be made of the evidence of women's voices in a text like *Njáls saga*? Though many of the verses may be authentic, all are arranged with a high degree of *littéarité*. In Sandra Straubhaar's book, *Old Norse Women's Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*, poems spoken by women in *Njáls saga* appear in three completely separate sections: Þórhildr skáldkona's *kviðlingar* in "Real People, Real Poetry", along with Steinunn Refsdóttir's two stanzas of *dróttkvætt*; Unnr Marðardóttir's verses in "Quasi-Historical People and Poetry"; and

⁵⁵¹ Ursula Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda, Volume 1: Heroic Poems*, 42.

⁵⁵² Ursula Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda, Volume 1: Heroic Poems*, 43.

the voices of the valkyries in *Darraðarljóð* in “Magic-Workers, Prophetesses, and Alien Maidens”. Nonetheless, all of these stanzas form part of the same text, and should be read in the context not only of each other and of the surrounding prose, but also of the other verses in *Njáls saga*. Sexual themes play a significant role in *Njáls saga*,⁵⁵³ and the variety of verses voiced by women in the text is worthy of focused attention.

In the remainder of this chapter I will endeavour to do exactly that, and conclude with a brief discussion of the verses in *Njáls saga*. Anxiety and tensions surrounding women’s roles in perpetuating violence have often been noted in the saga; Carolyn Anderson writes that “[t]he shift from personal and familial based oaths of loyalty and action to proto-codification of laws announced in public is gendered in this saga, and that reveals cultural anxiety over the actual male desire for, and habit of, resorting to violence as the proper response for an offence.”⁵⁵⁴ Anderson finds that “when seen as a matter of the exercise of power, gender in Njal’s Saga is inherently unstable”⁵⁵⁵ and goes on to argue that the saga “presents individual subjects whose gender is blurred because their identities are always in process. People in this saga change their behaviours, and the discourse of gender does not always constrain them.”⁵⁵⁶

Both Þórhildr skáldkona and Unnr Marðardóttir exemplify a crucially important reason that women are shown to adopt skaldic verse: self-advocacy. This does mean adopting the language and form of a predominantly masculine practice in order to do so. Women’s verses that advocate for, or honour, or advise their husbands, brothers, or other male family members are – as we have seen – often sanctioned and even applauded by the surrounding prose. Advocacy for

⁵⁵³ As discussed in detail by Ursula Dronke, *The role of sexual themes in Njáls saga* (London, 1981).

⁵⁵⁴ Carolyn Anderson, “No Fixed Point: Gender and Blood Feuds in Njal’s Saga”, *Philological Quarterly* 81.4 (2002), 422.

⁵⁵⁵ Carolyn Anderson, “No Fixed Point: Gender and Blood Feuds in Njal’s Saga”, 422.

⁵⁵⁶ Carolyn Anderson, “No Fixed Point: Gender and Blood Feuds in Njal’s Saga”, 435.

their own desires, particularly in a sexual context, was perhaps more radical. The (poetic) attempt by Jarl Arnfiðr's daughter (whose name the saga nowhere records) to deter Egill from staying in her seat in *Egils saga* is quickly squashed by Egill's own verse. Þórhildr and Unnr might get away with the (poetic) last word, but the surrounding prose, and the reactions of other characters in the saga to their behaviour, still reveals discomfort with these women's use of verse for their own ends. The manuscript history (and the inclusion, or not, of Unnr's verses in later scholarly editions) is also revealing.

The textual history of Þórhildr's *kviðlingr* is less complicated, and the episode is highly memorable. Þórhildr and her husband enter the saga in this way:

Þráinn hét maðr. Han var Sigfússon, Sighvats sonar ins rauða. Hann bjó at Grjóta í Fljótshlið. Hann var frændi Gunnars ok virðingamaðr mikill. Hann átti Þórhildi skáldkonu. Hon var orðgifr mikit ok fór með flimtan. Þráinn unni henni lítit.

There was a man named Þráinn. He was the son of Sigfús, the son of Sighvatr the red. He lived at Grjót in Fljótshlið. He was a friend of Gunnarr's, and a great man of distinction. He was married to Þórhildr the poetess. She was a great word-witch and she used satire. Þráinn loved her little.⁵⁵⁷

Þórhildr and Þráinn are invited to the wedding of Gunnarr and Hallgerðr, and at the feast, Þráinn's eyes wander to the fourteen-year old daughter of the bride, Þorgerðr. Understandably, Þórhildr is unimpressed, and makes her feelings on the matter very clear:

Þórhildr gengr um beina, ok báru þær Bergþóra mat á borð. Þráinn Sigfússon var starsýnn á Þorgerði; þetta sér kona hans, Þórhildr; hon reiðisk ok kveðr til hans kviðling:
“Era gapriplar góðir,
gægr er þér í augum,
Þráinn,” segir hon. Hann sté þegar fram yfir borðit ok nefndi sér vatta ok sagði skilit við hana – “vil ek eigi hafa flimtan hennar né fáyrði yfir mér.” Ok svá var hann kappsamr um þetta, at hann vildi eigi vera at veizlunni, nema hon væri í brautu rekin; ok þat varð, at hon fór í braut.

