

WOMEN WITH DOGS IN OLD NORSE–ICELANDIC LITERATURE

By ASHLEY CASTELINO

University of Oxford

Old Norse–Icelandic literature is full of dogs. As the animals closest to humans, they can be found across all genres, living, travelling, fighting, hunting, guarding, eating, and even sleeping alongside human companions. The majority of these human–dog interactions, however, appear to be associated with male characters in the corpus and it is much rarer to find women directly interacting with dogs at all. This article attempts to explain such sparse women–dog interactions in the literary corpus, arguing that many saga narratives privilege male voices and stories. Even when texts do pair women with dogs, their relationships are less clearly defined and questions of ownership become particularly complex. It is nevertheless demonstrated that for the few Old Norse–Icelandic women who do have dogs, canine companionship functions as an important source of agency, status, power, and protection that shapes their roles within the narrative. Paying attention to dogs can therefore be instructive in understanding how texts and genres approach gender and other power dynamics.

In doing so, this article follows a methodological approach that Susan McHugh (2011, 5) has termed a ‘narrative ethology’, which she describes as ‘ongoing and systematic analysis of how forms of species remain embedded in storytelling processes’, suggesting ‘an irreducibly relational ethics’. By foregrounding dogs and other animals in textual analyses, one might as Lena Rohrbach (2009, 3) explains ‘eine neue Lesart der bekannten Erzählungen vorzunehmen, die neue Bezugssysteme und Diskurse in diesen Texten aufdeckt und damit zu einem tieferen Verständnis ihrer Bedeutungskonstituierung führt’ [undertake a new reading of the well-known stories, that uncovers new reference systems and discourses in these texts

and thus leads to a deeper understanding of how their meaning is constituted]. By exploring the literary functions of dogs in narratives of canine companionship in different genres of Old Norse–Icelandic literature, this article thus demonstrates how their presence and absence within texts is used to shape the roles that women play as well.

Ownership and companionship in Old Norse–Icelandic Literature

In order to understand the literary relationships between women and dogs, it is important to first define the parameters of human-dog relationships at the time. What did it mean, for instance, to “own” a dog in medieval Iceland? According to *Grágás*, the ‘Grey Goose’ collection of laws from the Icelandic Commonwealth, dogs as individuals have no ‘hælgí’, a term that in this context refers to legal immunity (Finsen 1852, II 187; cf. Evans Tang 2022, 132–33). The main implication of this statement in these laws is that a dog is not responsible for its own actions, but is the responsibility of a human (referred to as *maðr*, which may or may not be gendered). *Grágás* defines the terms of such responsibility in the following way (Finsen 1852, II 188):

Sa er hund leysir eða fer með at hann vill ser láta fylgia þa abyrgiz sa þo at anar maðr eigi. Ef hundr jømr ifor með manne oc biðr hann mat gefa honom eða syslir vm hann er þeir coma til húss. þa abyrgiz hann hund þótt anar eigi.

One who lets a dog loose or treats it such that he is willing to have it accompany him makes himself responsible for it even if another man owns it. If a dog joins a man on a journey and he asks for food to be given to it or takes care of it when they come to a house, then he makes himself responsible for it even if another man owns it.¹

This passage appears to establish two models of responsibility for dogs that we may tentatively apply to the literary corpus, the first based on ownership and the second on subsequent care for the animal. The terms of the former are not defined, but we may at least consider ownership marked by the term ‘eiga’. Across the corpus under consideration, there

¹ All translations of Old Norse texts (and of modern commentary) are my own.

are at least 14 characters who are said to *eiga* dogs.² All are male, with the sole exception of Queen Ólöf of *Hrólfs saga kraka og kappa hans* who, it is simply stated, *átti hund þann, er Yrsa hét* ‘had a dog who was called Yrsa’ (*Hrólfs saga kraka* 1944, 18). A similar way of registering ownership of a dog is through the use of the genitive, of which there are at least 32 further instances, including two dogs potentially owned by women. Hlaðgerðr refers to a dog in *Ála flekks saga* as *skikkjurakka minn* ‘my *skikkjurakki*’ (Hui et al. 2018, 22) (the term being explored further below) and a toy likeness of an important dog in *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* is said to be *rakki hennar* ‘her [Ísönd’s] dog’ (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 186).

The literary corpus, however, contains many more instances where clear relationships exist between people and dogs, even if ownership is not explicitly declared, and these relationships do play significant roles in the narrative. In considering the literary functions of dogs, this article will thus move away from thinking about ownership in a strictly legal-historical sense — if such a sense were to exist at all — and will instead take into account broader forms of human-dog companionship. The use of “companionship” here is not limited to how one might think of non-functional “pets” or “companion animals” in the modern sense of the word, but also includes dogs as companions on the hunt, in battle, and on the farm.³ Indeed, the parameters of such companionship in an Old Norse–Icelandic context may be defined according to the terms of responsibility laid out in the above *Grágas* clause. Including instances where humans (or humanoids) leash or loose dogs, are accompanied by them on journeys or in a house, or provide food or other forms of care to the animals, at least 137 examples of canine companionship might be identified in the literary corpus under consideration, some fleeting mentions and others more significant in the narrative.

² This figure and all figures henceforth include dogs in eddic and skaldic poetry, family sagas, contemporary sagas, kings’ sagas, legendary sagas, romances, and a range of different Christian texts, while acknowledging the fluidity of boundaries between genre definitions. Canine hybrids and dogs in kennings, metaphors, insults, and names are excluded. Any repetitions of episodes across different texts are counted as single occurrences.

³ Joyce E. Salisbury (2022, 140), for instance, defines pets as those animals ‘that did no work and that were pampered in their idleness’.

Of these 137 instances, only 17 (12.4%) involve female characters in some way.⁴ This includes canine interactions in *Vǫlsa þáttr*, *Janual*, *Eskia*, *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, *Samsons saga fagra*, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, *Hávamál*, *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, *Ála flekks saga*, *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (and the Latin *Gesta Danorum*), *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Skírnismál*, *Fjölsvinnsmál*, *Mariú saga*, and *Atlakviða*. It will furthermore be seen throughout this article that questions of ownership and companionship are especially complex in many of these cases as there is some unease about straightforwardly depicting women with dogs. It is therefore useful to pay attention to how different texts and genres of texts choose to frame the relationships and interactions between women and dogs, and how this framing shapes the roles of both sides in the narrative.

Hunting hounds as status symbols

Writing about royal tomb effigies in Saint-Denis, Donna Sadler (2016, 267–68) notes that the advent of the dog in Europe ‘as beloved domestic pet of both men and women occurred gradually over the medieval period, but was an established fact of noble life by the fourteenth century.’ According to Sadler (2016, 267), one of the most significant stimuli for this shift in perceptions was the advent of hunting and its eventual movement ‘from a means to subsistence’ to ‘a sport for the noble classes’. This is reflected in much of the courtly

⁴ This is an especially low ratio when compared to Viking Age and medieval archaeological records. In her extensive zooarchaeological study of dogs and horses in early medieval cemeteries, Wietske Prummel (1992, 141) has listed 103 burials in Northern Europe including both dogs and humans where the sex of the human could be determined. Of these, 22 graves (21%) included dogs and women together, 15 of which were purely female graves with no men. Even more striking is a review by Rúnar Leifsson of 32 Viking Age burials in Iceland with recorded dog bones. The burials where the sexing of remains has been possible include ‘five to seven probable female burials and eight to ten probably male burials [...], which is a similar ratio as between male and female burials altogether’, plus two burials that might have contained both sexes (Rúnar Leifsson 2018, 269–70). It is worth noting that traditional techniques used in the gendering and sexing of graves can be unreliable and most of these sites are not contemporary with the literary corpus, but the comparison might nevertheless be useful in highlighting the scarcity of women–dog literary relationships.

literature of medieval Europe, including in many of the Old Norse–Icelandic *konungasögur* composed during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries and in *riddarasögur* translated from continental romances around the same time. In both genres, dogs appear most frequently in the hunting parties of kings, earls, and other members of the nobility to the extent that they may be read, in the words of Joel Savishinsky (1983, 118), as ‘a kind of living heraldry, an animated, almost totemic symbol of class and group identity.’ As Sophia Menache (2000, 42–43) has noted, hunting and hunting dogs were not just symbols of class but also gender, as the participation of women in medieval European hunting spaces was marginal. Of all the hunting episodes in both genres, women are notably absent.

