HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Distinctions and Transgressions in the Realm of Icelandic Romance

An Encounter with the Stepmother

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í íslenskum miðaldafræðum

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Abstract

The wicked stepmother is a well-known character in folklore and popular culture and arguably one of the most accomplished female villains of fictional literature. Also the medieval Icelandic saga corpus is among the numerous literary contexts in which the character can be encountered, and some conspicuously wicked specimens are featured in a subgroup of the genre that dates from the period between the late thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Since these types of sagas are set in a courtly milieu and display overtly chivalric ideals, they have also become known as Icelandic romances.

Icelandic society underwent great changes during the latter part of the Middle Ages. When the country was integrated into the Norwegian monarchy in the course of the thirteenth century, a new social elite emerged which received its power from the king rather than from retainers. This class was preoccupied with the ideology of the court which promoted the adoption of new modes of normative social behavior. These were also considerably influenced by Christian norms and ideals such as monogamous marriage and sexual purity. This thesis discusses the function of the character of the stepmother in the context of changing norms and attitudes which are expressed in the secular Icelandic prose literature that emerged during that time.

Ágrip

Vonda stjúpan er vel þekkt persóna í þjóðsögum og alþýðumenningu. Færa má rök fyrir því að hún sé ein best þekkta neikvæða persóna af kvenkyni í skálduðum frásagnarbókmenntum. Hana má einnig finna í íslenskum fornsögum, ekki síst eru dæmi um mjög skæðar stjúpmæður í undirtegund sagnanna sem varð til á síðmiðöldum, frá lokum 13. aldar til þeirrar 15. Þessar sögur fjalla um riddara og hugsjónir þeirra og eru því kallaðar íslenskar rómönsur.

Íslenskt samfélag gekk í gegnum veigamiklar breytingar á síðari hluta miðalda. Eftir því sem leið á 13. öldina varð til ný yfirstétt sem þáði yfirráð sín frá konungi fremur en frá lægra settum lögum samfélagsins. Þessi stétt var upptekin af hugmyndafræði hirðarinnar þar sem nýjar reglur um viðtekna félagslega hegðun voru í hávegum hafðar. Kristileg áhersla á einkvæni og hreinlífi höfðu þar líka mikil áhrif. Í rigerðinni er persóna vondu stjúpunnar rædd í samhengi við þessa nýju bókmenntagrein og ný viðhorf sem komu fram á þessum tíma.

Contents

1. Introduction

The character of the wicked stepmother is a frequent guest in the realms of fiction and fantasy, and features in some of the most popular fairy tales such as *Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Hansel and Gretel*. Although many of these tales had not been recorded before the end of the Middle Ages, the alleged enmity of women towards their stepchildren reaches much further back. Not only has it been a vivid motif in oral folklore tradition, but has, in fact, been in chronicles and stories from ancient times to the present day.[1] Also the medieval Icelandic saga corpus is among the numerous literary contexts in which this particularly evil female character can be found, and some conspicuously wicked specimens are featured in a handful of sagas from the late thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries.[2] These texts, which are often referred to as Icelandic romances (a term used henceforth in this thesis), are typically telling the story of a handsome and privileged knight who sets out to seek glory and honor in distant lands.[3] During his journey, the knight encounters other noble men and together they make their way through a world teeming with an abundance of supernatural powers and beings. One such example are dwarves, which often provide aid to the protagonist as in the fairy tale about Snow White.[4] While the exploits of the young male hero are central to the plots of these romances, it often is the way in which the other characters are organized around him that provides nuanced information about the underlying values and ideas of the narrative in question. In view of the fact that the mother of the protagonist is primarily notable for her absence, the family structures seem to call for a deeper investigation into the mind-set at the core of Icelandic romance. If she is mentioned at all, the (biological) mother of the hero is often found passing away within the very first lines of the story. Moreover, it certainly does not come as a surprise that the woman, who supplants the dead mother, does not distinguish herself as a loving wife and caring surrogate mother, but rather brings nothing but chaos and calamity into

[1] Patricia A. Watson, *Ancient Stepmothers. Myth, Misogyny, and Reality* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995), 49.
[2] Geraldine Barnes, "Romance in Iceland," in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Cluniess-Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 269.
[3] See Margaret Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1934) for the first scholarly mention of the term in the context of medieval Icelandic literature.
[4] On dwarves in the Icelandic romances and folk tales, see Ármann Jakobsson, "Enabling Love: Dwarves in Old Norse-Icelandic Romance," in *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland. Essays in Honor of Marianne Kalinke*, ed. Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin (Ithaca/New York: Cornell University Library 2008), 183–206.

the lives of the other characters. As modern readers of medieval Icelandic romance, many of us have already become acquainted with the picture of the untrustworthy and malevolent stepmother in our early childhood. Both the Grimm brothers and Walt Disney have done much to naturalize and entrench these associations in the imaginations of children and grown-ups worldwide.[5] The negative connotations attached to the notion of the stepmother, however, do not solely originate from the representations found in oral storytelling, literature and movies. They are also reinforced by etymological considerations: The English prefix *step-* and its Icelandic cognate *stjúp-* both derive from the Old English *steop-*, a form that seems to be closely related to the verbs *āstēpan* "to bereave" and *bestēpan* "to deprive."[6] While the modern usage of the word "stepmother" (*stjúpa*) denotes a connection that has been established through the remarriage of the father, the etymology also indicates associations with loss and bereavement.

Among German-speaking scholars, the Icelandic romances have sometimes been referred to as *Märchensagas* ("fairy tale-sagas"), a term that bears clear testimony to the group's affinity to the fantastic and supernatural realms of the fairy tale and its notorious characters.[7] As with the fairy tale, the remote and sometimes rather peculiar settings of the romances do not seem to have much in common with reality at first sight. The hero, his companions and their opponents interact in a world of pure imagination that is full of wondrous creatures, magic potions, flying carpets and all kinds of good and evil enchantments. Although this sort of literature is undeniably entertaining and comforting, it was, in the past, often disqualified and marginalized from scholarship without any further consideration. Icelandic romance, in other words, was literally treated as the neglected stepchild of the Old Norse-Icelandic saga family, and until far into the twentieth century it was common to contrast the "fantastic" sagas with texts that addressed issues which seemed to be ultimately connected to Icelandic society. When speaking of the "realistic" representatives of medieval Icelandic secular prose, most people at first tend to think of the *Íslendingasögur*, that is, those narratives that transport

[5] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde. On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1994), 207.
[6] Watson, *Ancient Stepmothers*, 15; see also *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "step-."
[7] Kurt Schier, *Sagaliteratur* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1970), 106. This term has not been considered applicable to late medieval saga-literature outside the German-speaking area. See, for example, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Verzeichnis isländischer Märchenvarianten* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia Academia Scientarium Fennica, 1929), XXVII.

their audience back into the age of the settlement. Unlike the romances, the *Íslendingasögur* provide such detailed illustrations of both the local geographical and social landscape of Iceland that the scenery appears to comply with reality to a great extent.[8] And even if they do not paint a consistently reliable picture of the past (but, contrarily, reflect much of the values of the time in which they were produced), they succeed in creating the impression of historicity. Specifically, they make it easy for the audience to identify with the events depicted. The romances, on the other hand, are not capable of guaranteeing this identification with reality since neither the plots nor the characters are rooted in the existing and known world of early Iceland (and in many instances not even Scandinavia or Europe). If one subscribes to the view prevailing in early Old Norse-Icelandic scholarship, the production of sagas that were dealing with *Icelandic* issues, problems and persons started to diminish with the emergence of the first romances. This development was often labeled with rather unflattering terms and metaphors (such as "decay" or "death of the classical sagas") and was believed to be symptomatic of the period that followed after the Icelanders' subjugation to the Norwegian kingdom in 1262/64.[9] There is no denying that Icelandic society was facing fundamental changes during this time, and also that the climatic changes and the ensuing natural disasters had certainly left their mark on the country. Still, one must be careful about generalizing conclusions too broadly.[10] Does it not take more than the mere attempt of escaping reality in order to generate the historical development of literature? And more to the point, was this reality really characterized by nothing but hardship and gloominess?[11]

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[8] Vésteinn Ólason, "Family Sagas," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 105; Julia Zernack, "Die mittelalterliche isländische Schrift- und Buchkultur," in *Isländersagas. Texte und Kontexte*, ed. Klaus Böldl (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2011), 59.

[9] Finnur Jónsson, *Den islandske litteraturs historie tilligemed den oldnorske* (København: Gad, 1907), 406.

[10] See esp. Peter Hallberg, *Den isländska sagan* (Stockholm: Svenska bokförlaget/Bonniers, 1956), 132; Jan de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, vol. 2: *Die Literatur von etwa 1150–1300* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1964-67), 529; Þorvaldur Thoroddsen, *Landfræðissaga Íslands. Hugmyndir manna um Ísland, náttúruskoðun þess og rannsóknir, fyrr og siðarr*, vol. 1 (Reykjavík/København: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag, 1892–96), 107.

[11] Some of these assessments, nevertheless, are still worth reading today, as the following quote may suggest: "*In der dunklen Nacht, die sich über Island gesenkt hatte, fand der Bauer in der trostlosen Einförmigkeit seines Daseins einen Trost in der Lektüre solcher kindischer Phantasien, in denen ihm die unmöglichsten Abenteuer vorgegaukelt wurden und die Beschreibung der von Gold und Edelsteinen strotzenden Paläste, Waffen und Kleider ließ ihn seine Armut einen Augenblick vergessen.*" Vries, 1964-67, 539; Translation: "*During the dark night that had fallen over Iceland, it was the reading of these childish fantasies which provided the farmer with comfort in the bleak monotony of his existence. Due to*

Even if the romances comprise a strong fascination for the exotic and the fantastic, Icelanders had certainly not lost their interest in *the Icelandic* in the latter part of the Middle Ages. On the contrary, also in the fourteenth century, there emerged sagas that dealt with people who lived in Iceland around the year 1000. In fact, some of the most famous *Íslendingasögur* seem to have been recorded *after* the notorious years of 1262/64.[12] Due to their abundance of exaggerations and supernatural elements, they paint, however, a more diffuse picture of the Free State society than the older *Íslendingasögur*, a picture which is more difficult to capture.[13] The late-medieval audience seemed to have had a wide range of sagas to choose between, and in light of the manuscripts dating back to the beginning of the fourteenth century, they seemed to have appreciated the "realistic" illustrations of everyday life at least much as the more "fantastic" representatives of the saga corpus.