⁵⁵⁷ *Njáls saga*, ed. Magnús Finnbogason (Reykjavík, 1944), 43. This edition cited here due to difficulties accessing the Íslenzk fornrit edition during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Þórhildr waits upon the guests, and she and Bergþóra brought food to the table. Þráinn Sigfússon was staring at Þorgerðr; his wife Þórhildr sees this; she becomes angry and speaks this *kviðlingr* to him:

“Staring is not good;

lust is in your eyes,

Þráinn,” she says. He immediately stood up from the table and named witnesses and declared himself divorced from her – “I do not want to have her satire nor her reproaches about me.” And he was so impetuous that he would not remain at the feast, unless she were driven out; and that eventually happened, that she went out.⁵⁵⁸

Þórhildr does not return to the saga. Meanwhile, back at the feast and apparently keen to waste no time, Þráinn immediately declares his interest in marrying Þorgerðr, and asks her grandfather Hǫskuldr for her hand. Hǫskuldr, unsure of what to make of this, asks Gunnarr for his opinion; Gunnarr defers to Njáll. After both Njáll and Hrútr speak in favour of the match, Hǫskuldr and Þráinn make an agreement: “Þá tala þeir um kaupin ok verða á allt sáttir.” (Then they discussed the terms and became entirely agreed.)⁵⁵⁹ Only then does Gunnarr walk over to Þorgerðr and her mother Hallgerðr to ask for their opinions.

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir writes of this episode: “As much as we might empathize with the plight of a young girl being traded in such an unsympathetic way between grandfather and freshly divorced, much older groom, the account seems to express the attitudes of the ruling class in Norse society. Marriage was primarily a business transaction between men”.⁵⁶⁰ Þorgerðr, the fourteen-year-old abruptly married off, never speaks a word; the saga notes only that she and her mother made no objections, and then subsequently praises her for her management of her new home: “Þorgerðr tók við búráðum at Grjótá ok var góð húsfreyja.” (Þorgerðr took over at Grjót and was a good housewife.)⁵⁶¹ Þórhildr, the scorned wife, is both physically and textually thrust out of the saga at Þráinn’s insistence.

⁵⁵⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík, 1953), 89.

⁵⁵⁹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 90.

⁵⁶⁰ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World*, 40.

⁵⁶¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 90.

The episode reveals the tensions and discomfort that could arise from an outspoken woman challenging her husband, particularly in a public place. The prose does not take a very favourable view of Þórhildr; she is first introduced as an “orðgífr”, which I have translated as “word-witch” and which Straubhaar translates as “a great troll with words”.⁵⁶² Þráinn’s desire to marry Þorgerðr is condoned by Njáll, whose reputation for giving good advice is repeatedly emphasized throughout the rest of the saga. The saga then emphasizes the harmony and happiness that results in both the account of the feast afterwards, and the description of Þorgerðr’s skilled household management.

At the same time, there does appear to be some uneasiness in the onlookers at what has transpired, and at Þráinn’s behaviour. Hǫskuldr is taken aback and defers judgment, with the comment that “mér þykkir þú lítt hafa við þessa skilit, er þú áttir áðr” (it seems to me you have parted poorly with the one whom you had before).⁵⁶³ Gunnarr too refuses to venture an opinion (claiming potential bias due to his relation to Þráinn), and the matter is put to Njáll. Even Njáll’s opinion is not sufficient for Hǫskuldr, who then also asks Hrútr, and only after the two of them have spoken in support does Hǫskuldr assent. Njáll and Hrútr’s advice is also fairly restrained. Njáll refrains from any particular comment on Þráinn’s character, and instead opines that Þráinn is wealthy, accomplished, and powerful, and so “megið þér því gera honum kostinn” (therefore you may make this match).⁵⁶⁴ “You *may* make this match” (which both Njáll and Hrútr say; my emphasis) is not ‘you *should*’ and the subsequent statement in the prose that Hallgerðr and Þorgerðr did not raise any objections is (although a very common way of phrasing a woman’s response to a man’s offer of marriage in the sagas) hardly a ringing endorsement either.