The function of dogs in these genres occasionally also extends to other forms of entertainment (such as accompanying jugglers in *Sverris saga* (2007, 130–31) and participating in bearbaiting in *Piðreks saga af Bern* (1951, 209)), tracking, and torturing enemies. In a few cases, men of high status like King Óláfr I of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (*Flateyjarbók* 1944–45; see, e.g., I 166) and Partalópi of *Partalópa saga* (1949) are accompanied by loyal dogs throughout their sagas. In most of these cases, the primary function of the dog is as a symbol of status and wealth. This is well illustrated visually too, such as in multiple illuminations in the late fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók* manuscript (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, GKS 1005 fol.). A historiated initial on 5v depicts a king with crown and sword, an attendant with a bowl on one side and a dog on the other; another on 69r depicts another high-status man with a sword and shield, flanked by a woman and a dog. The fine attire, swords, and choice of companions are all signs of the high status of the men being depicted, and the dogs form an important part of that.

The latter illumination is also revealing in its construction of the relationship between woman and dog. The man (probably Jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson) is looking forward at the viewer, but both the woman and the dog have their eyes directed towards him. Even though they exist

in the same space, there is no sense of any direct interaction between woman and dog in this illustration, their experiences mediated by the man in the middle. This positioning is emblematic of the relationship between women and dogs in the Old Norse–Icelandic corpus, particularly in the *konungasögur* where out of around 22 cases of human-dog companionship, one alone includes a woman. This single episode comes from *Flateyjarbók*’s *Vqlsa þáttr*. The *þáttr* relates how King Óláfr Haraldsson goes to a remote house to convert its inhabitants, a family who worships a horse phallus. The dog in this episode is not associated with the King, but with the strange family. It is a large *etjutík* ‘female hound’ named Lærir, whom Óláfr ends up throwing the phallus down to. The matriarch of the house becomes extremely agitated in response, declaring (*Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, II 445):

Hvat er þat manna
mer okunnra,
er hundum gefr
hæilagt bleti?
[...]
legg þu niðr Lærir,
ok lat mig æigi sia,
ok suelg æigi niðr
sartikin rög.

Who is this man, unknown to me, who gives this holy idol to dogs? Put it down, Lærir, and do not let me see it, and do not swallow it, you dastardly *sártikin*!

This is significant, being a rare example of a woman directly and explicitly communicating with a dog. Lærir is described as the *hundr hiona* ‘dog of the household’, living in the same quarters as the woman, and this interaction makes it clear that she is just as much, if not more, the woman’s dog as of any other male member of the family. That said, their interaction is not a positive one. The exact meaning of *sártikin* (literally ‘wound-bitch’) is unclear but it is likely insulting in some way. Unlike other companions of nobility, this dog

does not work as a symbol of high status. Quite the contrary, the hostile interaction only augments the strangeness of the woman and her family.

Dogs were somewhat more widely associated with aristocratic women in medieval Continental Europe and this is reflected in a few *riddarasögur* translated into Old Norse–Icelandic, though in just three dog–human episodes out of 43. For instance, in the tale of *Janual* (Lanval) in the *Strengleikar* collection, the protagonist Janual is on trial needing to prove the incomparable beauty of his lover, a fairy maiden. This is finally achieved when

kom riðande um enndilangan bæen ein sva frið mæR a sva goðum hesti. [...]. Mæren bar sparháuc a hœgre hendi sinni. ok fylgdi henni einn hunndr. En fegrð ok heyveskleic hennar þarf ei aðra leið geta en fyrr er sagt. (Cook and Tveitane 1979, 224)

a maiden so beautiful came riding through the whole town on such a good horse. The maiden was carrying a sparrowhawk on her right hand and a dog was following her. Of her beauty and courtesy there is no need to say more than what is said before.

The trifacta of horse, hawk, and hound is a classic combination signalling high status and wealth in these kinds of texts. One of the best analogues is in *Þiðreks saga*, where Duke Alibrandr is depicted in a very similar manner (*Þiðreks saga* 1951, 549–50):

Þá ríðR einn maðR í mót honum með tvá hunda, ok á vinstri hlið hefir hann einn hauk. Sá maðR er mikill á hestbaki ok sitR hæverskliga sinn hest. Hann hefir hvítan hest ok hvíta alla hernesku.

Then a man rides towards him with two dogs, and on his left side he has a hawk. The man is tall on horseback and sits courteously on his horse. He has a white horse and entirely white armour.

For both characters, the animals are signs of their courtesy, a term usually used in courtly contexts to describe the high chivalric status and comportment of men and women. The fact that the fairy-maiden has a sparrowhawk of all birds is a nod as well to the higher-class pastime of hunting. Of course, the text does not go as far as to show the fairy maiden actually participating in a hunt, but the three animals as symbols are enough to prove her beauty and save her lover — the text need not say any more. Importantly, the fairy-maiden must prove that she is more beautiful than Guinevere or any other woman in Arthur's court and so the

animals are even more significant as status symbols usually otherwise limited to men in the narrative.

Strengleikar depicts another group of women sometimes associated with dogs in medieval Europe: nuns. The Old Norse tale of *Eskia* begins with a handmaiden fleeing with a child in order to save her from death. This handmaiden travels for a while through a forest until

høyrði hon miok fiarre a hægri hond hunda gauð ok hana galdr ok vœit hon af þui at þar man at visu bœr vera ok stefndi hon þa þangat með myklom skunda sem hon høyrði hundana gœyia. þui nest kom hon i æinn bæ rikan ok læynelegan. ok biuggu þar nunnur fyrir. ok abbadis yvir flokk þæirra. (Cook and Tveitane 1979, 48)

she heard very far away towards the right the barking of dogs and the crowing of cocks and she knew from this that there must be a town and she went in that direction with great speed to where she heard the dogs barking. Then she came to a rich and hidden farmstead where nuns lived, with an abbess over their flock.

By the handmaiden following the sound of barking out of the forest, the text thus uses the presence of domesticated dogs as an indication of human society. In this case, the society in question is a community of female nuns, led by an abbess, and it is therefore a reasonable assumption that the dogs are a part of this female community. Kathleen Walker-Meikle (2012, 68–72) has indeed described numerous instances of nuns in England being reprimanded for keeping dogs as pets, as well as several manuscript illustrations of nuns with dogs. The fact that the town is described as *rikr* ‘rich or powerful’ further aligns with the canine presence. Nevertheless, as is often the case, the text provides no further signs of direct interaction between the women and the dogs.

Perhaps the best-known dog in the romances is in *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, prepared at the court of King Hákon Hákonarson around 1226 and thought to be the first Norwegian translation of a French romance. Like many romances, *Tristrams saga* has numerous hunting scenes involving dogs, but standing out among them is a very special animal belonging to a duke in Poland. Even before it is introduced in the saga, the great value

of the dog is made clear when the duke first has his men lay out *eitt dýrligt pell* ‘a precious carpet’ for it to sit on (Jorgensen 1999, 152).⁵ The dog itself is said to be unlike any other (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 152):

Þat var undarliga fagrt kvikendi, svá at aldri var sá maðr fæddr, at skrá kynni né telja hagleik hans ne vöxt, því hvern veg, sem maðr leit at hundinum, þá sýndist hann svá mörgum litum, at engi kunni skynja né geyma.

It was an exceedingly beautiful creature, so that never has a man been born who could make known or communicate its style or stature, because whichever way a man looked at the dog, it displayed so many colours that nobody could perceive or recall them.

In addition to its many colours, this dog also has a golden chain and a wondrous bell around its neck. These special characteristics make the dog a dearest treasure to the protagonist Tristram, who asks for the animal as a reward for killing a giant. The duke reluctantly agrees and the dog now becomes the object of a long chain of gift-giving in the saga. It is said that the duke of Poland first received this dog from *Álfheimr* ‘Elf-world’, where *gaf þenna rakka hertuganum álfkona ein* ‘an elf-woman gave this dog to the duke’ (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 152). The duke then gifts the dog to Tristram as a reward, and Tristram proceeds to gift it to his beloved Ísönd. To facilitate this final transfer, Tristram sends the dog with a certain fiddler. This fiddler hands the dog over to Ísönd’s attendant Bringvet, who receives it *með miklum fagnaði ok mörgum þökkum, þvíat aldri mátti verða fríðari skepna* ‘with great joy and many thanks, because never could there be a more beautiful creature’ (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 158). Bringvet finally delivers the dog to Ísönd, for whom *var ... þessi sending kærust yfir alla hluti* ‘this gift was dearer than all other things’ (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 158).