In contrast to the first *Íslendingasögur*, the romances are the products of a writing culture, commissioned by and written for an elite that pursued completely different aims than the ruling class chieftains of the Free State: "*Der var ikke længere den sammenhæng mellem fortid og samtid, der i det 13. årh. gjorde det muligt at se aktuelle problemer i historiens lys og bruge nedarvede forståelsemøntstre til forklaring af samtidige tilstande.*"[14] This seems to suggest that the places, stories and characters that are illustrated in these stories have much more to offer than what they reveal at first sight.[15] Since they can be read as the literary reflections of the shifting interests and priorities that accompanied the reorganization of the Icelandic society in the thirteenth and fourteenth century, late medieval Icelandic prose can help in answering questions such as: What happens when a previously independent region is brought under the control of an outside political organization? What consequences did the implementation

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the fact that they led him to believe in the most impossible adventures, riddled with gold and gemstones, precious palaces, weapons and garments, he could forget about his poverty for a little while."

[12] Jürg Glauser, "Nachwort," in *Isländische Märchensagas*, vol. 1, ed. Ibid. and Gert Kreutzer (München: Diedrichs, 1998), 401–02.

[13] The younger *Íslendingasögur* are discussed in Martin Arnold, *The Post-Classical Icelandic Family Saga* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003).

[14] Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga og samfund. En indføring i oldislandsk litteratur* (København: Berlingske Forlag, 1977), 152.

[15] Torfi H. Tulinius, "Fornaldarsaga och ideologi. Tillbaka till 'The Matter of the North'," *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi. Handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8–2.9.2001*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson et al. (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 2003), 87; Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North. The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-century Iceland*, trans. Randi C. Eldevik (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 2002), 42.

of an administrative system, in which offices were bestowed by a king, have for the members of the country's social elite? And, no less important, what role did the growing institution of the Church play in this context?

In the course of the Middle Ages, the Christian European kingdoms witnessed a gradual process of centralization and consolidation of royal power, and with its entry into the Norwegian kingdom, Iceland also participated in this movement. Along with social reorganization, land ownership became a more and more important source of power, and new inheritance regulations and marriage norms made it easier for the members of the upper class of to keep their property concentrated. Due to the rise of the Church, marriages were now also increasingly arranged in accordance with the papacy's demands of monogamy and restraint. This development seems therefore to suggest that also the sexual norms and practices of this time were highly sensitive to the social shifts.[16]

When interpreting historical events from a contemporary perspective, there is always the risk of imposing modern concepts and ideas on the past, regardless of the fact that the modern conceptualization of sexuality is fundamentally different from other periods of human history. Sexuality, however, is a product of society, and this implies that sexual patterns of thought are firmly anchored in history. They are constructed by the values and premises of their time.[17] As scholars such as the Swedish historian Henric Bagerius have argued, this applies no less to the developments that took place in late medieval Icelandic society. In the forms of the romances, he claims, the Old Norse-Icelandic literary corpus provides us with a fascinating insight into a period of Icelandic history in which two very different sets of norms came together, and which led to new ways of thinking about sexuality, especially among the members of the Icelandic

[16] According to the American sexologists John Gagnon and William Simon, who were among the first to suggest that sexual norms and values were the most responsive indicators for social changes, the importance of sexuality for society became subject to extensive studies in the last third of the twentieth century. John Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct. The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (1973; reprint, Chicago: Aldine, 2009), 1–20. This also paved the way for Michel Foucault's pioneering work on the history of sexuality, in which he argued that sexuality was a historical invention. Michel Foucault, *Sexualität und Wahrheit*, vol 1: *Der Wille zum Wissen*, trans Ulrich Raulff and Walter Seitter (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983, esp. 12–26.

[17] Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 128–31; Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz, "Introduction," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie et. al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), ix.

"aristocracy."[18] As I seek to illustrate in this thesis, the shifting preoccupations of the country's social elite have also left their mark in the way masculinity and femininity are portrayed in these narratives, and how men and women interact with each other. Central to these observations, however, shall be the question of what role the stepmother, in particular, has for the advancement of the male protagonist. What distinguishes her from the other characters, not the least of which other females, and which rules and boundaries does she transgress and overstep? Through the examination of the motif in *Valdimars saga*, *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, *Hjálmþés saga ok Ǫlvis*, and *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*, I hope to shed light on how the stepmother is presented in a literature that was shaped considerably by the interplay of the political and sexual strategies of a new social elite.

[18] Henric Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom. Sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk identitet på det senmedeltida Island* (Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 2009), see esp. 13–29.

2. Towards a Demarcation of Icelandic Romance – Translated and Indigenous *riddarasögur*, and *fornaldarsögur*

In the course of the late Middle Ages there emerged a great number of sagas that lead their audiences into worlds with little or no resemblance to those found in native Icelandic literary tradition or society. Although most of the "fantastic" representatives of Old Norse secular prose seem to have been written here, none of the illustrated events were taking place in Iceland. Instead, the stories are set on the Scandinavian Peninsula, Denmark and the European continent, and quite often on other continents (such as Africa). Some of these events do not even take place in reality at all. At first sight, the realm of medieval Icelandic romance does not seem to have any boundaries, and similar conditions also apply to the element of time. Although there are sagas that are set in a particular historical period (that is, prior to the settlement of Iceland), the settings are for the most part removed from any sense of place and time. This elusiveness, however, has led to scholarship having contrasting views about the differentiation of the corpus's subclasses. The boundaries between fantasy and reality are often blurred, and so too is the generic terminology. To begin with, the term chosen for the present study requires some further explanation.

As indicated by their name, the Icelandic romances belong to those representatives of Old Norse saga literature that seem to have been exclusively composed in Iceland. Another term that is often used to refer to these kinds of narratives is "indigenous", or Icelandic *riddarasögur*. This, in turn, implies that there must also exist a non-indigenous branch of the *riddarasögur*. In order to unravel these two closely related types of late medieval sagas, we need to let our eyes wander towards the events that took place at the Norwegian court during the reign of King Hákon IV Hákonarson (1217–1263).[19] As we shall see in the further course of this thesis, it will not be our last visit to the royal household of the Kingdom of Norway. Up to that point, the Norwegian kingship had been engaged in a process of state formation, but by the time Hákon had consolidated his power, the medieval kingdom is considered to have reached the peak of its development.[20] King Hákon, who was greatly influenced by European political

[19] Jürg Glauser, "Romance (Translated *riddarasögur*)" in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 375.
[20] Sverre Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom. State Formation in Norway, c. 900–1350* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanums Forlag, 2010), 66.

culture, aimed to be a monarch in the western fashion. That, under his reign, Norway was highly receptive to foreign culture, is also mirrored in the literary production of that time.[21] One important part of his efforts to "civilize" the aristocracy and to promote royal ideology was the introduction of courtly literature popular with the European nobility.[22] Under Hákon's patronage there arose an abundance of either translated or adapted versions of English and continental European texts (including Arthurian romances, *chansons de geste* and *lais*) that soon came to be a literature of prestige at the Norwegian court.[23] Although the Old Norse versions, just like the source texts, are much concerned with the idea of kingship and the ethics of chivalry and courtly love, they also provide a unique insight into the social context and the cultural discourse that accompanied the transmission process. At the same time, many of the adaptions also leave out certain key aspects of English and continental European literature, such as the often rather ironic perspective on courtly society.[24] When the *riddarasögur* arrived in Iceland in the course of the thirteenth century, and Icelanders started to make use of surface attributes in their very own way, these differences became more and more pronounced.[25] Especially in their emphasis of the importance of homosocial loyalty over heterosexual love, the Icelandic narratives differ considerably from the canon of European verse romance.

The composition of the Icelandic *riddarasögur* stayed lively throughout the entire late Middle Ages (and beyond), and approximately thirty of them have survived in manuscripts from the period between the end of the thirteenth and the fifteenth century.[26] Since many of these are quite elaborate, it seems safe to assume that the

[21] David Brégaint, "Conquering Minds. *Konungs skuggsiá* and the Annexation of Iceland in the Thirteenth Century," *Scandinavian Studies* 84 (2012): 440–41.
[22] Bjarne Fidjestøl, "Romantic Reading at the Court of King Håkon Håkonsson," in *Selected Papers*, ed. Odd Einar Haugen and Else Mundal, trans. Peter Foote (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1997), 365.
[23] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, "Introduction," in *Women in Old Norse literature*, 5.
[24] Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 81.
[25] Although the translations and adaptions seemed to have been produced for the most part at the Norwegian court, the vast majority of these texts is preserved in Icelandic manuscripts. See, for example, Glauser, "Romance," 372–73.
[26] When it comes to identifying the Icelandic romances that date back to the medieval period, the numbers referred to usually range from thirty (Schier) to thirty-five (Sävborg). For a further discussion, see Agnete Loth, "Preface," in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, vol. 5, ed. Agnete Loth (København: Munksgaard, 1965), x–xi; Marianne E. Kalinke and Philipp M. Mitchell, eds., *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Romances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), vii–ix; Kurt Schier, *Sagaliteratur*, 112–15; Jürg Glauser, "Nachwort," 402; Daniel Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken. Erotik, känslor och berättarkonst i norrön litteratur* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 2007), 561.

romances must have been commissioned by people with considerable means and ambitious aspirations of social and material advancement. In late medieval Iceland, this group within society was on the one hand made up of those who were manning the offices in the new administrative system, and, on the other hand, the men and families who had attained wealth through the burgeoning fishing industry.[27] The literary illustrations of a courtly and chivalrous society provided the members of the new Icelandic elite with a unique opportunity to explore new thoughts and ideas about their own group, as well as those who did not belong to it.[28] Through the depiction of the knight and his desirable and appealing way of life, the aristocracy aimed at creating a distinction between themselves and the rest of the population, which also explains why the romances made a lasting contribution to the development of a distinct aristocratic identity. When discussing the preoccupations and concerns of the medieval Icelandic gentry, one can, however, also refer to other types of secular prose literature. Among those narratives which have conventionally been categorized as *fornaldarsögur*, there are, in fact, a handful of texts of striking similarity to the *riddarasögur*.