⁵⁶² Sandra Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women’s Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*, 17.

⁵⁶³ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 90.

⁵⁶⁴ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 90.

Þórhildr's remarks to Þráinn have been compared to Auðr of *Laxdæla saga*; Straubhaar suggests, in fact, that Þórhildr is Auðr's "dark echo".⁵⁶⁵ Auðr is also a scorned wife; her husband Þórðr Ingunnarson befriends Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, a woman in an unhappy marriage she did not choose. After meeting Þórðr, Guðrún quickly contrives to divorce her own husband (Þorvaldr) and then rides to the *alþingi* with Þórðr, where she persuades him to announce his own divorce at the *alþingi* (without telling his wife beforehand). When Auðr hears this, she too recites a short *kviðlingr*.⁵⁶⁶

Unlike Auðr, Þórhildr does not get the last word, or revenge, or even any response at all after her husband divorces her. Her verse survives as her only commentary on the situation. The alliteration is particularly memorable, and between that and the stress, the emphasis is firmly on Þráinn's "gapriplar" (staring or gaping) and "gægr" (lust or ogling). Though it is unfortunate that no more of Þórhildr's verses survive, the brevity of this one significantly enhances its impact: she goes straight to the point, without any of the circumlocutions or elaborate kennings found in other poets' work. It is perhaps in part thanks to the pithy and memorable nature of Þórhildr's verse that this account of Þráinn's misdeeds has survived the centuries. The *kviðlingr* (used elsewhere in the saga by Þráinn to mock Hákon and by Hjalti to insult the goddess Freyja) seems particularly well-suited to this sort of concise, cutting, memorable insult.

In contrast, the verses of Unnr Marðardóttir (though not the rest of her story) have often been left out of editions of *Njáls saga*. There is considerable variation in the verses included, or not included, in the surviving manuscripts, particularly in the first section of the text known as *Gunnars saga. While this has not affected our discussion of Þórhildr or Steinunn, this variation

⁵⁶⁵ Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, "Ambiguously Gendered: The Skalds Jórunn, Auðr and Steinunn", in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, 267.

⁵⁶⁶ *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík, 1934), 96.

does affect the verses spoken by Unnr, which only survive in some manuscripts. The textual history is complex, but suffice it to say that the manuscripts have been divided into three groupings, X, Y, and Z, and the X-group “is partially characterized by its citation of more verse than the other two manuscript groups”.⁵⁶⁷ This X-group includes two of the three oldest manuscripts of the saga, *Reykjabók* (AM 468 4to) and *Kálfalækjarbók* (AM 133 fol.), but editions and translations of the text have usually preferred to use manuscripts from the Y or Z groups as a base.⁵⁶⁸ Guðrún Nordal has highlighted the fact that “most of the additional verse ... is preserved in more than one manuscript from the fourteenth century, and therefore the inclusion of the so-called additional stanzas is not an idiosyncrasy by one editor or writer at the time, but suggests, rather, a strong interest in the use of verse within the saga and a preference for endowing certain characters with poetic talents.”⁵⁶⁹ Unnr’s verses are *not* included in the Y- and Z- group manuscripts, which include other early manuscripts of *Njáls saga* such as *Gráskinna* (likely written about the same type as *Reykjabók*, and usually dated around 1300).⁵⁷⁰

It is thus remarkably difficult to find an edition of *Njáls saga* that allows Unnr’s verses to be read in their prose context. The Íslenzk fornrit edition, edited by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, relegates the additional verses to an appendix, without the prose.⁵⁷¹ Magnús Finnbogason’s edition makes no mention of Unnr’s verses that I can find, not even in the notes.⁵⁷² Most English translations, following Einar Sveinsson’s lead, also omit the verses: for instance, both Robert

⁵⁶⁷ Guðrún Nordal, “The Dialogue between Audience and Text: The Variants in Verse Citations in *Njáls saga*’s Manuscripts”, in *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing* (Copenhagen, 2008), 185.

⁵⁶⁸ The classic study is by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Studies in the Manuscript Tradition of Njáls saga* (Reykjavík, 1953).

⁵⁶⁹ Guðrún Nordal, “The Dialogue between Audience and Text: The Variants in Verse Citations in *Njáls saga*’s Manuscripts”, 188.

⁵⁷⁰ Jón Karl Helgason, *The Rewriting of Njáls saga: Translation, Politics and Icelandic Sagas* (Clevedon, 1999), 21-22.