Walker-Meikle (2012, 24–26) notes that pets were very common gifts between members of the noble class and especially between lovers in romance, and this practice is evident in other genres of Old Norse–Icelandic literature as well. Most similar to this episode of *Tristrams saga* is the legendary *Gautreks saga*, where a man named Refr helps King

⁵ Although translated here as ‘carpet’ the exact meaning of ‘pell’ is unclear, referring to some kind of costly textile.

Gautrekr by finding him a whetstone. King Gautrekr rewards him with a ring, which he then gives to King Ælla. In return, King Ælla gifts Refr a ship and two exceptionally pretty dogs that, very much like the duke's dog, *enga hafði Refr slíka sét* 'Refr had never seen the likes of' (*Gautreks saga* 1944, 35). These two dogs also come with golden halters and a golden chain. Refr finally gifts these dogs to King Hrólfr Kraki, who offers him many gifts including another ship and a golden helmet and coat of mail. In both these chains of gifting, it is made clear through every exchange that the dogs are precious gifts and symbols of wealth and status. It is usually the most noble of people who give and receive these gifts. The text goes out of its way to clarify that even the fiddler in *Tristrams saga* who has temporary control over the dog is *hinn kurteisasta mann, er þar mátti finna í öllu því hertugadæmi*, 'the most courteous man who could be found in all the duchy' (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 158). Where *Tristrams saga* most notably differs from *Gautreks saga*, however, is in including both men and women in this gift-giving ritual. Significantly, the canine gifting chain in *Tristrams saga* begins and ends with female characters, and both characters should therefore benefit from the power and status that goes along with dog ownership.

The question of ownership is, however, complicated by the saga when it comes to Ísönd. It is made quite clear in some ways that the dog should belong to her. Tristram procures it from the duke precisely so that he can gift it to his beloved. Ísönd personally rewards the fiddler for bringing the dog to her and has a house built out of gold for it, cementing her claim to the animal. The dog's identity becomes so attached to Ísönd that when Tristram later designs a beautiful statue of her, he makes sure to include beside it *af brendu gulli lítil skemtan, rakki hennar, höfuð sitt skakandi ok bjöllu sinni hringjandi* 'a little toy made of gold, her dog, shaking its head and ringing its bell' (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 186). However, it is exclusively in reference to this statue and toy that the saga refers to the dog as *rakki hennar*. Immediately after Ísönd first acquires the dog, the saga goes out of its way to

state that *hundr Tristrams* ‘Tristram’s dog’ did not stay at the court of Ísönd and her husband for very long; ‘*Vil ek nú, at þér vitið*’ ‘I want you to know now’, the narrator says in a rare third-person intervention (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 160). When Tristram and Ísönd later spend time together in the woods, the saga adds that *Tristram hafði þar með sér hund sinn, er honum var hinn kærasti* ‘Tristram had his dog there with him, the one that was dearest to him’ (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 160). In these small but significant ways, the Norwegian translation is therefore sending mixed messages about the ultimate ownership of the dog, perhaps slightly uneasy about the dog being with Ísönd rather than with the male protagonist.

The saga’s uncertainty about how to best approach the dog may be related to its function. The duke first presents the dog to Tristram to *hann ... skemta* ‘amuse him’ (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 152), and Tristram similarly wishes to acquire the dog *til skemtunar* ‘for the amusement’ (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 154) of Ísönd. The amusement provided by the dog is largely a result of its magical bell, a legacy of its elfish origins. It is said that *engi var sá lifandi maðr, er heyrði hljóð bjöllunar, at ekki mundi þegar huggaz af öllu hjarta af sínum harmi ok fyllaz fagnaðar ok gleði ok vilja enga skemtan aðra hafa* ‘there was no living man who heard the sound of the bell and would not immediately be comforted in his whole heart about his grief and be filled with joy and happiness, and would not wish to have any other amusement’ (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 152). Yet we are only told of Tristram being comforted by this bell and there is very little description in the saga of Ísönd interacting with the animal. Instead, after the dog is sent to Ísönd, the saga begins to emphasise hunting as its primary function and the language of ownership shifts back towards Tristram. When the dog is first described as *hundr Tristrams*, it is said that

vandiz hann í mörkum úti at veiða villisvín ok rauðdýri, þá er þau váru bæði þar, Tristram ok Ísönd. Þessi hundr tók hvert dýr, svá at hann slapp aldri til, ok svá sporvís, at hann spurði upp allar þjóðgötur ok farvega. (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 160)

it became used to hunting wild swine and red deer out in the forests when Tristram and Ísönd were both there. This dog caught every animal so that nothing escaped and it was so good at tracking that it found all roads and paths.

Similarly, when the dog is next described as Tristram's dearest animal, it is once again in the context of hunting. Although its hunting skills are used to provide food and entertainment for both Tristram and Ísönd, the text specifies that it is Tristram who *vandi ... rakkann fyrst at taka rauðdýri* 'first trained the dog to catch red deer' and Tristram who *veiddi ... þau svá mörg sem hann vildi* 'hunted as many of them as he wished' (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 160). The hunting skills of Tristram and this dog are furthermore directly juxtaposed against those of the king (Ísönd's current husband) and his huntsmen and hounds, who are described in very great detail in the long succeeding chapter as frequently losing the trail and failing to catch a single member of a large herd of deer. It can thus be seen that although the dog has technically been gifted to Ísönd by this point in the saga, it is nevertheless employed to elevate the status of Tristram, especially in comparison to his male rival. The text seems to acknowledge the possibility and, indeed, the normality of women owning dogs, but it is uninterested in exploring what that might mean for the character of Ísönd, instead focusing on its male protagonist. While the women of *Janual* and *Tristrams saga* do thus benefit somewhat from the high status of canine companionship, the latter nevertheless ensures the primacy of its male protagonist.

Displacing violence onto dogs

In addition to the many romances translated from other sources, the Old Norse–Icelandic corpus contains a number of original *riddarasögur* that blend the stylistic and thematic features of romances with those of other genres. Such blending is apparent in its use of dogs too, with a few hunting scenes but also other more fantastical episodes that will be seen below. There are not as many dogs in this genre, with only around 8 occurrences of human-

dog companionship, two involving women: *Samsons saga fagra* and *Ála flekks saga*. Rudolf Simek (1993, 565) sees two distinct halves to the late-fourteenth- or early-fifteenth-century *Samsons saga fagra*, the first ‘a romance in the Arthurian style, mingled with motifs from fairy tales’ and the second in a *fornaldarsaga* mode. It is in the former that we get a notable appearance from a dog. The dog in question is a *miohundr* ‘greyhound’ who *rann með* ‘ran with/accompanied’ Ólympia, sorcerous foster-mother of the protagonist Samson (*Samsons saga* 1953, 9). In this case, Ólympia uses her dog as a means of protecting not Samson but his beloved princess Valentina. Valentina is abducted by an evil harpist, but Ólympia saves her by substituting her with the dog (*Samsons saga* 1953, 9):

[H]un tok þrad ok bindur vm hals hundinum ok syndizt hann þa sem ein mey. hun visar honum nu epter þiofinum.

She took a thread and tied it around the dog’s neck and it then looked like a maiden. She sent it now to the thief.

Although the dog continues to behave like the animal it is, the disguise is visually convincing enough to trick the harpist who attempts to take it to bed with him, at which point the dog jumps out through the window. Ólympia then repeats a similar trick with a cat. This may be a rather fantastical scene, but substituting a human with a dog is in fact a motif that recurs in the corpus in a number of different forms.

To take one example from the same genre, the protagonist of *Drauma-Jóns saga* (-1951, 160) is saved from having his heart cut out and eaten by using a dog’s heart instead. There is a similar episode in *Þiðreks saga* (1951, 229) where a dog’s tongue is cut out instead of that of Queen Sisibe. Both episodes may be considered examples of a popular fairy-tale motif common across western Europe, titled ‘Compassionate executioner: substituted heart’ (K512.2) in Thompson’s index (Thompson 1955–58, IV 304–05). More broadly speaking, displacing violence onto dogs to protect humans, especially women, is a motif found across multiple genres of Old Norse–Icelandic literature. In the legendary *Hervarar saga ok*

Heiðreks (1943, 210–11), for instance, it is not just part of a dog but the whole animal that is wrapped in a cloth in imitation of a dead child. This is done by a queen who does not want to get into trouble with her husband for losing her stepson, but of course the dog is not a convincing enough replacement. There is a double layer of displacement here, as the dog is not just a substitute for the young prince but is also killed in the hopes of saving the queen from her husband's anger.