The *fornaldarsögur* belong to the aforementioned representatives of "fantastic" medieval Icelandic literature that are, for the greater part, set in ancient Scandinavia or continental Europe, and which display a strong interest in the "legendary past" of the Nordic countries. Many of them are based on old tales and legends about Scandinavian kings and heroes, such as the Danish King Hrólfr kraki. Although they are not preserved in manuscripts that date from before 1300, the first *fornaldarsögur* already seemed to have emerged by the end of the twelfth century, and thus at roughly the same time as the *Íslendingasögur*.[29] Both in their own way have contributed to the construction of an Icelandic history: Insofar as they sought to "*imitate the aristocratic customs that flourished elsewhere in Europe*" at that time, the *fornaldarsögur* were considered an

[27] Jürg Glauser, "Erzähler – Ritter – Zuhörer. Das Beispiel der Riddarasögur. Erzählkommunikation und Hörergemeinschaft im mittelalterlichen Island," in *Les sagas de chevaliers (Riddarasögur). Actes de la Ve conférence internationale sur les sagas (Toulon juillet 1982),* ed. Régis Boyer (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1982), 101.
[28] Barnes, "Romance," 269–70.
[29] Torfi H. Tulinius, "Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory (*fornaldarsögur*)," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 449–52.

important medium for binding the Icelandic ruling-class more closely to the powerful elites of the Scandinavian countries.[30]

According to the Danish antiquarian Carl Christian Rafn, who provided the first comprehensive edition of the *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda* in the beginning of the nineteenth century, the corpus consists of twenty-five texts.[31] Despite the fact that this collection has constituted the genre and often served as the point of departure for other editions, Rafn's selection of sagas is, after all, only loosely defined by the texts' narrative setting. In fact, the corpus is not very homogenous at all. Just as there exist *riddarasögur* which are set in a prehistorical Nordic rather than in a Europeanized surrounding, there are also quite a few *fornaldarsögur* whose plots take place in a chivalric milieu completely detached from reality, and which express a distinct flirtation with courtly topoi.[32] All of these sagas, however, display a similar narrative structure in so far as they tell the story of a knight who, after having defeated his malevolent counterpart, successfully manages to find himself the perfect woman to marry, as well as a kingdom to rule over.[33] Since they show that certain literary motifs and styles often do not respect traditional generic boundaries, they all will be referred to as Icelandic romances in the present study.[34] Another aspect common to these sagas is that they all have a happy ending – at least from the perspective of the male hero.[35] Since the maintenance of the order, which constitutes the world of Icelandic romance, can often

[30] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Stórkirkjur, sagnaritun og valdamiðstöðvar 1100–1400", in *Þriðja íslenska söguþingið 18.–21. maí 2006. Ráðstefnurit*, ed. Benedikt Eyþórsson and Hrafnkell Lárusson (Reykjavík, 2007), 233; Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, 45.

[31] C. C. Rafn, "Formáli," in *Fornaldar Sögur Nordrlanda: Eptir gömlum handritum*, vol. 1, ed. Ibid. (København: n.p., 1829), V.

[32] Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom*, 81–82.

[33] Among them are *Hjálmþés saga ok Ǫlvis* and *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*. On the generic hybridity of the *fornaldarsögur*, see esp. Lars Lönnroth, "Fornaldarsagornas genremässiga metamorfoser: Mellan Edda-myth och riddarroman," in *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi*, 37–45; Hermann Pálsson, "Towards a Definition of *fornaldarsögur*," in *Fourth International Saga Conference. München, July 30th – August 4th, 1979* (München, 1979); Ármann Jakobsson, "Le roi chevalier. The Royal Ideology and Genre of *Hrólfs saga kraka*," *Scandinavian Studies* 71 (1999): 163.

[34] Among those who have argued for a new definition of the genre is, for example, Torfi H. Tulinius, "Kynjasögur úr fortíð og framandi löndum," in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, vol. 2, ed. Böðvar Guðmundsson et al. (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1993), 219. Other scholars have also suggested that we regard the *fornaldarsögur* as secular romances. See, for example, Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary Fiction in Medieval Iceland*, Studia Islandica 30 (Reykjavík: Heimspekideild Háskóla Íslands and Menningarsjóður, 1970), 17; Hermann Pálsson "*Fornaldarsögur*," 137. Marianne E. Kalinke, "Norse Romance (*Riddarasögur*)," in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, Islandica 45 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 324–7.

[35] An exception to this is the rather tragic *Hrólfs saga kraka* which ends with the death of the male protagonist. Since the plot is set in a distinctly courtly milieu which is defined by the homosocial bonds between the king and his champions, it is, however, plausible to classify also this saga as a romance.

only be maintained by the use of violence and sexual humiliation of the woman, many of the female characters seldom live so “happily-ever-after”.

3. Political Power and Social Networks during the Free State Period

3.1. The Power Base of the Icelandic Ruling-Class Chieftains

While the arrival of Christianity had led to the gradual strengthening and consolidation of royal power in most parts of Northern Europe, such changes did not take place in Iceland until nearly three centuries after the introduction of the new faith.[36] Early Iceland was a country without a king (or similar sovereign leader) or any kind of central authority. Instead, it was governed by a varying number of secular chieftains (*goðar*) with equal rights and opportunities to exercise power, at least theoretically. Rather than being bound to a clear geographical territory, a chieftaincy (*goðorð*) was a lordship over people (*mannaforráð*) and considerably based on the support a chieftain gained from his followers (*þingmenn*).[37] All landowning farmers (*bændar*) were obliged to attach themselves, their family and their household to one of the leading men of Icelandic society, although they also had the opportunity to change their allegiances.[38] In order to prove himself worthy of his leadership and to attract as many followers as possible, a chieftain had to show himself helpful and generous towards the farmers. In demonstrating the possession of these qualities, the most common and most popular methods were the practices of gift-giving and feast holding.[39] Since the material foundation for this usually based on the farmers' surplus production, the two sides were tightly bound together.[40] The obligations of leadership implied that the chieftain had to provide his followers with protection and, if necessary, advise and support in legal matters. When it came to disputes among his *þingmenn*, the chieftain had to make sure to satisfy both parties. In return, the *þingmenn* had to support their chieftain in the way that suited him best.[41] If he was not able to fulfill his duties and failed to establish orderly conditions within his sphere of power, it was not only his chieftaincy, but also

[36] Ralph O'Connor, "Introduction," in *Icelandic Histories and Romances* (Stroud: Tempus, 2002), 10.
[37] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "The Changing Role of Friendship in Iceland, c. 900–1300," in *Friendship and Social Networks in Scandinavia, c. 1000–1800*, ed. Ibid. and Thomas Småberg (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 45.
[38] *Grágás. Islændernes lovbog i fristatens tid, udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift*, vol. 1, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (1852–70; reprint, Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1974), 132–36 (*Grágás Konungsbók*).
[39] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "The Changing Role of Friendship," 51.
[40] Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom*, 46.
[41] William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking. Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 22–26.

his honor that was at stake.[42] Although the friendship between a chieftain and his follower was based on reciprocal dependence, it was the chieftain alone who held the initiative. The farmers, however, had very limited opportunities to act independently. No less important was the fact that a farmer could not establish several vertical bonds of friendship, but was exclusively bound to *one* chieftain. Although he could establish his own social networks with other householders, in the establishing of friendship with chieftains, he had to make a choice.[43] The vertical alliances between the chieftains and the landowning farmers constituted the nucleus of each chieftaincy, and the exercise of political power in medieval Icelandic society rested to a large extent on the construction of these networks. This does not mean that a chieftain could entirely renounce establishing friendship-pacts with other chieftains. In fact, the horizontal alliances between men of equal social and economic status could also prove quite instrumental in expanding social networks.[44] In this context, it has to be taken into account that most of the alliances within the upper stratum of Icelandic society were exclusively established in accordance with the chieftain's own current interests. In other words, there was usually very little loyalty in these types of associations. Since both parties had their own political goals and alternative networks, they also had the possibility to act independently.[45] This means that the chieftains were always willing to sacrifice their "friendships" with other chieftains in favor of stronger and more powerful alliances. The vertical alliances with the farmers involved much more adherence. This is also why many chieftains preferred taking a concubine (*frilla*) from among the ranks of their followers instead of (or sometimes also in addition to) entering into a bond of marriage with the kinswoman of their potential competitors. Becoming involved with a woman who was attached to a wealthy and influential farmer (*stórbóndi*) provided the chieftains with access to the social networks and financial resources of his followers.[46] Therefore, in defining the relationships between the leading men of Icelandic society, women

[42] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, trans. Jean Lundskær-Nielsen (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1999), 120–22.
[43] Auður G. Magnúsdóttir, "Women and Sexual Politics," in *The Viking World*, ed. by Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 45.
[44] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "The Changing Role of Friendship," 52–55.
[45] Auður G. Magnúsdóttir, "Women and Sexual politics," 43.
[46] Ibid., *Frillor och fruar. Politik och samlevnad på Island 1120–1400* (Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 2001) 47–97.

played a crucial role in the political power games of high and late medieval Icelandic society.

3.2. The Political Situation at the End of the Free State Period

While the even disposition of power constituted the basis and the objective of the Icelandic Free State, the political development of the period showed that this had already become an unrealized ideal by the end of the twelfth century. Since the chieftains were lusting for more and more political authority, the system contained a built-in imbalance which led to detrimental consequences. Due to the fact that the expansion of power was only possible at the expense of other chieftains, the chieftaincies slowly began to disintegrate. Along with the gradual concentration of power, the chieftaincies started to evolve into proper domains (*ríki*), that is, small states with relatively fixed geographical boundaries. When most of the domains had taken shape in the first decades of the thirteenth century, Iceland was divided up among the leaders of only six families.[47] In addition to the accumulation of a considerable number of chieftaincies, these families were also in possession of the country's most important church farms.

All power, however, is only relative, and since none of the competing groups were able to gain control over the others consistently, there was no way to attain absolute power in the Icelandic Free State. The spiral of violence and counter-violence that was induced by the reckless and self-righteous actions of the political elite revealed clearly that the constitution of the Icelandic Free State had already lost its legal and judicial functions a long time ago. The chieftains were encouraged to find other ways to settle their disputes and to secure their social positions. With the beginning of the thirteenth century, the men of the Icelandic ruling-class began to turn their attention to what was happening on the other side of the Northern Atlantic, and tried to become closer to the Norwegian king. A good relationship with the Norwegian crown was not only a question of prestige, but it also ensured support and indirect protection against the aspirations of the other chieftains.[48] The close contacts between the Norwegian court

[47] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "The Icelandic Aristocracy after the Fall of the Free State," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 20 (1995): 154.
[48] Ibid., *Chieftains and Power*, 76–77.

and the Icelandic ruling-class also led to considerable changes in the country's domestic political organization in so far as the chieftains concentrated on establishing alliances with only the most influential among the householders. Since the power of the chieftains was now based on a limited number of "retainers", this system was almost identical to the royal retinue (*hirð*).[49] Due to the fact that through these developments the chieftains gradually lost their connections to the common people, the gap between the upper and the lower classes of society became progressively wider.[50]

Since the chieftains were required to hand their political authority over to the Norwegian crown, the price to be paid in order to become a retainer of the Norwegian king was no less high. Through the implementation of these claims, the king could – beginning between the years 1220 and 1250 – acquire proof or ownership of the majority of the Icelandic chieftaincies. Once a chieftain had given his lordship to the king, he could only re-obtain it from him as a fief.[51] At roughly the same time when the king bound most of the chieftains to him by the use of retainers as vassals, the Icelanders also accepted to pay taxes to him and were thereby formally integrated into the Norwegian kingdom.[52]

The years 1262/64 did not, however, mark the often suggested breach with the Age of the Free State. On the contrary, the years that followed upon Iceland's incorporation into the Norwegian realm differed little from the preceding period. In fact, it was almost the same men and the same families as before that happened to dominate the first decade of the post-Free State society.