⁵⁷¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 465.

⁵⁷² *Njáls saga*, ed. Magnús Finnbogason (Reykjavík, 1944).

Cook's translation (which appears in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*) and the translation by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson are based on the Íslenzk fornrit edition.⁵⁷³ Sandra Straubhaar's collection of poetry (and many other editions of skaldic poetry) includes Unnr's verses, but not the surrounding prose.⁵⁷⁴ The edition that Guðrún Nordal cites, also the only edition I have been able to find that includes Unnr's verses as they appear in *Reykjabók* (aside from a facsimile of the *Reykjabók* manuscript itself), is normalized to modern Icelandic. I will quote the relevant section in full:

Nú líður til þings framan. Unnur talaði við Sigmund Össurason og spurði ef hann vildi ríða til þings með henni. Hann kveðst eigi ríða mundu ef Hrúti frænda hans þætti verr.

“Því kvaddi eg þig til að eg á að þér helst allra mann,” sagði hún.

Hann svaraði: “Gera mun eg þér kost á því. Þú skalt ríða vestur með mér aftur og hafa engi undirmál við Hrút eða mig.”

Hún hét því. Síðan riðu þau til þings.

Mörður var á þingi, faðir hennar. Hann tók við henni allvel og bað vera í búð sinni meðan þingið væri. Hún gerði svo.

Mörður mælti: “Hvað segir þú mér frá Hrúti félaga þínum?”

Hún kvað vísu:

1. Víst segi ek gott frá geystum
geirhveffanda þessum,
þat er sjálfráðlegt silfra
sundrhreyti er fundið.
Verð ek, því er álmur er orðinn
eggþings fyrir gjörningum,
satt er að ek ség við spotti,
segja margt eða þegja.

Mörður varð hljóður við og mælti: “Það býr þér nú í skapi, dóttir, að þú vilt að engi viti nema eg og munt þú trúá mér best til úrráða um þitt mál.”

Þá gengu þau á tal þar er engir menn heyrðu þeirra viðurmæli.

⁵⁷³ “Njal's saga”, trans. Robert Cook, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Volume 3 (Rekjavík, 1997), 1. *Njal's saga*, trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (Harmondsworth, 1960), 33.

⁵⁷⁴ Sandra Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women's Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*, 26-27.

Þá mælti Mörður til dóttur sinnar: “Segðu mér nú allt það er á milli ykkar er og lát þér það ekki í augu vaxa.”

“Svo mun vera verða,” segir hún og kvað vísu:

2. Víst hefir hringa hristir,
Hrútur, líkama þrútinn
eiturs, þá er linbeðs leitar
lundýgur munúð drýgja.
Leita ek með ýti
undlinna þá finna
yndi okkars vanda,
aldræðr boði skjaldar.

Og enn kvað hún vísu:

3. Þó veit eg hitt, að hreytir
handfúrs, jökuls spannar
meiður, er jafnt sem aðrir
ýtendur boga nýtir.
Vilda eg við öldu
jókennanda þenna –
rjóður, lít þú orð ok íðir,
undleggs, skilið segja.

“Hversu má svo vera?” segir Mörður, “og seg enn gerr.”

Hún svarar: “Þegar hann kemur við mig þá er hörund hans svo mikið að hann má ekki eftirlæti hafa við mig en þó höfum við bæði breytnti til þess á alla vega að við mættum njótast en það verður ekki. En þó áður við skiljum sýnir hann það af sér hann er í æði sínu rétt sem aðrir menn.”

Now it comes time to go to the *alþingi*. Unnr spoke with Sigmundur Qzurarson and asked if he would ride to the *alþingi* with her. He said he would not ride if it did not please his kinsman Hrútr.

“I asked you because I thought you of all men owed me,” she said.

He answered: “I will do this for you on this condition. You shall ride west with me afterwards, and have no underhand dealings towards Hrútr or myself.”

She agreed to this. After that they rode to the *alþingi*.

Mörður was at the *alþingi*, her father. He greeted her well, and asked her to stay in his booth during the *alþingi*. She did so.

Mörður said: “What have you to say to me about Hrútr, your partner?”

She spoke a verse:

1. Certainly I speak well about this hasty spear-sharpener [=warrior, = Hrótr], about that which the distributor of silver [= generous man] has in his own control. I must say everything or keep silent (it is true that I fear mockery), because the elm of swordplay [=warrior] has become the victim of sorcery.

Mǫrðr fell silent and said, “You have something on your mind, daughter, which you do not want anyone to know except me, and you may trust me as the best one to help with the matter.”