There is a closer analogue to *Samsons saga* in the Eddic poem *Hávamál*. This poem contains a short episode where the god Óðinn attempts to seduce a woman in a so-called 'love quest'. The woman in question is unnamed, referred to only as *Billings mey (mær)* (*Eddukvæði* 2014, I 341). The character Billigr is largely unattested to elsewhere in the corpus but suggested by John Lindow (2002, 79–80) to be either a dwarf or a giant. Most translations of *mær* interpret the woman as Billigr's daughter, although Nordal (1936, 290) suggests understanding her as Billigr's wife. In a way, being a queen, 'härskarinnan, som vet att ta vara på sig själv' [the ruler who knows how to take care of herself], gives the woman greater agency, but Nordal's (1936, 290) suggestion that Óðinn 'ville locka kvinnan att bedraga sin man' [wanted to seduce the woman to deceive her husband] detracts from that. The key point here is that the woman, daughter or wife of Billigr, is unmoved by Óðinn's wooing.

Despite her disinclination, the woman has no choice but to instruct Óðinn to come to her room at night. However, when Óðinn does so, he relates that

grey eitt ek þá fann

innar góðu konu

bundit beðjum á. (*Eddukvæði* 2014, I 342)

I then found a bitch bound to the bed of the fair woman.

The fact that Billingsr's *mær* herself remains unnamed and becomes the unwilling object of Óðinn's affections would seem to deprive her of any personal agency in this narrative, but she is able to reclaim her agency by leaving a dog in her place. She could indeed have left anything in her bed, animate or inanimate, or simply left it empty, but the choice of a dog speaks volumes given the connotations of sexual lasciviousness associated with female dogs and the misogyny sometimes inherent in the term 'grey'. Although McKinnell (2007, 109) suggests that this episode is 'illustrating the unreliability of women towards men', at least in Óðinn's first-person telling of it, it is Óðinn himself whose sexual impropriety might be best compared to the animal and who is foiled by its use. Nordal (1936, 291) therefore describes the use of a dog as 'et grovt hån' [a gross mockery]. McKinnell (2007, 109) and Ursula Dronke (2011, 42) both read this episode as comic, perhaps an attempt to make the god more relatable, Dronke speculating that the 'story of the offer of a dog instead of a woman probably became a great joke.' It is nonetheless telling about attitudes towards both dogs and women and the comparisons drawn between them in literature of this kind.

Dronke further compares this episode to one in the so-called *samtíðarsaga* ('contemporary saga'), *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, in which a priest conceals a woman from the man wooing her, ultimately sending him away with a dog instead and composing a *lausavísa* that ends (*Hrafns saga* 1987, 15):

En hqfðu heim
þat er hæfði þeim:
var hundr í fqr
með hjálma bqr.

But they took home what was fitting for them: a dog was in the company of the man.

While there is a mocking tone to the poet's statement that the dog was more fitting for the man, it is nevertheless true that a dog (especially a male one, as opposed to the bed-bound *grey*) is a good choice of companion and the man may thus allay his growing *sût* 'grief'. In

all of the above episodes, a dog is therefore a perfect tool to protect a woman, but sometimes at the animal's expense.

A different example of deflected violence can be seen in the early fourteenth-century legendary *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* in the court of Hjørleifr, king of Hordaland in Norway. Hjørleifr has two wives, Hildr and Æsa, and a dog named Flóki. It is said that one evening,

Kertisveinar glímdu ok slöktu ljósin. Í því bili sló Hildr horni á skikkju Æsu. Konungr sló hana með hendi sinni, en Hildr sagði hundinn valda, er lá á gólfinu. Þá laust konungr hundinn. (*Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* 1944, 164)

The link-boys were wrestling and put the lights out. At that moment, Hildr struck a corner of Æsa's cloak. The king struck her with his hand, but Hildr said that the dog who lay on the floor had done it. Then the king struck the dog.

This is a particularly interesting case as Hildr is not so much deflecting the king's violence as she is duplicating it. The primary narrative function of blaming Flóki is more to set up a parallel between woman and dog, both struck by the king and both eventually saving the king's life (as prophesised at this point by a laughing merman in the room). Despite this parallel, it is noticeable once again that there is no direct communication between the two women and the dog, even though they all clearly share a common space in the hall. Their only interaction is mediated through the king, just like the illumination in *Flateyjarbók*. Indeed, in most of these examples of deflected violence, the relationship between woman and dog is never explicitly defined by the texts. In *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, the text provides no details about where the dog was procured from or by whom. In *Hrafn's saga*, the dog could have been attached to the woman or the priest but, in any case, ends up with a new owner. Although a better case might be made for Billingr's *mær* owning the dog, binding the animal to the bed in the way she does means that their relationship in this episode is also one characterised by violence.⁶ It is only *Samsons saga*, perhaps drawing on its romance

⁶ There is a possibility that the dog was bound to a bedpost rather than on the bed, but this is strongly refuted by Gering (1927, 125) who references the fact that dogs are elsewhere said to not bark at Óðinn so this strategy would not work, and the woman using the dog as a means of trickery rather than physical protection does indeed suit the narrative better. Nordal (1936, 291) further argues that it is not the woman but Óðinn himself who binds the animal to the bed by sorcery, intending to do the same to Billingr's *mær* but being foiled by 'magisk

influences, where the dog is more explicitly associated with its female companion. In all these cases however, whether the relationship between dog and woman is positive or negative and whoever ultimately owns the dog, the animal is a useful tool in protecting the woman.

Canine gifts from troll-women

The early-fifteenth-century *Ála flekks saga* is often seen to contain a blend of *riddarasaga* and *fornaldarsaga* features (Hui et al 2018, 3–8). The latter is emphasised in the protagonist Áli's encounters with a *tröllkona* 'troll-woman' Nótt and her daughter (by a human man) Hlaðgerðr. Hlaðgerðr fears that Áli will end up trapped inside her mother's cave but has a plan to save him, explaining (Hui et al. 2018, 22):

‘Þá skal ek senda þér skikkjurakka minn með þá hluti, er þér þarfaz, ok með því einu muntu lauss verða, at hann leysi þik út. En ef hann ferr með flesk af svíni, þá tak þat; er þú kemr upp á þat fjall, er fyrir ofan er helli Nóttar, legg þat niðr í gøtuna, ok mun hon þá ekki eptir þér fara.’

‘Then I will send you my *skikkjurakki* with those things that you need, and you can only become free in this way, by him letting you out. And if he comes with the flesh of a pig, then take it; when you come up onto the mountain that is above Nótt's cave, lay it down on the path and she will not go after you.

The term *skikkjurakki* is rare and its meaning unclear. Sigfús Blöndal (1920–24, 722), Geir Zoëga (1910, 373), and Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon (1957, 545) translate it as ‘lap-dog’ and Fritzner (1886, III 318) as ‘stjððehund’ (a service dog of some kind). Hui et al. (2018, 22), however, point out that other attestations of the term do not suit modern nonfunctional connotations of ‘lap-dog’, suggesting other possibilities including ‘a dog who follows by its master's cloak or, perhaps more metaphorically, a dog who watches its master's back closely’ and ‘a type of dog with a saddle coloured differently to the rest of its body’. Unfortunately, the uncertainty surrounding the term makes it difficult to judge the precise nature of the relationship between Hlaðgerðr and her hound or whether the dog has

substitution’ (‘magical substitution’).

any specific function as a companion animal. Nevertheless, perhaps the most significant word in the passage is the *minn* ‘my’ of *skikkjarakka minn*, which states without any doubt that the dog, whatever its role, does belong to the woman. This dog is only temporarily sent to aid Áli and, even as it does so, it is referred to as *skikkjurakki Hlaðgerðar* ‘Hlaðgerðr’s *skikkjurakki*’ (Hui et al. 2018, 24). Moreover, the dog is not mentioned at all in the saga after helping Áli, the implication here being that it returns to its original owner rather than staying with the male hero.

Events do indeed come to pass as Hlaðgerðr predicted. Áli is trapped inside Nótt’s cave, but is rescued by Hlaðgerðr’s dog who *hafði gqrt rauf á berginu með trýninu* ‘had made a hole in the rock with his snout’. The dog’s incredible strength is somewhat unnatural and therefore fitting its association with Hlaðgerðr and her supernatural lineage. The dog is furthermore sent with good food and fine clothes on its back for Áli. Hlaðgerðr sending her dog to save Áli from danger, as well as using the animal to feed and clothe the protagonist, is a very clear expression of her own power. Moreover, it is through her dog that she is able to distance herself from her *tröll* mother and express her own individual agency.