[49] Randi Bjørshol Wærdahl, *The Incorporation and Integration of the King's Tributary Lands into the Norwegian Realm, c. 1195–1397* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 61.
[50] Sigríður Beck, "Frá goðum til yfirstéttar 1220–1387," in *Þriðja íslenska sögupingið 18.-21 maí 2006*, ed. Benedikt Eyþórsson and Hrafnkell Lárusson (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðingafélag Íslands, 2007), 242; Sigríður Beck, *I kungens frånvaro. Formeringen av en isländsk aristokrati 1271–1387* (Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 2011), 156–63.
[51] Why none of the chieftains refrained from delegating their power to the Norwegian king is a question whose answer goes far beyond the scope of this study. The political development, however, clearly demonstrates that the members of the Free State society were already highly receptive for alternative political forms and ideologies. Randi Bjørshol Wærdahl, *The Incorporation and Integration of the King's Tributary Lands*, 146.
[52] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power*, 71–83.

3.3. The Transformation of the Icelandic Elite from Kin-Based to Service Aristocracy

When the new law-books *Járnsíða* and *Jónsbók* were introduced in the years 1271 and 1281, the social elite underwent fundamental structural changes.[53] With the new constitution, the chieftaincy system was abrogated once and for all, and the chieftaincies were replaced by royal offices. As in most other medieval European countries, all legislative and executive power was now centralized in the hands of a king. The headquarters of the new leadership, however, were not located in Iceland but on the other side of the Northern Atlantic, and none of the Norwegian kings who reigned during this time of political transformation ever seemed to have visited Iceland.[54] Since the king was, nevertheless, in need of a superior commissioner, the leader of the Icelandic retainers became the most important and powerful man of the new administrative system. Along with the appointment of a *hirðstjóri*, the country was divided into twelve districts (*sýslur*) which were each to be administrated by one *sýslumaðr*. The new system was complemented by two *lögmenn* who led the work of the former legislative and judicial institution of the *Alþingi* (now a law court) and chaired the old law council of the *lögrétta*.[55]

The adoption of the Norwegian administrative system, however, did not lead only to changes within the former ruling class. In the course of the thirteenth century, Iceland developed into a more organized and hierarchical society that distinguished clearly between the upper and lower social strata.[56] Unlike before, power was not based on the householders any longer but was largely dependent on the Norwegian crown. In order to increase their status and to gain access to the court, a close affiliation to the Norwegian crown was the most essential precondition for the new royal officials. As illustrated above, the power struggles between the chieftains played a crucial part in the disintegration of the Icelandic Free State, and the Norwegian king realized that, if he wanted to rule the country more efficiently, he had to put an end to the conflicts between his new retainers. In order to prevent the outbreak of further conflicts, and to

[53] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "The Icelandic Aristocracy," 156.
[54] Ibid., 156. For a further discussion, see also Sigríður Beck's doctoral dissertation on the development of the Icelandic aristocary in absence of a king. Sigríður Beck. *I kungens frånvaro*.
[55] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "The Icelandic Aristocracy," 156–57.
[56] Ibid., 153–66.

reduce the existing tensions among the former leaders of the Free State society, the oath of allegiance proved to be of great helpfulness. But the obligations of mutual loyalty implied much more than the gradually increasing solidarity among the men of the new Icelandic elite. Through their integration into the royal retinue, its members adopted a shared set of guiding principles and began to develop something like an aristocratic identity.[57]

But what does it actually mean to belong to one of the king's men, and, moreover, what does it take to be worthy of this position? After relying on a governmental system of decentralized rule for more than three centuries, there was certainly a good deal of persuasion and propaganda needed to promote and implement the idea of a God-given royal authority within the Icelandic upper class. In this context, there were two important Norwegian texts from the thirteenth century that seemed to have played a decisive role. One important reference point for gaining an insight into the royal retinue is *Hirðskrá*, a compilation of laws and provisions that regulated the rights and duties of the king's retainers. Since the text is preserved in four Icelandic manuscripts from the fourteenth century, it seems reasonable to suppose that the Icelandic aristocracy's interest in the institution of the *hirð* and the corresponding code of conduct was growing considerably during that time. As a member of the king's retinue, *Hirðskrá* states, a man had to avoid a whole catalogue of things deemed unworthy by nature. Furthermore, a *hirðmaðr* was expected to display courteousness in all facets of life. Instead of running the risk of losing both his temper and self-control, he had to make sure to always remain the master of himself. When he was attacked, a *hirðmaðr* was still allowed to defend himself by means of arms, but as a representative of the Norwegian kingdom, he was also expected to avoid drawing premature and hasty conclusions. A chivalrous man used his weapons wisely.[58]

Konungs skuggsiá (a Norwegian representative of speculum literature with a strong didactical framing) also highlights the importance of temperateness and self-restraint, and advocates humility in words and behavior.[59] Perhaps more so than *Hirðskrá*, the text encapsulates the distinctiveness and exclusivity of the king and the

[57] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "The Icelandic Aristocracy," 158–60.
[58] "Hirdskråen," in *Hirdloven til Norges konge og hans håndgangne menn etter AM 322 fol*, ed. Steinar Imsen (Oslo: Riksarkivet, 2000), 112–16.
[59] Sverre Bagge, *The Political Thought of the King's Mirror* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1987), 210-11.

men which he gathered around him. With the exception of the king, *Konungs skuggsiá* claims that there is no one of such high esteem and social standing as the *hirðmaðr*. Whether in terms of his ancestry, property, reputation or conduct, a king's man is flawless in every way.[60] In practice, this meant that no one who could not prove to come from a distinguished family was allowed to enter the king's service. If a man was descended from a chieftain, however, it was almost taken for granted that his ancestry would be defined as appropriate.[61] A sound economy and, not least, the possession of refined manners and culture also belonged to the criteria that were necessary to gain entrance into the royal retinue. In order to show that the aspirant met these expectations, he was required to submit an official document that attested his economic status and behavior. All of these demands are articulated in a decree issued by King Hákon V in 1308.[62]

Although membership to the nobility was to a large extent socially hereditary, there was still a chance for commoners with an acceptable economic and social background to gain admission. While some of the secular authorities who had exercised supreme power and control over the country during the period of the Free State increasingly lost their influence, a small number of new families grew rich with the rise of the fish industry in the beginning of the fourteenth century.[63]

[60] *Konungs skuggsiá*, ed. Ludvig Holm-Olsen (Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskrift-Institutt, 1945), 43.
[61] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "The Icelandic Aristocracy," 157–58.
[62] Ibid., 158.
[63] Jürg Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas. Studien zur Prosaliteratur im spätmittelalterlichen Island* (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1983), 37–60.

4. Sex, Gender, and Sexual Norms in Medieval Icelandic Society

4.1. Manliness and Unmanliness during the Free State Period

During the period of the Free State, Icelandic society was governed by a huge body of laws which have collectively become referred to as *Grágás*.[64] Although it represents a collection of various kinds of legal material rather than an official version of the medieval Icelandic law, the texts (which have been preserved for posterity in two manuscripts from the thirteenth century) reveal much about what kind of behavior was considered appropriate among the medieval Icelandic population. In particular the sections about insult and slander (*níð*) provide an abundance of information on the prevailing norms of masculinity. In fact, only one word was enough to call a man's masculinity seriously into question and to plunge him into a deep identity crisis: A man who became the object of *níð* was assaulted because of his lack of manliness.

According to *Grágás*, the composition of *níðvísur* was considered the most potent form of defamation in medieval Icelandic society. The adjectives *argr* and *ragr*, and their respective nouns *ergi* and *regi* were regarded as particularly humiliating due to their implied connotations of passive male homosexuality. Since a man who was *ragr* was "willing or inclined to play or interested in playing the female part in sexual relations with another man", this kind of insult was ultimately connected to sexual submission.[65] Besides *ragr*, even the words *stroðinn* and *sorðinn* (both meaning "sexually used by a man") were considered so powerful that they could considerably offend a man's honor.[66] What caused the most indignation, however, was the notion that the man in question made no resistance to submit himself to another man.[67] On that note, the insulted was not only accused of having been penetrated by other males, but

[64] *Grágás* has been preserved in two manuscripts (*Konungsbók* and *Staðarhólsbók*) which both date to the period between 1250 and 1280. Gunnar Karlsson, Kristján Sveinsson and Mörður Árnason, "Inngangur," in *Grágás: Lagasafn íslenska þjóðveldisins*, ed. Gunnar Karlsson et. al. (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2001), xii.

[65] *Grágás. Islændernes lovbog i fristatens tid, udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift*, vol. 2, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (1852–70; reprint, Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1974), 183–84 (*Grágás Konungsbók*).

[66] Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man. Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society* (*The Viking Collection, Studies in Northern Civilization,* vol. 1), trans. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1983), 80.

[67] John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality. Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 184.

níð could further imply that he slipped into a role traditionally reserved for women or animals (who fall into the same category in this context). Against this background, *níðvísur* rarely seemed to have referred to actual cases of sexual intercourse between two men. Instead, it appears that the receiver of the insult was defamed because of his unmanliness in other situations. Since the insult was meant to catch the flaws in a person's character (such as cowardice in situations of potential danger or complaisance towards other men), the alleged sexual act was an abstract but rather meaningful reference that could not be ignored. There was always the risk that others would give credence to the accusations. In fact, the implications of *níð* were so offending that a man who made use of it could be punished with full outlawry – while the man accused falsely was entitled to kill on account of the three aforementioned words.[68]

4.2. Manliness and Womanliness during the Free State Period

Women could also become the victims of sexually charged attacks, although the insults. In these instances the insults, however, carried a slightly different meaning than those men were reproached with. (Of course, as a woman, it makes little sense to be offended by being called unmanly.) A woman insulted as *örg* was usually accused of indecent and lecherous behavior. This, in turn, seems to suggest that licentiousness and promiscuity in women were regarded with the same contempt as subservience, reluctance and effeminacy in men. Despite the fact that these qualities stood in sharp contrast to what was considered masculine, they must not necessarily be equated with femininity.[69]

Even though femininity could serve well to exemplify certain aspects of deviation from the masculine ideal, the opposite of manliness was not womanliness but unmanliness. This in fact means that the latter could be represented by a variety of different phenomena that did not conform to the standard, such as animal behavior,

[68] *Grágás, efter det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift Nr. 334 fol., Staðarhólsbók,* ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen. (1879; reprint, Odense: Odensee Universitetsforlag, 1974), 392 (*Grágás Staðarhólsbók). Konungsbók*, however, mentions only the words *argr* and *sorðinn*. *Grágás Konungsbók*, 184. The relevant passages from *Grágás* are also conveniently summarized in Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 15–18.