Then they went apart to where no one could overhear their conversation.

Then Mǫrðr said to his daughter: “Now tell me all about the two of you and do not leave out anything.”

“So will it be,” she said and spoke a verse:

2. Certainly the shaker of rings [=Hrótr] has a swollen body because of poisoning, when in the linen bed he ardently seeks pleasure. I try with the launcher of swords to find satisfaction in our attempts, O old shield-commander.

And then she spoke a verse:

3. Nevertheless, this I know, O beam of the span of the glacier [=warrior, = Mǫrðr], that the scatterer of hand-fires [=gold, = generous man] is like other launchers of bows [=men]. I want to be separated from the guide of the stallion of the wave [=ship, =seafarer, = Hrótr] – consider words and deeds, O reddener of weapons [=warrior, = Mǫrðr].

“How may this be?” said Mǫrðr, “explain more clearly.”

She answered: “Whenever he comes to me, then his penis is so large that I can not have pleasure from him, and yet we have both tried all possible ways to have intercourse, but it is not to be. Nevertheless before we part, he shows that he is in all other ways like other men.”⁵⁷⁵

This is not the first time Unnr has attempted to explain her marital woes to her father. At the previous *alþingi*, she went to her father’s booth and burst into tears, but did not explain why.

Mǫrðr asked Hrótr why his daughter was unhappy, but Unnr could not bring herself to explain,

⁵⁷⁵ *Brennu-Njáls saga: Texti Reykjabókar*, ed. Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson (Reykjavík, 2004), 16-17. Neither Oxford nor Cambridge hold a copy of this text in their libraries; there seem to be only two universities in the United Kingdom (and one in Canada) that do. The exclusion of Unnr’s verses from the dominant editions of the saga, or the relegation to appendices, have (regardless of the intent) had the effect of further marginalizing her words.

and Mǫrðr sent his daughter home. This time (with Hrútr’s notable absence; one can imagine it would be easier to explain such a delicate and personal matter without an audience) she is able to get her father on side.

There is thus a certain amount of irony in Mǫrðr’s insistence to Unnr that he is the best person to deal with the problem (whatever it is): the last time she sought his support, it was not forthcoming, and he sent her home with the parting statement “Heim skalt þú fara ok una vel við ráð þitt, því at honum ganga ǫll vitni betr en þér.” (Home [=to Hrútr’s house] you shall go, and be happy with your condition, because all speak better of him than of you.)⁵⁷⁶ On this visit to the *alþingi*, she is more successful, in that Mǫrðr does give her advice on how to divorce Hrútr in compliance with the various applicable laws, but subsequent events demonstrate that her father is perhaps *not* the most suitable person to handle the legal matters since he does not manage to get her dowry back. (After her father’s failure, Unnr later seeks out her kinman Gunnarr, who does manage to get her money back, with some help and advice from Njáll.)

Guðrún Nordal has done a very insightful side-by-side comparison between the *Reykjabók* text (with the verses) and the *Gráskinna* text (without), and notes some of the “verbal echoes between the prose of *Gráskinna* and the verse in this section of *Reykjabók* and *Kálfalækjarbók*”.⁵⁷⁷ She suggests that the stanzas may have been inspired by the prose, potentially composed after the saga was written.⁵⁷⁸ Lucy Anne Keens has commented that “[i]f

⁵⁷⁶ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 23.

⁵⁷⁷ Guðrún Nordal, “The Dialogue between Audience and Text: The Variants in Verse Citations in *Njáls saga*’s Manuscripts”, 193.

⁵⁷⁸ Guðrún Nordal, “The Dialogue between Audience and Text: The Variants in Verse Citations in *Njáls saga*’s Manuscripts”, 192.

this were the case, the delight in suggestive metaphor reveals how Unnr’s disclosure captured the imagination of later audiences.”⁵⁷⁹