A similar episode involving a female character offering canine aid can be found in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, a saga often considered by critics to be on the ‘periphery’ of the genre of family sagas known as the *Íslendingasögur*, but including many *fornaldarsaga* elements and motifs (cf. Ármann Jakobsson 1998, 53). This dog is named Snati and is companion to Gestr, protagonist of the second half of the saga. Snati accompanies Gestr for most of his narrative and is an invaluable aid when it comes to fighting trolls and other supernatural adversaries. However, Gestr was not Snati’s first companion. The dog was first introduced at the Yule feast of a *tröllkona* ‘tröll-woman’ Hít, who is said to live in a cave named Hundahellir (*Bárðar saga* 1991, 142). Hundahellir is situated near the bottom of the mountain Bæjarfell, just north of Hítardalr in west Iceland, the landscape situating this

episode firmly within a legendary world of trolls, giants, and other supernatural beings. The name of the cave itself suggests that the dog is important to Hít, central to her identity in this saga.

Also attending Hít's feast is the *purs* (a supernatural being often translated as 'giant') Kolbjörn, who is tripped by Gestr in the middle of a game, leading to a violent scuffle that ends with Kolbjörn swearing vengeance on Gestr. The feast is broken up but, before Gestr leaves, Hít gives him the dog Snati. Hít's motivations behind this gift are left unexplained. Perhaps this was done out of respect or fear of Bárðr of whom, it is said, *allir pursar váru ... hræddir* 'all the *pursar* were afraid' (*Bárðar saga* 1991, 145). Or perhaps it was out of her friendship with Bárðr and in reaction to Kolbjörn's threat of revenge, Snati's intended function being a protective one. Ármann Jakobsson (1998, 65) does describe the relationship between Bárðr and Hít as 'one of the few examples in medieval Icelandic literature of friendship between a male and a female on an equal basis', and it is also one of the few examples of friendship between a dog and a female. Assuming the gift of a dog was indeed driven by friendship and respect, it serves to raise Hít's status and cement her role as a 'positive' character in the saga, an ally rather than an adversary to the protagonist. Although Hít herself does not directly benefit from the dog's protective functions, her association with Snati nevertheless ascribes her a level of agency and status.

Power and powerlessness through dogs

If *Bárðar saga* were to be counted as a family saga, Snati would be the only dog in the entire genre associated with a female character, out of 15 occurrences of canine companionship. On the other hand, women with dogs are slightly more common in legendary sagas, making up four out of 20 occurrences of human–dog companionship in the *fornaldarsaga* genre. Dogs

play a wide variety of roles in this genre, including hunting, herding, guarding, and fighting a range of different natural and supernatural enemies. Several of these sagas emphasise the close relationships between dogs and their owners, most notably the dogs Karlsnautr and Selsnautr in *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar* (1944, 305–11) and Gramr in *Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar* (1944, 216–19). It has already been discussed how the interactions between women and dogs are unfortunately negative in two *fornaldarsögur*, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* and *Hervarar saga*, but a more positively complex relationship might be seen in the thirteenth-century *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*.

One of the most well-known scenes of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* involves a riddle thought up by the protagonist Ragnarr to test the intelligence of his future wife Kráka (otherwise known as Áslaug). Ragnarr's riddle-instructions for Kráka are as follows: *Hvárki vil ek, at hún sé klædd né óklædd, hvárki mett né ómett, ok fari hún þó eigi ein saman, ok skal henni þó engi maðr fylgja* 'I wish that she is neither clothed nor unclothed, neither full nor unfed, and moreover she must not walk alone and yet no man should accompany her' (*Ragnars saga* 1944, 106). Kráka's solution is ingenious. She wears a fishing net with her hair hung low so that she is neither clothed nor naked. She licks a leek, so she is neither fed nor unfed. And in fulfilment of Ragnarr's third condition, Kráka is accompanied by a dog belonging to her foster-father Ári, explaining: *Ek mun láta fylgja mér hund [Áris], ok fer ek þá eigi ein saman, en þó fylgir mér engi maðr* 'I shall let Ári's dog accompany me, and I will then not be going alone, and yet no man will be accompanying me' (*Ragnars saga* 1944, 106).

Jan de Vries (1928, 218 and 230) made a convincing argument that this specific set of riddles has its roots in a more universal folktale tradition, named 'The Clever Farmgirl' (type 875) in the Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index (Uther 2011, I 494–95). Variants of the folktale involve a range of different riddles, including 'neither clothed nor unclothed' (*weder nackt*

noch bekleidet) and ‘neither fed nor unfed’ (*weder hungrig noch gesättigt*) (de Vries 1928, 181–86, 210–11). The dog component of Ragnarr’s riddle, however, is unique to the Old Norse *Ragnars saga* tradition, with no other known occurrences (de Vries 1928, 212). De Vries (1928, 220) does suggest influence from a variant of another folktale, ATU-type 981, in which a dog is the solution to a riddle about a man’s best friend, staying faithful to its owner despite being beaten by him (Uther 2011, I 612–13). While de Vries (1923, 227–28) makes a convincing case that the ATU 981 tale could have been known in Scandinavia, his chief argument for influence is that there is violence inflicted on the dogs in both stories. This argument is not in itself wholly convincing since the levels of violence are quite different in both cases and violence inflicted upon dogs is not uncommon in the sagas themselves. The two riddles are certainly distinct enough that even if there were some mutual influence, we must nevertheless credit the composer of *Ragnars saga* for some originality. While both riddles emphasise the faithfulness and loyalty of a dog, Kráka’s solution is especially reflective of the unique position occupied by dogs in this literature. On the borders between human and animal, they are not human but very much an integral part of human society. This hybridity creates a useful loophole where dogs are able to perform human social obligations when humans themselves cannot.

In this case, Kráka exploits this loophole not only to solve the riddle, but also to allow herself a companion and protector when she goes to meet Ragnarr on his ship. Kráka actually refuses to go aboard the ship *nema henni sé grið gefin ok förunaut hennar* ‘unless she is given a promise of safe-conduct, and her companion as well’ (*Ragnars saga* 1944, 107). This is one of the first times the usually silent and powerless Kráka speaks in the saga, and she speaks to advocate not just for herself but also for another living being under her care. By turning the dog into a charge under her protection, Kráka is able to claim some agency for

herself, styling herself like any other kings or chieftains who are responsible for the safety of their retainers.

Unfortunately, Kráka's agency in this is soon undermined. When they climb aboard the ship, Ragnarr is said to *seilist í mót henni* 'reach out towards her' (*Ragnars saga* 1944, 107). The verb 'seilast' usually has the implication of stretching out one's hand towards something, often with the intention of taking hold of it; whether Ragnarr is for some reason reaching towards Kráka or merely raising his hand in greeting is unclear. Whatever the intention, its consequence is that the dog, as protector and perhaps in fulfilment of its animalistic nature, bites Ragnarr on the hand. Ragnarr's men immediately jump in and quite gruesomely kill the dog, thus violating the *grið*. Carolyne Larrington (2010, 56) notes that this slaying 'suggests a degree of impetuosity on the part of Ragnarr's men, a quality shared by their lord' and, indeed, this is not the last time that Ragnarr will violate Kráka's personal space or agency. Shortly after they are married, Ragnarr forces himself on Kráka despite her explicitly stated desire to wait a few days, leading to the conception of a boneless child (*Ragnars saga* 1944, 110). The killing of the dog in a way foreshadows this incident and does seem to be looked on critically by the narrator of the saga, who adds this rare statement of judgement: *ok er eigi betr griðum haldit við hana en svá* 'and no better was the promise of safe-conduct held up for her than this' (*Ragnars saga* 1944, 107).