[69] Folke Ström, Níð, ergi *and Old Norse Moral Attitudes* (London: Viking society for Northern research, 1974), 4; Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Norrønt nid. Forestillingen om den umandige mand i det islandske sagaer* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1980), 22.

servitude, poverty – or even femaleness.[70] In order to demonstrate and defend his masculinity, a man had to prove courage and determination, and when someone in his household was physically or verbally attacked, he was expected to defend the assaulted one. This applied especially to those cases in which the victim was a woman of his own family, and for whom he held guardianship over. Since the shameful slandering of a woman always fell back to her guardian, no matter whether it was her husband or her father, it also implied that the man's own honor was at stake. If he wanted to avoid being considered unmanly and effeminate, he could not let the insult happen without retribution.[71]

As has been made clear, there seemed to have existed certain ideas about manliness and unmanliness during the period of the Icelandic Free State. But still, there remains the question where exactly the sphere of the feminine was located. Did there already exist a particular concept of femininity? As already indicated in the introduction to this thesis, it is not a new discovery that sex and gender in the pre-modern European context were conceptualized in a radically different manner than after the transition to modernity. Furthermore, within the last decades, the social and cultural history of sex and gender has been explored and evaluated in an abundance of studies. According to the historian and sexologist Thomas Lacqueur, the notion of the essential difference between the male and the female body had been virtually unknown until far into the eighteenth century. Since the human body, Lacqueur argues, was predominantly conceptualized in terms of permeability and fluidity, sexual difference was a matter of degree of perfection. This means, he continues, that the bodies of males and females were arranged differently "*along a vertical axis of infinite gradations*."[72] While the male body constituted the canonical human form, the woman represented a slightly lesser, imperfect version of it.[73] Since men are privileged with respect to women,

[70] Bjørn Bandlien, *Man or Monster? Negotiations of Masculinity in Old Norse Society* (Oslo: Unipub, 2005), 134–36.
[71] Bandlien, *Å finne den rette. Kjærlighet, individ og samfunn i norrøn middelalder* (Oslo: Den historiske forening, 2001), 70.
[72] Thomas Lacqueur, *Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 148.
[73] In formulating his ideas, Lacqueur drew on a vast amount of material stretching from ancient philosophical writing to anatomical descriptions from the seventeenth century. The fundamental basis for the one-sex/one-flesh model, however, can be found in the works of the Greek physician and philosopher Galen of Pergamon (c. 129–200 AD) who organized sexual difference around the level of "vital heath" each living being's body produced. While males' excess of heat resulted in extroverted genitalia, women's cooler constitution led to their genitalia being left inside the body: the vagina was regarded as

Lacqueur's one-sex/one-flesh model is, of course, clearly patriarchal: The male was the standard against which all else was measured. This, however, brings us back to the question of the sphere of the feminine.

According to the literary scholar Carol Clover, Iceland during the period of the Free State was a society that only knew one sex. Despite the awareness of the anatomical differences between the male and the female body, men and women, Clover argues, were regarded as two comparable variants of the same sex: "*More to the point, there was finally just one "gender," one standard by which persons were judged adequate or inadequate, and it was something like masculine.*"[74] Building on Lacqueur's studies on the emergence of sex and gender, Clover claims that, during the period of the Icelandic Free State, it was not decisive whether one was born as man or women. The boundaries, she suggests, did not lie between men and women. Rather, they were drawn between the strong and powerful, and the weak and powerless members of society: "*A woman may start with debits and a man with credits, but any number of other considerations – wealth, marital status, birth order, historical accident, popularity, a forceful personality, sheer ambition, and so on – could tip the balance in the other direction.*"[75] Although women were often counted among the less influential members of society, they were perfectly capable of achieving a higher position – while men, who did not realize their potential, were not only considered powerless but risked social devaluation. Woman, Clover concludes, was a normative category, but it was not a binding one.[76]

With reference to the legal material gathered in *Grágás*, it might be objected at this point that there were several aspects of daily life that required a sharp distinction between men and women: Whereas men had, for example, the right to bear arms, have their hair cut short and dress themselves in clothing made of brocade, women were disallowed to wear male clothes and accessories. Moreover, they could even be punished with outlawry, if they violated these prescriptions, and the same applied to

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an interior penis, the labia as foreskin, the womb as a scrotum, and the ovaries as testicles. See, for example, Amy Bix, "Medicine," in *Women, Science, and Myth. Gender Beliefs from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Sue Vilhauer Rosser (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2008), 136.

[74] Carol Clover, "Regardless of Sex," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 379.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid., 371–72.

men who walked around in women's clothing.[77] The clearest expression for the spatial separation of men and women, however, is probably embodied by the threshold of the house:

> Þar er samfarar hiona ero oc scal hann raða fyrir fe þeirra oc cavpom. Eigi er kono scyllt at eiga ibue nema hon vile. en ef hon á ibve með honom. þa a hon at raða bv ráðom fyrir inan stocc. ef hon vill oc smala nyt.[78]
>
> (When a couple is in a marriage, he shall take care of their property and their business. The woman does not have to own a share in the household unless she wants. But if she has a share with him, then she should take care of the household inside the threshold, and if she wants, also of the dairying.)[79]

While the world of the man was located on the outer side of the threshold, the woman, as the passage above seems to suggest, was primarily associated with the duties that had to be taken care of inside the house.[80] It has often been argued that the keys that were hanging down from the woman's waist displayed her authority in and belonging to the domestic sphere. It seems worthwhile to re-evaluate this interpretation in light of the fact that keys, throughout history, have been used to symbolize the ability to *gain access* to something rather than to be excluded from it. Since the keys gave the woman the power to distribute (or not distribute) food to the other members of the household, they were also a useful means of control. The bunch of keys at her belt did not merely consist of keys that gave her entry to the pantry and the milk chamber. What happened, for example, when the man – whether temporarily or permanently – was prevented from taking care of the farm himself? Although a woman was by law subordinated to her husband when he was at home, it seems highly likely that the mistress of the house assumed full charge of the entire farm in times of her husband's absence. In other words, the door that led outside was not closed, and when circumstances allowed, the

[77] *Grágás Konungsbók*, 203–04.
[78] Ibid., 44.
[79] All translations of Old Norse texts are my own, unless otherwise stated.
[80] For a further discussion, see, for example Birgit Sawyer, *Kvinnor och familj i det forn- och medeltida Skandinavien* (Skara: Viktoria bokförlag, 1992), 75; Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, *Konur og vígamenn: Staða kynjanna á Íslandi á 12. og 13. öld* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands,1995), 175; Jenny M. Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 117; Henric Bagerius, "I genusstrukturens spänningsfält: Om kön, genus och sexualitet i saga och samhälle," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 116 (2001): 27–28, 39–43.

woman could cross the border between the two worlds and occupy roles that were *normally* assigned to men.[81]

4.3. The Rise of a New Masculinity

The political events that took place in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries showed clearly that the power struggles between the few remaining Icelandic chieftains had become a no-win situation for everyone involved. Parallel to the development within the national borders, and along with the close contact to the Norwegian crown, the leading men of Icelandic society became more and more preoccupied with the values and ideals of courtly society. In order to consolidate their social positions, they sought to strengthen their ties to the Norwegian king, who, by that time, had become one of the most powerful men of the Northern hemisphere. Although the royal support was bound to the condition of transferring their chieftaincies to the crown, eventually all of the men of the Icelandic ruling-class swore their oaths of allegiance to the king. At the same time, one man after the other was integrated into the king's retinue, and became a royal retainer. Once bitter rivals and political opponents, the former Icelandic chieftains found themselves as members of a group with shared interests and aspirations. Along with the constitutional changes of the years 1271 and 1281 and the introduction of administrative offices with an unprecedented admission framework, the Icelandic retainers were challenged with the construction of a new, aristocratic self-image.

As discussed above, power had not always nor necessarily been a question of whether one was born as a man or a woman, but was determined by a whole set of other considerations. After the incorporation into the Norwegian monarchy, however, the situation had changed considerably. Along with the new emphasis on the importance of mutual loyalty, there arose a powerful homosocial network among the members of the Icelandic aristocracy, which, in turn, seemed to have contributed to the emergence of a strong feeling of exclusiveness. In order to enable aristocratic men to expand into new territories, the sphere of the feminine had to be be marginalized considerably. As a

[81] That the medieval Icelandic saga corpus is full of female characters that act independently from their men (or other male guardians) is also discussed by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir in *Women in Old Norse Literature.*

result, femininity – rather than unmanliness – gradually came to be seen as the opposite of masculinity. This meant that, in creating a distinct aristocratic identity, a dichotomy was established between masculinity and femininity.[82] The notion of the woman's "otherness" was to play a key role in the aristocracy's development of a more courtly and chivalric masculinity.[83] In order to conform to "*a true knighthood*", men were expected to demonstrate bravery and boldness in certain situations, and restraint and humility in others.[84]

4.4. Sexuality and Politics between Secular Interests and Christian Moral Values[85]

The Church had never been particularly pleased with the moral conduct of the Icelandic population and the different forms of extramarital cohabitation that were practiced among the secular elite of the Free State. For the greater part of the period, however, the ecclesiastical authorities were not in the position to exert any influence on the members of the ruling class. In the early days of Old Norse scholarship, the Icelanders' reluctance to obey the norms of the Church was often related to the assumption that the customs and habits of the Icelandic chieftains differed fundamentally from the Christian teachings on morality and sexuality. These ideas were closely connected to the alleged primitivism of the medieval northern society and the backwardness of the Icelandic people in particular. In fact, this opinion arose from the same tradition as the reservations towards most of the literature that came after the "classical" period of saga-writing.