Echoes between the verse and the prose do not in themselves prove that the verse was based on the prose, however. It is also possible that the surrounding prose was influenced by, or based on, knowledge of pre-existing verses. Though most scholars have concluded that the so-called additional verses were written and inserted later, it is unlikely that we can ever be sure of the exact relationship. Mǫrðr’s request for clarification or elaboration (“Hversu má svo vera? ... og seg enn gerr”), which appears in both versions, does potentially make more sense as a response to the verses, since Unnr’s prose statement in *Gráskinna*, that precedes Mǫrðr’s question, is already fairly clear about what the problem is: “Ek vilda segja skilit við Hrút, ok má ek segja þér, hverja sök ek má helzt gefa honum. Hann má ekki hjúskaparfar eiga við mik, svá at ek mega njóta hans, en hann er at allri náttúru sinni annarri sem inir vǫskustu menn.” (I want to be divorced from Hrútr, and I will tell you what charge I have, most of all, against him. He is not able to have intercourse with me, in a way that I may enjoy him, though in all other ways his nature is as manly as other men.)⁵⁸⁰ Ursula Dronke highlights Mǫrðr’s reputation as a lawyer when she writes that he “insists on a precise, unevasive statement – *seg enn gerr* – such as the law can use. So Unnr spells out her meaning to him.”⁵⁸¹ However, Unnr’s prose statement is already explicit about the nature of the problem, clearly specifying Hrútr’s inability to have intercourse with her in a way that gives her pleasure. As a response to two *dróttkvætt* stanzas with a number of kennings and complex word order, Mǫrðr’s request for clarification seems more appropriate.

⁵⁷⁹ Lucy Anne Keens, “Scenes of a sexual nature: theorising representations of sex and the sexual body in the Sagas of the Icelanders”, PhD thesis (University College London, 2016), 147.

⁵⁸⁰ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 24.

⁵⁸¹ Ursula Dronke, *The role of sexual themes in Njáls saga*, 9.

Regardless of when and how the verses were added (or omitted), the inclusion of the verses in *Reykjabók* (and related manuscripts) deepens both Unnr's characterization, and the depiction of the relationship between her and her father. Guðrún Nordal comments that "the stanzas give her [Unnr] a chance to speak her mind; without them she is a silent victim."⁵⁸² The verses also provide Unnr with a way to broach a delicate and potentially embarrassing topic in a less blunt way. She was not able to discuss it with her father on her first attempt (perhaps due to shame and embarrassment) and is – as O'Donoghue notes – "intimidated by the men who arranged the marriage."⁵⁸³ On the second attempt, she resorts to the somewhat cryptic medium of skaldic verse, often a medium for men in the sagas to express deep-seated emotion. Finally (after her father does not seem to understand her verses), she explains the problem in straightforward, blunt prose. If this is indeed a revision of an original prose text, it is highly skillful one.

Throughout *Njáls saga*, the impact that a happy or unhappy marriage can have on the stability of the larger community is repeatedly made clear. It is not said that Unnr was ever consulted before her betrothal to Hrútr; the matter is arranged by Hǫskuldr (Hrútr's brother), Hrútr, and Mǫrðr. Similarly, Hǫskuldr arranges his daughter Hallgerðr's first marriage (to Þorvaldr) without consulting her; this too goes very badly for Þorvaldr and for the families involved. Unnr eventually remarries, but even then it seems she cannot win: the saga (and her relatives) roundly condemn her for marrying Valgarðr without consulting her kinsmen, and their son becomes one of the primary antagonists of the second half of the saga. Andrew Hamer has identified symmetries in the story of Hrútr and Unnr, writing that "[a]n overall reverse parallelism marks their sexual histories, to the extent that it argues deliberate authorial planning.

⁵⁸² Guðrún Nordal, "Attraction of Opposites: Skaldic Verse in *Njáls saga*", in *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. Pernille Hermann (Odense, 2005), 227.

⁵⁸³ Heather O'Donoghue, "Women in *Njáls saga*", in *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*, ed. John Hines and Desmond Slay (London, 1992), 85.

The stages of those histories are arranged around the divorce and its immediate consequence, Unnr's financial hardship".⁵⁸⁴ Hamer reads the episode as "the first in an escalating series of conflicts which embroil, and ultimately destroy, Gunnarr and Njáll": not merely a prefatory episode, but one which prefigures and foreshadows the larger conflict.⁵⁸⁵

The survival of Unnr's verses in *Reykjabók* and other manuscripts from roughly the same time frame suggests that at least some writers or copyists felt similarly, and chose to highlight the importance of this episode. Verse is used sparingly in *Njáls saga*, with other stanzas often clustered around critical moments of tension or conflict. For instance, two stanzas mark Gunnarr's death: one composed by Þorkell Elfaraskáld about Gunnarr's last stand (which is introduced using the standard formula often used for evidentiary verses),⁵⁸⁶ and one spoken by Gunnarr's ghost at his burial mound, which is apparently witnessed by Skarpheðinn and Hogni.⁵⁸⁷ As discussed earlier in this chapter, a cluster of verses (culminating with Steinunn's verses to Þangbrandr) highlight the rising tension between Christian and pagan Icelanders. A dream-verse, spoken by an unnamed man in Hildiglúmr's dream, is interpreted by Hjalti as a portent of disaster, and foreshadows the imminent execution of Flosi's plans against Njáll.⁵⁸⁸ Two stanzas also mark the burning of Njáll's house (in a pattern that mirrors those about Gunnarr's death): one by Mórðólfr Ketilsson, spoken after Flosi and the Sigfússons have just learned that Kári escaped (and thus that they are not safe, and that the cycle of vengeance will continue),⁵⁸⁹ and a second by Skarpheðinn, or Skarpheðinn's ghost, from amid the flames of the

⁵⁸⁴ Andrew Hamer, *Njáls saga and its Christian Background: A Study of Narrative Method* (Leuven, 2014), 85.