The specific way in which Kráka's dog is killed also seems unnecessarily cruel and reflects badly on Ragnarr and his men. *Þeir menn hans hlaupa til ok drepa hundinn ok reka bogastreng at hálsi honum, ok fær hann af því bana* 'His men leapt at it and struck the dog and tied a bowstring around its neck, and it died from this' (*Ragnars saga* 1944, 107). It is difficult to find a justification for this extreme act of violence, although perhaps there is some influence from another dog-killing episode in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* involving a similar Ragnar-figure. Rory McTurk (1991, 229) has suggested that this episode in *Gesta*

Danorum may ‘represent a Danish stage on the route from England to Norway in the case of the faithful dog motif’, in between the ‘Clever Farmgirl’ folktale and *Ragnars saga*. In Book 9 of *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo’s Ragnar woos an uninterested female warrior named Lathgertha, who *urso canem in edis sue uestibulo religari precepit, contra omne amatoris studium per obiectas belluas proprium tutatura conclaue* ‘ordered a bear and a dog to be tethered in the entrance of her house to defend with animals her own chamber from all her lover’s desires’ (*Gesta Danorum* 2015, I 632). Ragnar, however, quickly dispenses with the bear and hound, *a belluis alteram telo traiicit, alteram faucibus apprehensam obtorto gutture strangulauit* ‘slicing one of the animals with his weapon and seizing the other by the jaws to strangle it by twisting its neck’ (*Gesta Danorum* 2015, I 632). Though slightly different in the implements used, the strangling of the dog in both episodes is similarly disturbing enough to suggest possible influence.

Whether or not there is direct influence between the two episodes, the comparison might change the way we approach the killing of Kráka’s dog in a couple of important ways. Firstly, the Lathgertha episode is read by critics like Rory McTurk (1991, 77) as an example of the trope where ‘the hero wins a maiden, usually after overcoming great dangers’, and Lathgertha’s dog and bear thus take on the role of dangers to be overcome. Like the dragon encircling Þóra’s bower earlier in the saga, Kráka’s dog might be similarly seen as an obstacle to be overcome by Ragnarr, which would explain the addition of the dog biting him. Although the bite might at first seem unimportant since we are not told of it causing Ragnarr any serious harm, it is quite significant in the context of the rest of the saga. This is the first and only time in the saga up until the very moment of his death that Ragnarr suffers any physical injury. In fact, much is made of the fact that he remains unscathed in his fight against a dragon early in the saga, in a late battle against the English army, and for a long time in the snake pit where he eventually meets his death (*Ragnars saga* 1944, 134–35). The

dog bite thus becomes the only consequence Ragnarr suffers for his ‘impetuosity’ and his unwanted advances.

A comparison between Lathgertha and Kráka’s ‘guard dogs’ does also suggest that Ragnarr’s advances are, to some extent, unwanted by both women. Just as the impetuosity of Ragnarr’s men is, according to Larrington, shared by their lord, so too can Kráka’s dog be seen as a reflection of her own intentions. Indeed, Timothy Bourns (2017, 107) suggests that dogs with such a close connection to their owners ‘are thematically similar to animal *fylgjur*, which metaphorically reflect a person’s characteristics,’ and Kráka does in fact refer to the dog as a *fylgi* ‘escort’ in a verse. The dog biting Ragnarr when he gets too close may reflect Kráka’s own reservations about giving in to Ragnarr’s courting and represents her (ultimately futile) effort to defend herself against him. The introduction of a dog, who may play a role similar to a human protector but whose death as an animal may pass unavenged, thus allows these reservations to be played out without much altering the course of the marriage plot that is so important to the saga.

Agency is exerted in a different way in another fourteenth-century *fornaldarsaga*, *Hrólfs saga kraka*. As was mentioned above, this text introduces the Saxon queen Ólöf and her dog Yrsa. Although this is the most explicitly straightforward textual reference to female dog ownership, it is part of a darker narrative in which Ólöf is raped by King Helgi and conceives a child. The text describes the consequences of this act in characteristically straightforward language, stating that Ólöf *leggr á barn þat alla óstund* ‘had complete disregard for this child’ (*Hrólfs saga kraka* 1944, 18) and names her Yrsa after the dog. Although it is quite possible that Ólöf was fond of her dog, naming her daughter after it, a daughter whom the text says she does not care for, cannot be read as complimentary. Although there is no clear etymology of the name Yrsa, Axel Olrik (1919, 269) has argued

that attributing the name to a dog ‘teaches us that the name Yrsa sounded strange and was considered unbecoming a queen.’

It is true that although it was a common practice in Viking-Age and medieval Scandinavia to incorporate animal elements into human names, this is far more often the case with male names than female ones (cf. Jennbert 2011, 184–87). Part of the reason for this may be that being compared to a female animal was considered more unambiguously insulting than being compared to a male one (Jennbert 2011, 184–85). The Old Norwegian law-code of the *Gulaping* (Keyser and Munch 1846, I 70), for instance, demanded that full compensation, even in blood or outlawry, be paid by any man who compared another *við meri. æða kallar hann grey. æða portkono. æða iamnar hanom við berende eitthvert* ‘to a mare, or calls him a bitch or a harlot, or compares him with any female animal (literally ‘birth-giver’). The equation of ‘bitch’ and ‘harlot’ here suggests that the offensiveness of comparing someone to a female dog may have been rooted in implications of sexual lasciviousness. A similar clause in the law-code of the *Frostaping* (Keyser and Munch 1846, I 225) orders full atonement for comparing someone to a female animal, but only half for comparing him to male animals like horses or oxen. While it is true that these clauses refer to insults directed at men, scholars have argued that insults like *ergi* and *argr* when directed at women imply that they are ‘generally immodest, perverted or lecherous’ (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 18; cf. Ström 1974, 2).

The *Íslensk orðsifjabók* (Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989, 1168) additionally suggests for ‘Yrsa’ an eighteenth-century meaning of ‘fála, óhemja; stygg ær’ [foul and unrestrained, or ugly ewe], both possibilities certainly insulting but the latter somewhat appropriate to the way the human Yrsa is treated in the saga. Yrsa is made to believe she is the daughter of peasants and at twelve years old *skyldi hún gæta hjarðar* ‘had to watch the flocks’ (*Hrólfs saga kraka* 1944, 18). It is in this role, watching *við skóg einn marga hjörð* ‘a

large flock by a forest’ (*Hrólfs saga kraka* 1944, 18) that Helgi first meets her (and, unfortunately, ends up marrying her). Yrsa is thus treated in much the same manner as a sheepdog and so another parallel is created between woman and dog. And yet, if this naming is an act of insult, it is aimed not at Yrsa but at Helgi, now a king, and Ármann Jakobsson (1999, 152) thus suggests that Queen Ólöf ‘uses a name as a symbol for dignity’. The dog in this story, even by just its name, becomes a means by which the queen is able to reclaim some agency after her traumatic experience. In any case, on a very basic level it is significant that the queen owning a dog is mentioned so matter-of-factly with no hint that it is an occurrence at all out of the ordinary, and thus a tantalizing suggestion that female dog ownership was more widespread than Old Norse–Icelandic literature might sometimes lead us to believe.

Dogs guarding giantesses

Moving to poetry, there are ten mentions of canine companions in Eddic poems, including in four texts with female characters: *Hávamál* (discussed above), *Skírnismál*, *Fjölsvinnsmál*, and *Atlakviða* (discussed below). *Skírnismál* describes the god Freyr’s infatuation with Gerðr, daughter of the giant Gymir, and Freyr’s messenger Skírnir’s quest to woo Gerðr on the god’s behalf. Skírnir arrives at *Gymisgarðr* where there are *hundar ólmir ok bundnir fyrir skíðgarðs hliði þess er um sal Gerðar var* ‘savage dogs bound before the gate of the fence which was around Gerðr’s hall’ (*Eddukvæði* 2014, I 382). The name *Gymisgarðr* signals that the court, dwelling, or other space that could be implied by the term ‘garðr’ belongs to the giant, but the hall where Gerðr is staying is itself grammatically linked to her own name. The dogs around the hall do appear to be Gymir’s, or that is at least what is implied by Skírnir when he asks a nearby herdsman,

Segðu þat, hirðir,

...

hvé ek at andspilli

komumk ins unga mans

fyr greyjum Gymis.

Tell me this, herdsman, how I can manage to have a conversation with the young woman past Gymir's hounds.

Skírnir, then, treats the dogs as obstacles imposed by Gerðr's father rather than by Gerðr herself. The dogs, however, prove not to be much of an obstacle at all. When Gerðr's handmaiden notices Skírnir outside, the giantess invites him in, bypassing the dogs entirely. The dogs thus do appear to represent Gymir's wishes and not Gerðr's own, but ignoring them might be read as an expression of her own agency. This sense of agency, however, is soon lost as she is violently coerced by Skírnir into meeting Freyr against her wishes.