The Icelanders, and especially the members of the social elite, were certainly well aware of the Christian moral code and the holy sacrament of matrimony. It was, however, far from being respected by everyone. Due to the fact that the Church had not yet gained a substantial foothold in the society of the Icelandic Free State, there did not exist a real consensus over what constituted a valid Christian marriage. Hence, it was not unlikely that two individuals, who mutually consented to live in a permanent

[82] Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom*, 60.
[83] The significance of "otherness" for the construction of social identities is, for example, discussed in Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).
[84] Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), 88.
[85] As indicated in the introduction, the changing approaches to sexuality and marriage that are described in the following chapters are part of a wider European development which arose from the centralization of political power and the establishment of the Church as an independent institution. Due to the good source material, it is, however, particularly well documented for the case of late medieval Iceland society.

relationship, could, at least in practice, be regarded as married.[86] However, when the Icelandic Church began to develop into a strong independent institution in the course of the thirteenth century, the political and social framework became subject to great changes. With the country's integration into the Norwegian kingdom, Iceland fell under the sphere of influence of the Norwegian Church, which, in turn, was based on the Gregorian interest of tying the periphery of Europe more closely to the control of the papacy in Rome.[87] The major ecclesiastical reforms that followed upon these developments led, among other things, to the end of lay control of the country's major church farms (*staðir*).[88] However, through the infringement on areas of society that used to be dominated by the laity, it was above all the sexuality of the upper class that now became extremely regulated. Along with the fierce condemnation of concubinage, the ecclesiastical authorities deliberately sought to impose marriage as the only tolerable form of cohabitation. In order to comply with the large catalogue of requirements that accompanied this demand, the Icelandic aristocrats had to leave behind many of those attitudes that had defined them as men in the previous centuries.[89]

The Christian understanding of matrimony was based on and firmly bound to the statements found in the Christian biblical canon and included principles such as the prohibition of incest, the promotion of monogamy, and the postulated indissolubility of marriage.[90] Starting from the premise that both spouses had to remain within the boundaries of monogamy, marriage, through the eyes of the Church, was regarded as the deepest and most personal relationship that could be established between two

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[86] Auður G. Magnúsdóttir, *Frillor och fruar*, 219–23; Jenny M. Jochens, "The Church and Sexuality in Medieval Iceland," *Journal of medieval history* 6 (1980): 389.

[87] Erika Ruth Sigurdson, *The Church in Fourteenth-Century Iceland. Ecclesiastical Administration, Literacy, and the Formation of an Elite Clerical Identity* (PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2011), 3.

[88] The institution of the Church used to be closely connected to the secular Icelandic authorities during the period of the Free State, partly because the first churches were raised on the farms of chieftains and other powerful householders. The establishment of a church farm constituted an important aspect of the chieftains' economy since half of the tithe was to be given to the owner of the churches. This is also why many church-owners began to donate their farms entirely to the local church, and fought hard to ensure family control over it. The Church also recognized the enormous economic value of the church farms, and made several attempts to claim sole control of the country's major church farms (*staðir*). This summary is a very simplified outline of the tensions between the secular and ecclesiastical authorities of Icelandic society. For a further discussion see, for example, Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland. Priests, Power, and Social Change 1000–1300* (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 67–74, 209–37; Magnús Stefánsson, "Kirkjuvald eflist," in *Saga Íslands*, vol. 2, ed. Sigurður Líndal (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafélag, 1975), 72–81, 104–05.

[89] Auður G. Magnúsdóttir, "Women and Sexual Politics," 42.

[90] See, for example, Edith Ennen, "Die christliche Eheauffassung und das kirchliche Recht," in *Frauen im Mittelalter* (München: C. H. Beck, 1984), 44–48.

individuals. This is also why the contract of marriage was only valid when both man and woman gave their free consent to it, normally before witnesses. No less important, however, was the notion that the bond of matrimony was a life-long attachment. In practice, this means that once a marriage was contracted legally, it became indissoluble.[91]

Since a woman could not be forced into a marriage, or be cast aside when her husband found a more promising bride, the canon law seemed to have the potential to benefit her position, at least at first sight. However, since it seems rather unlikely that the Christian marriage doctrine was much concerned with female emancipation, these "advantages" were probably more the result rather than the intentions of the ecclesiastical authorities.[92] Moreover, due to the fact that the laity found ways and means to harness the Church's demands for its own behalf, the personal rights of the woman played only a minor part in practice.

During the Middle Ages (as in later centuries), relationships that were established through marriage were considered political resources of uttermost importance, since they, as Georges Duby put it rather accurately, represented "*the keystone of social edifice*."[93] In his studies on kinship structures, Claude Lévi-Strauss referred to marriage as one of the most essential forms of gift-exchange. Since women, he argues, are the most precious of gifts, marriage leads to much stronger bonds than any other gift that is made in order to establish and strengthen social networks. Through marriage, an individual obtains access to and membership in a new family, and if the relation results in children, the alliance is even further confirmed by blood.[94] There is certainly no denying the highly controversial nature of Lévi-Strauss' theory, but still, his ideas had an enormous impact on contemporary and later scholarship, and also provide a useful starting point for discussing the development of the social and sexual culture of medieval Iceland.

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[91] James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 183.
[92] D. H. Green, "Marriage and Love," in *Women and Marriage in German Medieval Romance*, ed. Ibid. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 64–65.
[93] Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest. The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, trans. Barbara Bray (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 19.
[94] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell et al. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 65. See also Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom*, 24–25.

Although the arrangement and contraction of marriages within the own social ranks was already practiced by the secular authorities of the Free State, horizontal alliances (as discussed earlier) were not considered as significant as the vertical relations with the householders. This has a lot to do with the egocentric and bilateral nature of the Icelandic kinship system which led to each individual having his or her own kindred. In practice, this meant that although marriage created new kinship ties, it also implied the change of loyalties – and thus also the risk that conflicts might arise between the different loyalties.[95] However, since the horizontal alliances within the ruling-class often lasted only very briefly, the dissolution of a marriage did not constitute that much of an impediment yet. It was only with the social reorganization of the thirteenth century and the new emphasis on monogamous marriage that the Icelandic social elite began to realize the enormous significance of this type of relationship.

When the chieftaincy system was abolished with the constitutional changes of the years 1271 and 1281, the members of the Icelandic elite were not dependent on the support of the householders any longer. The new political power game took place exclusively in the upper layer of society, and as a result, the practice of concubinage also gradually diminished in value. Along with Iceland's subjugation to the Norwegian kingdom, the old members of the ruling-class became vassals under a sole ruler and thus lost their authority to exercise political power. In order to consolidate their positions in the new administrative system and to comply with the new political framework, they had to hold together and act like a group rather than a horde of lone fighters.

This also explains why, despite the introduction of a new Christian Law (*kristinréttr*) in 1275, the Icelandic aristocracy obeyed the Christian teaching on matrimony only to a certain degree. Since the political considerations that led to aristocratic marriages were highly impersonal, there cannot have been much space left for the individual preferences of the partners. Although a woman could not be forced into matrimony, the arrangement of a marriage could easily be brought about by indirect ways of compulsion, and the right to choose her husband herself was in most cases probably not a realistic possibility.[96] Interestingly enough, while the new Church law placed a high emphasis on mutual consent, the woman's "yes" was not even mentioned in the secular law code of *Jónsbók*. Instead, it explicitly encouraged the woman's

[95] Auður G. Magnúsdóttir, "Women and Sexual Politics," 42.
[96] Jenny M. Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 46.

parents to settle their daughter's future and, moreover, it even provided them with the right to disinherit her if she married without asking their consent.[97] It was the parents who decided whether or not their daughter was to marry the one who asked her hand in marriage. If the suitor could provide a sufficient economic background, an appropriate genealogy and a flawless reputation, the woman's own interests were of no great importance.[98] In the constraints of a highly patriarchal society, a woman did not choose to marry, but rather, to come back to what Levis-Strauss suggested, she was *given* into marriage.[99]

4.5. New Inheritance Practices and the Power of Virginity

The ability to think further ahead was not only important when it came to the assessment of potential bridegroom candidates. If a man wanted to make sure that his property remained in the hands of his own kin, he was wise to choose a bride who was a virgin.[100] For the secular authorities, chastity meant not only renouncing sex but, above all, reproduction. By marrying a woman who was not sexually active yet, the man could exclude the possibility that his future wife was already pregnant with the child of another man. Since a chaste way of life was considered as a means of saving the soul from the distractions and the filth of earthly existence, the members of the Church

[97] *Jónsbók: Kong Magnus Hakonssons lovbog for Island vedtaget paa Altinget 1281 og Réttarbætr: De for Island givne retterbøder af 1294, 1305 og 1314*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson (1904; reprint, Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1970), 70–71. For a further discussion of the changes in the Icelandic marriage legislation, see, for example, Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, "Two Models of Marriage? Canon Law and Icelandic Marriage Practice in the late Middle Ages," in *Nordic Perspectives on Medieval Canon Law*, ed. Mia Korpiola (Helsinki: Publications of Matthias Calonius 1999), 79-92; Bjørn Bandlien, "The Church's Teaching on Women's Consent. A Threat to Parents and Society in Medieval Norway and Iceland?" in *Family, Marriage and Property Devolution in the Middle Ages*, ed. Lars Ivar Hansen (Tromsø: Department of History, University of Tromsø, 2000), 73–75; Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, "Marriage in the Middle Ages: Canon Law and Nordic Family Relations," in *Rapporter til det 24. Nordiske historikermøde, Århus 9.–13. august 2001*, vol 1: *Norden og Europa i middelalderen*, ed. Per Ingesman and Thomas Lindkvist (Århus: Jysk Selskab for Historie, 2001), 182–83.

[98] Jenny M. Jochens, "'Með jákvæði hennar sjálfrar': Consent as Signifier in the Old Norse World," in *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies*, ed. Angeliki E. Laiou (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1993), 278–79.

[99] That the exchange of women was one of the most striking aspects of (pre-modern) patriarchal societies is also discussed by Gayle Rubins, one of the pioneers of feminist anthropology, in "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210.

[100] Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom*, 63.

agreed on the positive qualities of virginity.[101] Despite the fact that chastity was a quality desired in both men and women, it should not come as a surprise that, in a society in which males represented the primary authority figures central to social organization, there existed a double standard in regard to sexual matters: While premarital sexual intercourse was unthinkable in the case of women, it was usually taken much less seriously when it came to men.[102]

When Icelandic society was reorganized in the course of the thirteenth century, and the property rights of the country's major church farms fell into the hands of the Church, the secular elite had to make every effort to retain ownership of their possession. In order to keep family property concentrated, the greater part of the heritage was passed down across patrilineal lines alone.[103] Whereas children were considered as useful "resources" for the expansion of social networks during the time of the Free State, having a great number of offspring was often regarded as counterproductive. If there was more than one child, it was of utmost priority to make sure that the inheritance would not fall into the wrong hands. This, in turn, explains the importance of biological fatherhood and the strong emphasis on the woman's virginity. When a woman became pregnant by virtue of pre- and/or extramarital sex, it had severe consequences for the settlement of the family's property. Christian moral values might not even particularly persuade the woman's father, but they served perfect guidelines to retain his property.