⁵⁸⁵ Andrew Hamer, *Njáls saga and its Christian Background: A Study of Narrative Method*, 74-75.

⁵⁸⁶ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 190.

⁵⁸⁷ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 193.

⁵⁸⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 321.

⁵⁸⁹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 335.

burning house.⁵⁹⁰ Other verses, spoken by Kári, mark critical stages of his quest for vengeance for Njáll's death.

The additional verses in *Reykjabók* are, aside from Unnr's, largely spoken by Gunnarr (arguably the main protagonist of the first section of the saga, which indeed has been termed Gunnarr's saga) and Njáll's son Skarpheðinn, a noted poet.⁵⁹¹ Unnr's plight, and her failed relationship with Hrútr, clearly not only captured later authors' imaginations but was also seen (by at least the compiler(s) or author(s) of *Reykjabók* and *Kálfalækjarbók*) as a crucial turning point that had a major impact on later events in the saga. The kennings and language of the verses, while poignant and particularly appropriate for the subject matter, are very much in the vein of skaldic tradition: Unnr describes Hrútr, for instance, as the "silfra sundrhreyti" (distributor of silver, a kenning for generous man) and an "álmur eggþings" (elm of swordplay, a kenning for warrior). While Guðrún Nordal highlights that these verses are "explicit in their sexual longing" in a way that is unique for verses spoken by women within the skaldic corpus,⁵⁹² such open longing and explicit discussion of sexual themes is a regular theme for male poets. Kormákr, for instance, openly expresses his desire for Steingerðr repeatedly and enthusiastically throughout *Kormáks saga*. To cite only a single example, when the two reunite in Miðfjörðr, and are obliged to sleep separately (Steingerðr is married to another man at the time) Kormákr speaks a sexually explicit verse about how much he has previously enjoyed sharing Steingerðr's bed.⁵⁹³

⁵⁹⁰ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 336.

⁵⁹¹ Guðrún Nordal includes a table listing all the additional verses (and some of the manuscripts in which they appear) in "The Dialogue between Audience and Text: The Variants in Verse Citations in *Njáls saga*'s Manuscripts", 187. Also see *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 465-480.

⁵⁹² Guðrún Nordal, "The Dialogue between Audience and Text: The Variants in Verse Citations in *Njáls saga*'s Manuscripts", 194.

⁵⁹³ See in particular verse 59. *Kormáks saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík, 1939), 272-273. For a much more detailed discussion of Kormákr's verses throughout the saga, and Kormákr's relationship with Steingerðr, see Heather O'Donoghue, *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in Kormáks Saga* (Oxford, 1991).

In short, sexual longing as a topic for skaldic composition is not unusual, though Unnr's verses represent a singular example of this from a woman.

Conclusion

Robert Cook has described *Njáls saga* as “virtually obsessed with sex and marriage and divorce and sexual innuendo and ambiguity and identity.”⁵⁹⁴ Nowhere is this complexity and this focus clearer than in the poetry, spoken by women, that has been integrated into the text. From Unnr, to Þórhildr, to Steinunn, to the valkyries of the *Darraðarljóð*, the compiler(s) of *Njáls saga* have included an astonishing range of verses with a wide variety of effects.

Throughout this chapter, it has become clear that though women's verses differ, stylistically, very little from their male contemporaries, the reception of these verses (both within their prose contexts, and sometimes by later scholars) has often been strongly influenced by the speakers' gender. Can we discern a distinctive ‘women's voice’? No, but what we do see is far more interesting: a multitude of women, shown to adopt a largely male genre, for an incredibly diverse range of purposes. Rather than a unified ‘women's voice’ we see many, many different women's voices, each influenced by their own circumstances and shown to wield verse in pursuit of their own goals. It is likely that this engagement with poetry was even more widespread than we can now document. As Guðrún P. Helgadóttir writes, “[í] Skáldatali og fleiri heimildum er nefndur fjöldi skálda, sem ekkert hefur varðveitt eftir, en staðfestir aðeins það, að sá skáldskapur, sem menn hafa nú í höndum og öldur tímans hafa náðarsamlegast skolað á fjörur okkar, er aðeins brot þess, er var.”⁵⁹⁵ (In *Skáldatal* and other sources, there are named a number

⁵⁹⁴ Robert Cook, “Gunnarr and Hallgerðr: A Failed Romance”, in *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland*, eds. Kirsten Wolf, Johanna Denzin, and Marianne E. Kalinke (Ithaca, 2008), 6. Also see Ursula Dronke, *The role of sexual themes in Njáls saga*.