There is a similar case of dogs guarding a home in the poem *Fjölsvinnsmál*, in which a man named Svipdagr is sent to win the hand of a woman named Menglǫð. The identities of both characters are unclear. It has been suggested that Menglǫð is the goddess Freyja or an incarnation of her (see, for instance, *Eddukvæði* 1944, II 195), but there is no definitive evidence provided by the text itself. When Svipdagr arrives at Menglǫð's dwelling place, he encounters a watchman named Fjölsviðr and two hounds Gífr and Geri, who are said to be extremely large and savage and excellent guards. One hound stays awake during the day and the other during the night and together they are thus able to effectively protect Menglǫð. Once again, the origin and ownership of the two dogs is unspecified, and the dogs could belong to either Fjölsviðr or Menglǫð. Neither character directly interacts with the animals, but Fjölsviðr certainly seems to have intimate knowledge about them and they would suit his watchman role. Fjölsviðr also happens to be a name used for Óðinn in the poem *Grímnismál* (*Eddukvæði* 1944, I 377) and the two dogs could be related to Óðinn's wolves Geri and Freki.

That being said, it is equally significant that when Svipdagr reveals his true identity as the destined lover of Menglǫð, it is said that *hundar fagna, hús hefir upp lokizk* ‘the dogs are fawning, the house has opened up’ (*Eddukvæði* 2014, II 449). Timothy Bourns (2017, 107) has argued that in the sagas ‘qualities of pet dogs are metonymically emblematic of the people that they follow’ and the dogs’ fawning over Svipdagr could very well be read as metonymically reflecting Menglǫð’s own emotions towards her beloved and thus evidence of a very close bond between the woman and the dogs.

A third analogue might be seen not in a pre-Christian mythological text but rather in a Christian one. There are numerous demonic hounds in the sagas of priests, bishops, and saints, as well as around 17 dogs with human companions, both types most commonly depicted as antagonists of holy men. The distinction between real and demonic can be difficult, however, as in the hagiography of the Virgin Mary, the only text in this Christian canine corpus other than *Hrafn saga* that includes a woman. Dominating the Marian tradition in Iceland are numerous collections of miracles (*jarteiknir*) transmitted both alongside and separate from the hagiographical saga, and several of these miracles involve dogs. One such miraculous incident concerns the abbot of Clairvaux, Peter Monoculus. Before he first joined a monastic order, it is said in one text that Peter has a dream vision in which

hann gengi inn i hina fegrstvi holl, ok i þeiri holl var hasæti, ok þar sat i ein drottning. Hennar fegrð ok æsiona var biort ok virdulig. Enn sem hann villdi inn ganga i hollina, runnv i mot honum suartir ok hrædiligr hundar. Þeir hlupu ækafliga at honum ok villdu bita hann. Þessi virduliga frv rak hundana i brvtt i stad med sinu bodi. (Unger 1871, 1152–53)

he enters the most beautiful hall, and in this hall was a high-seat, and in it sat a queen. Her beauty and countenance were bright and magnificent. But as he wished to go inside the hall, black and fearsome dogs ran towards him. They jumped fervently at him and wished to bite him. This magnificent woman drove the dogs away from the place with her bidding.

Sitting on a high-seat in a magnificent hall, Mary is thus styled in this Old Icelandic translation very much like a classic Germanic queen. It is possible that the black dogs are

demonic agents attacking the holy man, but their appearance within Mary's hall suggests that they might instead be playing protective roles like those guarding the homes of Gerðr and Menglǫð. In either case, Mary proves her divine power over the animals, driving them away with just her bidding, just as both Gerðr and Menglǫð appear able to make their own guard dogs stand down. All three women, then, have dogs in and around their halls in potentially protective capacities, but the texts themselves remain frustratingly ambiguous about whom the animals ultimately belong to or are companions of. Nevertheless, it is through their interactions with the hounds of their hall that each of these women is able to express her agency and power.

Conclusion: Reimagining women-dog interactions

This article has thus demonstrated that there is some interaction between women and dogs in Old Norse–Icelandic literature, and even a few clear instances of women owning dogs. Ólöf of *Hrólfs saga kraka* and her dog Yrsa are the best examples of this, followed closely by the *vǫlsi*-worshipping woman and the household dog Lærir in *Vǫlsa þáttr*, the fairy-maiden and her companion in the tale of *Januall*, the sorceress and her disguised hound in *Samsons saga*, and the troll-woman Hlaðgerðr and her pork-bearing hound in *Ála flekks saga*. Meanwhile, the elf-woman of *Tristrams saga* and Hít of *Bárðar saga* both appear to own dogs whom they gift to men, while Kráka of *Ragnars saga* acquires her loyal companion from her foster-father. In even more cases, however, women directly or indirectly interact with the dogs in their lives but the texts are more ambiguous about the exact nature of their relationship. This is the case with the nuns of *Eskia*, Ísönd, Billinger's *mær*, Hildr, Gerðr, Menglǫð, and Mary.

Whether or not ownership or even companionship is explicitly established by the text, each of these women certainly benefits from her relationship with dogs. Wietske Prummel

(1992, 151) argues that the function of dogs (and horses) in early medieval graves in Europe ‘was to mark the prestige, importance and wealth of the deceased. They demonstrated that the deceased belonged to a group that had the means, leisure and skills to keep and train these horses and dogs.’ This could be the case for both men and women, and true just as much in literature as in the archaeological record. By her possession of a canine companion and by demanding protection for it, Kráka is thus able to style herself as a powerful ruler. For the fairy-maiden of *Janual*, her dog clearly acts as a marker of noble status, and Ísönd’s hound plays a similar role as well, although the latter is undermined by the language of the text. For the troll-women Hít and Hlaðgerðr, giving the saga protagonists use of their dogs does serve to raise their status as well, both in terms of power and ‘goodness’. By allowing her dog to be employed against her own mother, Hlaðgerðr is able, furthermore, to express her own personal agency and distance herself from her evil troll lineage. Agency appears to be central to the role dogs play in women’s lives in Old Norse–Icelandic literature. Though the guard dogs of Gerðr and Menglǫð have supposedly protective functions, they ultimately represent the women’s agency to choose their own lovers, even if only fleetingly, as does the dog tied to the bed of Billingr’s *mær* and Kráka’s biting companion. Queen Ólöf too reclaims some agency through her dog, in her case after she was deprived of it by Helgi.

The comparative dearth of women with dogs in Old Norse–Icelandic literature means that other female characters may be denied this power, status, and agency. But in their lack of detail and explicitness about the nature of the relationship between many of these women and their dogs, these texts are also denying their female characters a certain complexity of character that goes along with dog companionship. Consider, for example, King Óláfr Tryggvason and his dog Vígi. Most versions of Óláfr’s saga contain a full long narrative arc of the relationship between Vígi and his human. We are told of the first moment when Óláfr lays eyes on the dog, so visibly impressed by his herding skills that Vígi is gifted to him at

once (*Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, 165–66). We see Vígi fighting for Óláfr in battle, the dog getting wounded, and Óláfr going to great lengths to have him healed. And when Óláfr dies, the saga goes into one of the most detailed and most moving displays of grief in all Old Norse–Icelandic literature as the dog runs off alone to a mound, crying and howling, and starves himself to death (*Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, 578). In the middle of all this, the *Flateyjarbók* version of the text (and this version alone) also contains a scene of Óláfr and his men joking around on their ship, putting Vígi at the helm and pretending the dog is the one steering, even composing a poem in his honour (*Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, 450). This is a rare moment of playfulness and a rather relatable human moment in a literature where displays of affection are sometimes overshadowed by the necessities of the heroic narrative and the heroic world order.

Such necessities are at the fore in the story of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, related in multiple sources including several eddic poems. At the heart of Guðrún’s story is her fate to end up alone. Over the course of the *Poetic Edda*, she loses two husbands, both her brothers, and all her children, some of them by her own hand. She is herself very aware of this fate, declaring early in the poem *Hamðismál*,

Einstæð em ek orðin
sem ǫsp í holti,
fallin at frændum
sem fura at kvisti. (*Eddukvæði* 2014, II 408)

I am come to be standing lonely like an aspen tree on a stony hill, deprived of kinsmen like a fir tree of a branch.

It might, however, be possible to imagine a loophole to Guðrún’s destined plight, the very same loophole that Kráka was able to use to solve Ragnarr’s challenge—a dog. And there are already dogs in Guðrún’s story, if only briefly. Before Guðrún sets fire to her husband Atli’s hall in the poem *Atlakviða*, killing him and all his men inside, it is said that she *hvelpa leysti* ‘loosed the dogs’ and *húskarla vakði* ‘woke the house-servants’ (*Eddukvæði* 2014, II 381).