The disadvantages and the discrimination that many women were faced with did not end here, however. Regardless of the actual circumstances that had led to the sexual incident, the woman was declared the one who had incited the man's passion and seduced him to fall into falling into evil with her. The tendency to point out the "flaws" in the character of the woman – instead of questioning the behavior of the man – is of course heavily based on the story of the fall of man, in which Eve urges Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. Whether referring to Adam or any man in medieval society, there is one question that remains largely open: Why, for God's sake, did he listen to and obey what

[101] This is also why the Virgin Mary was especially venerated in medieval culture: She alone was able to give birth to a child without losing her virginal purity. See Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe. Doing unto Others* (New York/London: Routledge, 2005), 35.
[102] D. H. Green, "The Role of Women," in *Women and Marriage in German Medieval Romance*, ed. Ibid. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 23.
[103] Bagerius, *Mandom och mödöm*, 15; Ibid., "Romance and Violence. Aristocratic Sexuality in Late Medieval Iceland," *MIRATOR* 14.2 (2013): 83.

the woman had said to him? Rather than interpreting the male's reaction as weakness in *his* character, it was much easier and, in fact, also highly efficient to pass the responsibility onto women.

4.6. The Fixation of Femininity in Late Medieval Icelandic Literature

The clerical view of women as either Mary or Eve goes hand in hand with the general ambivalence of medieval men towards women and their sexuality, as has been discernible in literature since late antiquity.[104] When the Church consolidated its influence on marriage rituals, and both the Christian and the secular law supported men's privilege to punish their wives and daughters if they transgressed the new rules and ideals, femininity became more and more connected to the physical and the sexual. Since sexual transgression could lead to severe social disorder (a notion that was ubiquitous in medieval society), women's lives became regulated by a strict moral codex which placed a high value on restraint and humility.[105]

The secular Icelandic prose literature that emerged out of the social and political reorganization of the thirteenth century clearly reveals the growing polarity between masculinity and femininity, and the changing conceptions of male friendship among the aristocracy. More importantly, the strong homosocial bonds between the chivalrous men that can be encountered in the romances often affect the way they act sexually. While the knights consider the consequences of their actions and are able to control their sexual urges and desires, the female characters are often led by their libidinal drives and carnal lust, and thus represent a potential threat for the homosocial order of aristocratic men.[106] As a result, the romances also display a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, humble and chaste maidens and, on the other, licentious and depraved women. However, rather than reflecting the actual nature of late medieval Icelandic society, Icelandic romance plays with the new set of social and sexual rules. Although the texts were written for and commissioned by the secular elite, they were probably composed

[104] R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 107–08.
[105] Jacqueline Murray, "Historicizing Sex, Sexualizing History," in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. Nancy Partner (London: Arnold, 2005), 144–46; Bagerius, "Romance and Violence," 88.
[106] Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom*, 65.

by members of the clergy.[107] Insofar as the narratives must also have served a clear didactic purpose, the romances are prescriptive rather than descriptive, and through the illustration of various and partly contradictory forms of sexuality, they demonstrate the potential consequences of the violation of these rules.

[107] Since most of the churches that were earlier administrated by the Icelandic chieftains went under the control of the bishop in the fourteenth century, the monasteries' importance for the production of literature seemed to have increased considerably by this time. See Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Stórkirkjur," 225–33.

5. One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

5.1. Methodological Approach

The Icelandic romances, as hardly can be overlooked, share a lot of surface similarities with other representatives of medieval or post-medieval bridal-quest narrative, such as Continental verse romance or folk tale. Central to most of these stories is an outstanding prince who is in need of a proper queen for his kingdom, and who, after having to overcome a series of obstacles that result from a confrontation with some evil force, in the end, usually succeeds in conquering his chosen one. In the case of the Icelandic romances, the protagonist often finds himself to be antagonized by brutish creatures of uncertain identity. As we shall see in the following chapter, trolls or troll-like individuals are particularly popular opponents of our young heroes. The deplorable and gruesome, yet sometimes also rather comical events that are depicted in these types of sagas are, however, not necessarily the most remarkable aspect that ensues from one's first visit to the realm of Icelandic romance. What is instead much more conspicuous about these narratives is the formulaic style of ever-recurrent and stereotyped storylines and character portrayals. In fact, that means that in the individual sagas, certain situations and patterns of actions are illustrated in a strikingly similar manner and with the help of almost identical phrases and expressions.[108] This is no less true of the stories' representation of the stepmother figure. Inspired by Vladimir Propp's assessment of (folk tale) characters according to their function in the plot development, and liberally borrowing from adaptions and developments of his method made by A. J. Greimas, the following analysis seeks to identify the stepmother's role for the object of the narratives, which is, as we shall see soon, the successful quest of the protagonist.[109]

However, narrative analysis alone cannot offer a satisfying understanding of the underlying ideas expressed in the sagas in question. In order to identify in what sense these sagas reflect the changes that accompanied the reorganization of the Icelandic aristocracy towards the end of the Middle Ages, and, more importantly, how this is

[108] Jürg Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas*, 101–03.

[109] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (University of Texas Press: Austin, 1968). Despite its applicability to folk tales, the method of the Russian folklorist has often been criticized for its lack of sensitivity to subtle story elements. Propp's approach has been adapted and further developed by the French-Lithuanian structuralist A. J. Greimas who has provided a useful method of investigating the deeper meaning of all representatives of narrative literature. A. J. Greimas. *On Meaning. Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

expressed in the figure of the stepmother, it needs to be borne in mind that we are, in fact, dealing with highly fictional literary works. The characters of the Icelandic romances do not provide representations of actual people but rather the abstract ideals of the society and culture that spawned them. Thus, and as much as they present models of desirable social and sexual practice, they also present antimodels of behavior.[110]

5.2. Introducing the General Pattern: *Valdimars saga*

As was customary for the greater part of the Icelandic romances, the eponymous protagonist of *Valdimars saga* is the son of a powerful king and enjoys a life free from any worry and care. He is handsome and strong, skilled in arms and languages, and outstanding among all other young men far and wide, while his sister Marmoría is the most beautiful and desirable of all women. The court of their father is a place of peace and harmony where Valdimar, always in the company of other noble men and knights, passes the time with tournaments and the admiring glances of the fine ladies. While the category of time, however, only plays a minor role in the narrated worlds of Icelandic romance, the concept of space is a crucial element of the narrative structure. Although the narrated world of the court is depicted as wonderfully harmless in the beginning of the story, this idyll represents only a temporary state of affairs, and is set in motion when the court is confronted with an antagonizing space.[111] In *Valdimars saga*, this confrontation is represented through an intruder from the world outside who manages to gain entrance into the court:

> ok nu af þuj at aull stundlig gledj lidr skiott ber monnum fyrer huar at ur vtnordri dro eirn skyvegg suartan miog upp æ himnjnnen. hann dregr skiott yfer suo at um liten tima liden uar suo myrkt at eingen madr sa fingra sinna skil. þessum myrkua fylger ogurligr otte ok hrædzla. her med fylgir ogurligr nyr ok elldjngar. þuji næst synjzt monnum allt lopted leika j loga einum en vr loganum sa þeir fliuga eirn ferligan flugdreka. hann beiner sinn flug nidr at stolinum sem Marmoria sat gripandj sinum bauluaudum klom fliugandj med hennar stol ok hana sialfa vpp j þenna loga.[112]
>
> (But now all earthly joy fades away from the men because there approached a black cloud from the Northwest which rises high up into the sky. It overdraws them so quickly that it does not take long before everything was so dark that no man could see his fingers any longer. With this darkness comes great cry and fear, followed by a huge noise and flashes of lightning. Then, it

[110] For a further discussion of the methodological approach to (medieval Icelandic) fictional prose narrative, see Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, 31–43.
[111] Jürg Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas*, 192–97.
[112] "*Valdimars saga*," in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, vol. 1, ed. Agnete Lothm (København: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1962), 54.

> seems to the men as if the whole sky is going up in a flame, and out of the fire they saw a dangerous dragon flying. It turns down towards the chair on which Marmoría sits, seizes her and her chair and flies back up into the fire.)

With the abduction of Princess Marmoría, those bright days are over, and all happiness and cheerfulness is replaced by sorrow and grief. Through the intrusion of an alien force, which has consciously transgressed the boundaries into the world of the court and whose outer appearance suggests that it definitely does not belong *here* but *somewhere else*, the established order has been completely disjointed. There is, of course, no other alternative now than to re-establish the initial conditions by any means possible, and it is no surprise either that the one who assumes responsibility for this endeavor is Valdimar. The prince is determined to bring Marmoría back, and to subdue that wild beast who dared to invade his father's kingdom (which will be his someday). Despite all these noble declarations, however, the prince does not really seem to be in that much of a hurry to find his sister. After having set out into the world beyond the court, it does not take long until he gets involved with a giant lady named Alba. In fact, he ends up spending two whole years in the company of the beautiful maiden. One day, the two lovers hear from her father, the giant Aper, the story of the highly dubious events that have occurred in the neighboring kingdom of Rísaland:

Once upon a time (or, in fact, quite recently), there was a great and mighty king named Arkistratus who was married to a woman of royal and utterly noble ancestry. The queen, however, dies at a young age, and leaves her husband and the two children Blábus and Flórída in deep grief. One day, when the king is out hunting in the forest in order to find distraction from his sorrows, he and his men are overtaken by a thick fog and lose their bearings. On the other side of the fog, they find themselves in a previously unknown world, and after a while, they come across a big host of people which, to the surprise of King Arkistratus and his retainers, is led by a woman. If that was not odd enough, their visual appearance is also quite a puzzle to the noble hunting party: "*þetta folk uar trollum likara en menszkum monnum*."[113] ("*These people were more similar to trolls than to human beings.*") However, since the strangers do not seem to be up to mischief, the king gratefully accepts the woman's offer to spend the night in her fortress nearby. Although they enjoy each other's company very much, the king is left clueless about what kind of woman he is dealing with: "*mitt nafn er Lvpa en kyn*

[113] "*Valdimars saga*," 61.

mjtt verdr ydur sidar sagt."[114] ("*My name is Lúpa but you will not get to know my ancestry yet.*") In view of all the beautiful and valuable treasures Lúpa is in possession of, the king does not have to be generous in overlooking these obscurities. As a woman of means, Lúpa meets one of the most important aspects when it comes to qualifying as a potential bride. The king is confident that if he can make her his wife, he will be provided with access to a great source of revenue. In fact, he does not let much time pass until he proposes to her, and Lúpa is not averse to the idea of marrying the king either. While the king's pain and grief at the death of his first wife have virtually disappeared, Blábus and Flórída are not particularly enthusiastic about their stepmother-to-be. Although they have not met Lúpa yet, they are worried about whether their father was wise to arrange the marriage so precipitously. And indeed, as it turns out after the wedding, the children's concerns have been more than justified: After depriving the king of his political power, Queen Lúpa proclaims herself sole ruler of Rísaland and establishes a regime of terror and cruelty and "*let þegar handhauggua edr fothauggua edr drepa ef motj hennj uar gert.*"[115] ("*and had people's hands or feet chopped off, or even killed when she was opposed.*") But in consolidating her sway over Rísaland, Lúpa has also other means at her disposal. Due to her magical powers and her ability to shapeshift, she not only seduces King Arkistratus (and sneaks into his kingdom and his bed), but, as it is revealed now, her powers even allow her to cause trouble in places far beyond the external borders of Rísaland: In the shape of a terrifying *flugdreki*, it was no other than Queen Lúpa who had removed the innocent Marmoría from her natural environment and carried her away to Rísaland.