⁵⁹⁵ Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, *Skaldkonur fyrri alda*, Volume 1 (Akureyri, 1961), 12.

of skalds, from whom nothing has been preserved, but that only confirms, that the poetry that men now have in their hands, and that the waves of time have washed up on our shores, is only a fraction of what once was).

General conclusion

Verse is a particularly powerful mode of expression, one that Old Norse-Icelandic authors at various times associated with authority, with prophecy, with wisdom, with danger, with emotional intensity, with defiance, with yearning, and with history. Whether included within longer poems, or within prose texts, women's poetic speeches mark turning points, foreshadow future events, build relationships, and engage with major social, political, and religious issues.

Some voices are strongly prophetic (and not only those in eddic-style metres). Some retain aspects of a prophetic nature while simultaneously fulfilling other functions with a text. Some express romantic or sexual yearning. Some are unexpectedly conventional, in their adaptation of the forms – and masculine norms – of *dróttkvætt*, and their attribution has been questioned as a result. Others break those forms, and have too often been condemned as inauthentic and therefore uninteresting. These verses reveal women's struggles, and allow them to express themselves.

The verses examined in this thesis also reveal that women's engagement with poetic expression was a site of ongoing tension and debate throughout many texts. Verse is a key way that women in Old Norse-Icelandic texts are shown to actively push back against patriarchal restrictions and gender norms. It is a medium in which they are shown to fight back, speak out, and claim agency and autonomy within frequently difficult situations. While women's poetic speeches were not always effective, or condoned by either their audience within the story or the compiler who recorded their verses, nonetheless their voices survive. The verses attributed to them allow them to advocate for themselves, their families, and their loved ones.

A few common themes have emerged throughout this work. One is the effectiveness of verses in revealing or highlighting power dynamics within a prose text, and the extent to which otherwise marginalized characters can gain influence through verse. Whose verses survive? Who gets the last word, in a poetic confrontation? Whose verses are the most skillful, and the most memorable? The answers to all of these questions matter, and should affect how we interpret a prose text. In addition, we have seen the tensions these verses illuminate between the pagan and the Christian, and the natural and the supernatural. These are not simple binaries; the analysis in this thesis reveals complex, shifting dynamics and ongoing societal debates.

This is not a complete or comprehensive survey. There are many more voices to be heard, and stories to be told. There is Gerðr, unhappily propositioned by Skirnir on behalf of the god Freyr;⁵⁹⁶ there are the enslaved women Fenja and Menja of *Grottasöngur*, forced to work at a mill until they finally break it; there is the unnamed priestess identified only as the wife of Álfr, in *Qrvar-Odds saga*, who summons magical arrows to defend her people and castigates Oddr for following the wrong gods; there is the dialogue between women in *Guðrúnarkviða I*, when Guðrún's grief for Sigurðr is so great that she cannot weep, and her sisters and friends seek to help her; there is the woman in *Vitnisvísur af Mاریu* who asks for (and successfully elicits) the testimony of the Virgin Mary herself, to resolve her grievance against a man who pledged to marry her and then attempted to abandon the arrangement after consummating it; there is the advice of Hervor Hundingjadóttir to the heroes of *Hjálmpés saga ok Olvis*; there are the verses of Kráka-Áslaug that praise her fallen son and stepsons in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. There is a large corpus of verses spoken by trollwomen, giantesses, goddesses, valkyries, and Christian saints.

⁵⁹⁶ See Carolyn Larrington, "'What Does Woman Want?' Mær und munr in *Skirnismál*", *Alvissmál* 1 (1992), 3-16.

These, and the many other verses spoken by women in Old Norse-Icelandic texts, also deserve scholarly attention.

Though this study has not been able to discuss all of these remarkable voices, I hope it has nonetheless shed some light on the multiplicity and diversity of reasons that women speak verse, or are represented as speaking verse, in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and on the range of structural and literary effects that these verses can have within their textual context.

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