Several scholars like Ursula Dronke have argued convincingly that these two acts ‘are brief statements of Guðrún’s mercies interwoven with her acts of murder’ (1969, 72; cf. Hollander 1962, 292). Why, though, would Guðrún choose these specific groups as objects of her mercy? It is quite possibly the case that Guðrún chose to spare those groups who were entirely uninvolved and innocent of the act she was avenging (the killing of her brothers). Alternatively, Inna Matyushina (2021, 101) has argued that Guðrún scattering gold among the servants a couple of stanzas earlier has the effect of her being ‘shown in the role of a Germanic ruler’ and her mercy towards the servants and dogs perhaps has the same effect. Just like Kráka making herself responsible for the safety of her dog, Guðrún’s actions can be read as a representation of her own power and agency.

On a more basic level, however, and one that could be true alongside either of the other suggestions, it is quite possible that Guðrún releases the dogs (and servants) simply because they are her dogs and she has some affection for them. After all, Guðrún is a powerful woman and Atli’s hall is her hall as well. Whether Guðrún is displaying affection here or simply mercy, her brief interaction with these animals thus adds even greater complexity to her character, a complexity that is very often denied to female characters in male-dominated stories. In this way, re-establishing and reimagining similar patterns of female dog ownership can provide new avenues for exploring female agency and the lack thereof in Old Norse–Icelandic literature. Developing a canine narrative ethology and foregrounding dogs in textual analyses thus reveals much not only about the nature of relationships between women and dogs, but about the women themselves and their place in poetic and saga narratives.

Note: This work has been made possible by the support of the Open-Oxford-Cambridge AHRC Doctoral Training Partnership and the Lincoln College Kingsgate Scholarship.

Bibliography

- Ármann Jakobsson 1998. 'History of the Trolls? *Bárðar saga* as an Historical Narrative'. *Saga-Book XXV*, 53–71.
- Ármann Jakobsson 1999. 'Le Roi Chevalier: The Royal Ideology and Genre of *Hrólfs saga kraka*'. *Scandinavian Studies* 71:2, 139–66.
- Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989. *Íslensk orðsifjabók*.
- Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* 1991. In *Harðar saga*. Ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson. Íslensk fornrit XIII, 99–172.
- Blöndal, Sigfús 1920–24. *Íslensk-Dönsk Orðabók*.
- Bourns, Timothy 2017. 'Between Nature and Culture'. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford.
- Cleasby, Richard and Gudbrand Vigfússon 1986. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. 2nd edn.
- Cook, Robert and Mattias Tveitane, eds, 1979. *Strengleikar: An Old Norse Translation of Twenty-one Old French Lais, Edited from the Manuscript Uppsala De la Gardie 4-7 – AM 666 b, 4°*.
- Drauma-Jóns saga* 1951. In *Riddarasögur*. Ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, VI 147–70.
- Dronke, Ursula, ed. and trans., 1969. *The Poetic Edda*. I: *Heroic Poems*.
- Dronke, Ursula, ed. and trans., 2011. *The Poetic Edda*. III: *Mythological Poems II*.
- Eddukvæði* 2014. Ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Íslensk fornrit.
- Evans Tang, Harriet J. 2022. *Animal-Human Relationships in Medieval Iceland: From Farm-Settlement to Sagas*.
- Flateyjarbók* 1944–45. Ed. Sigurður Nordal.
- Finsen, Vilhjálmur, ed. 1852. *Grágás: Islændernes lovbog i fristatens tid, udgivet efter det kongelige biblioteks haandskrift*.
- Fritzner, Johan 1886. *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog*.
- Gautreks saga* 1944. In *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, III 1–41.
- Gering, Hugo 1927. *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*.
- Gesta Danorum* = Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*. 2015. Ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen. Trans. Peter Fisher.
- Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar* 1944. In *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, III 283–319.
- Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* 1944. In *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, II 159–82.

- Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* 1943. In *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, I 191–242.
- Hollander, Lee M., trans., 1962. *The Poetic Edda*. 2nd edn.
- Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* 1987. Ed. Guðrún P. Helgadóttir.
- Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans* 1944. In *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, II 1–93.
- Hui, Jonathan, et al. 2018. 'Ála flekks saga: An Introduction, Text and Translation'. *Leeds Studies in English* 49, 18–43.
- Jennbert, Kristina 2011. *Animals and Humans: Recurrent Symbiosis in Archaeology and Old Norse Religion*.
- Keyser, R. and P. A. Munch, eds, 1846. *Norges gamle love indtil 1387*.
- Larrington, Carolyne 2010. 'Þóra and Áslaug in *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*. Women, Dragons and Destiny'. In *Making History: Essays on the fornaldarsögur*. Ed. Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay, 53–68.
- Leifsson, Rúnar 2018. 'Ritual Animal Killing and Burial Customs in Viking Age Iceland'. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Iceland.
- Lindow, John 2002. *Norse Mythology: A Guide to Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*.
- Matyushina, Inna 2021. 'Grief, Gender, and the Birth of Lyric in Old Norse Poetry'. In *Grief, Gender, and Identity in the Middle Ages: Knowing Sorrow*. Ed. Lee Templeton, 94–117.
- McHugh, Susan 2011. *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines*.
- McKinnell, John 2007. 'The Making of *Hávamál*'. *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3, 75–115.
- McTurk, Rory 1991. *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrókar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*.
- Menache, Sophia 2000. 'Hunting and attachment to dogs in the Pre-Modern Period'. In *Companion Animals and Us: Exploring the Relationships between People and Pets*. Ed. Anthony Podberscek, 42–60.
- Meulengracht Sørensen, Meulengracht 1983. *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*. Trans. Joan Turville-Petre.
- Nordal, Sigurður 1936. 'Billings mær'. In *Bidrag til nordisk filologi, tillägnade Emil Olson, den 9 Juni 1936*, 288–95.
- Olrik, Axel 1919. *The Heroic Legends of Denmark*. Trans. Lee M. Hollander.
- Partalópa saga* 1949. In *Riddarasögur*. Ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, II 81–133.
- Prummel, Wietske 1992. 'Early Medieval Dog Burials Among the Germanic Tribes'. *Helinium* 32, 132–94.
- Ragnars saga loðbrókar ok sona hans* 1944. In *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, I 95–148.

- Rohrbach, Lena 2009. *Der tierische Blick: Mensch-Tier-Relationen in der Sagaliteratur*.
- Sadler, Donna 2016. 'The Canine Domain: At the Feet of Royal Tomb Effigies in Saint-Denis'. In *Our Dogs, Our Selves: Dogs in Medieval and Early Modern Art, Literature, and Society*. Ed. Laura Gelfand, 261–78.
- Salisbury, Joyce 2022. *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*. 3rd edn.
- Samsons saga fagra* 1953. Ed. John Wilson. Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur 65.
- Savishinsky, Joel 1983. 'Pet Ideas: The domestication of animals, human behavior, and human emotions'. In *New Perspectives on Our Lives with Companion Animals*. Ed. Aaron Katcher and Alan Beck, 112–31.
- Simek, Rudy 1993. 'Samsons saga fagra'. In *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Phillip Pulsiano et al., 565–66.
- Sofaer, Joanna and Marie Louise Stig Sørensen 2013. 'Death and Gender'. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Death & Burial*. Ed. Liv Nilsson Stutz and Sarah Tarlow, 527–41.
- Ström, Folke 1974. *Níð, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes*.
- Sverris saga* 2007. Ed. Þorleifur Hauksson. Íslensk fornrit XXX.
- Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* 1999. Ed. Peter Jorgensen. In *Norse Romance, Volume I, The Tristan Legend*. Ed. Marianne Kalinke, 23–226.
- Thompson, Stith 1955–58. *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature. A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*.
- Unger, Carl Rikard, ed., 1871. *Maríu saga: Legender om jomfru Maria og hendes jertegn, efter gamle haandskrifter*.
- Uther, Hans-Jörg 2011. *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*. 2nd edn.
- de Vries, Jan 1928. *Die Märchen von Klugen Rätsellösern: Eine Vergleichende Untersuchung*.
- Walker-Meikle, Kathleen 2012. *Medieval Pets*.
- Zoëga, Geir 1910. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*.
- Þiðreks saga af Bern* 1951. Ed. Guðni Jónsson.
- Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* 1944. In *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, II 183–246.