Also Blábus and Flórída do not dare to go up against Lúpa alone. Her successful attempt to marry into the royal family has been a clear demonstration of the woman's capabilities, and her stepchildren are well aware of that they will need to be dependent on help from a more powerful force than themselves in order to escape her cruelty. The stepmother's malevolence seems to reach a new level when it is revealed that she intends to marry Marmoría to her stepson Blábus. But rather than settling the marriage like normal people do, Lúpa has decided to go with the ruthless approach instead. Blábus, however, is not very pleased with her plans because he, in contrast to her, is fully aware of the inappropriateness of such methods. Although he is not averse to the

[114] "*Valdimars saga*," 61.
[115] Ibid., 62.

idea of marrying Marmoría – who is not only gorgeous to look upon but also a virgin and of royal descent – Blábus would never force her into a marriage without her and her father's own consent. In not abiding by the rules, Lúpa, however, deliberately seeks to transgress the social and moral parameters valid in the world of Icelandic romance.

Why the king does not step in and intervene against the self-righteous behavior of his new wife is one of the many questions the saga does not provide any answer for. Maybe he made an attempt to stop her, maybe he did not, but all we get to know is that King Arkistratus is powerless when faced with the dark machinations of his wife. While Lúpa, more importantly, is considered the source of all evil, the king's responsibility is not upheld. Icelandic romance, however, is not meant to tell stories about aged and frail kings.[116] It is committed to the representatives of the generation that comes afterwards and which will continue the legacy of their fathers. Let us therefore return to our hero Valdimar now "*vid suo at hann mættj heidrsmadr verda.*" ("*so that he can become a man of honor.*")[117] Having told the story of the wicked stepmother, Valdimar is introduced to Alba's grandmother Nigra who gives him a magic portion to drink that makes his strength grow considerably. After that, Valdimar and the giant family sail out towards the court of the ferocious queen. When they come to a forest close by the royal castle, Alba's brother Kollr builds them a house out of the foliage which is sheltered from Lúpa's eyes by virtue of a magical powder. Upon the completion of the shelter, Kollr sets off to the castle and succeeds in enticing both Marmoría and Flórída away into the forest without Lúpa noticing their absence. It should be noted that though Valdimar has not yet contributed much to the defeat of the wicked stepmother, the reunion between the two siblings is exuberant and joyful. However, when he is introduced to Flórída, Valdimar tries to do all he can to conquer the heart of the beautiful princess, and thus promises to her that he will help Blábus to escape from the clutches of the evil queen. This, however, is much easier said than done. Although Valdimar soon hits the road towards the royal castle, the journey does not lead to anything – except that his presence in Rísaland is now detected by Lúpa. Again, it is

[116] Already twelfth century monk Oddr Snorrason had to acknowledge that in his rather critical assessment of the "*stivp meðra saugvr er hiarðar sveinar segia er enge veit hvart satt er. er iafnan lata konungin minztan isinvm frasǫgnum.*" ("stepmother-stories which shepherd-boys tell, whose truth no-one knows, and which always give the king the smallest role in his own saga.") *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar af Oddr Snorrason*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (København: Gad, 1932), 2.
[117] "*Valdimars saga*," 60.

thanks to Kollr that the attempt of liberating the prince ends successfully. After a series of somewhat incoherent events (Blábus, without knowing with whom he is dealing with, launches into a fight with Valdimar that ends with the victory of the latter), the two princes reconcile and become sworn-brothers. Valdimar, however, has still not revealed his identity to his new friend, but is not reluctant to ask Blábus for his sister's hand in marriage. Blábus is acquainted with what is essential for the arrangement of a proper aristocratic marriage, and demands Valdimar to disclose information about his family background: "*þat veit tru mjn at þu ert einkar godr Riddari en fyrr vil eg vita þitt nafn ok kynferdi en þu fair minar systr*."[118] ("*My feeling tells me that you are a good knight, but before I give you my sister, I want to know your name and your ancestry*.") When Blábus finds out that Valdimar is nothing less than the next ruler of a powerful kingdom, he is delighted to give him his sister in marriage while Valdimar, in turn, promises him the hand of his own sister Marmoría. The exchange of their respective sisters reinforces the friendship between the two princes and, not least the political alliance between their kingdoms. Due to the fact that the events so far depicted have considerably revolved around the knights' search for a suitable wife, *Valdimars saga* illustrates clearly that the bridal quest is one of the central – if not the most important – motifs of Icelandic romance.[119] Since both men have managed to find themselves a suitable wife, and thereby also consolidated their social networks, the story could be over now, and everyone would live happily ever after. But still, the question remains: What shall be done about the wicked stepmother? While it was due solely to her actions that the whole story was brought into motion in the first place, her role in the development of the story has gradually decreased over the course of the narrative. As a character that figures as a necessary evil, the stepmother can and must be written out of the plot as soon as her task is complete.

But instead of doing the dirty work of getting rid of the evil woman himself, it is once again the giants who solve the problem for him, and Lúpa is eventually killed in a bloody fight. In defense of Valdimar, it may be stated that it had been quite clever of him to establish a sexual relationship with the beautiful giant maiden: Although the saga only mentions this in passing, their liaison has ended with Alba's pregnancy, and this

[118] "*Valdimars saga*," 72.
[119] This is discussed in Marianne E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

proved crucial when it comes to gaining the support of her kin network. Valdimar, however, ends up marrying a woman who belongs to his own race and is, at no point, accused of having acted inappropriately.[120] This also reveals that, in the realms of medieval Icelandic romance, a character's social standing is often emphasized over his or her actions. If one's social background and rank within society are satisfactory, other indiscretions, at least in the case of men, are only marginal and easily overlooked.[121]

Valdimars saga was probably written at the end of the fourteenth century or even later, and has been preserved for posterity in twenty-five manuscripts.[122] As a relatively short representative of Icelandic romance, the saga is ideally suited for a first encounter with the wicked stepmother, although the story, admittedly, is full of narrative inconsistencies and blind motifs: "*Det er en ubetydelig saga, der tildeles slutter sig til Fornaldars., for så vidt som den både er en jætte- og stemodersaga; den er dog af en noget ejendommelig art*."[123] Despite its "somewhat peculiar nature", as Finnur Jónsson put it, *Valdimars saga* proves extremely worthwhile as a second examination proves since it establishes a number of major aspects that determine the appearance and disappearance of the stepmother in the realms of Icelandic romance. As stated above, it is through the character of the stepmother, who is not willing to comply with the rules, that the narrative is set into motion. Since Lúpa continuously transgresses the norms of decency and morality, her actions provide the necessary fuel for the plot, and due to the trouble and disorder this is causing, Valdimar is encouraged to set off in order to restore the initial order of the world. Since Lúpa travels alone fearlessly, acts independently and deprives her husband of all his power, the stepmother, moreover, also functions as a catalyst for the preoccupations and anxieties of the saga authors and, ultimately, the audience. By demonstrating a whole range of characteristics that are considered totally inappropriate in females, it is most of all women's access to and exercise of power, and, at the same time, men's vulnerability that seems to be embodied by the character of the stepmother. But is Lúpa really a woman, and moreover, is she of human flesh at all? Indeed, doubts are repeatedly expressed about her identity, and because of her difference from the common run of humankind, and the threat she poses to the

[120] John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 2005), 188.
[121] Jürg Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas*," 165–85.
[122] Marianne E. Kalinke and Phillip M. Mitchell, *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Romances*, 125; Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature*, 164; Jürg Glauser, "Nachwort", 403.
[123] Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie* (København: Gad, 1920-24), 116.

continued peaceful existence of society, it is easy to mark her as deserving death. Once the stepmother has fulfilled her purpose, she has to leave the story as quickly and easily as possible (even if this involves the massive use of violence) in order to allow the lives of the main characters to unfold. For the hero of Icelandic romance, it is the successful acquisition of wife and kingdom that is essential in order to gain honor and glory, but apart from that, the saga about Valdimar clearly illustrates that he has "*little sense of obligation beyond his own self-interest*."[124]

5.3. Beyond the Boundaries of Humanness: *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*

Sigrgarðs saga frækna, a text that probably dates back to the fifteenth century, is also much concerned with its protagonist's quest for a suitable bride – but regardless of how beautiful and noble-minded his female acquaintances are, Prince Sigrgarðr never spends more than three nights with one and the same lady.[125] Since his relentless womanizing inflicts not only great shame on the woman but ultimately falls back on her entire family, Sigrgarðr's methods are, of course, not met with much enthusiasm. The prince, however, is not overly interested in what other people think of him and keeps on following the same approach again and again. How else can he find himself a proper wife? Against all expectations, the situation begins to change significantly when Sigrgarðr is told the story about the beautiful but infamous maiden-king (*meykóngr*) Ingigerðr of Taricia. The framework of this story is very similar to the one embedded in *Valdimars saga* in so far as everything begins with the despair and grief of a recently-widowed king: "*ï þenna tïma reð firir austr ï Tar<i>cia kongr sä er Hergejr het, hann var gamall, hann ätte .iij. dætr*."[126] ("*During this time, Taricia in the East was ruled by a king named Hergeir, he was old, he had three daughters.*") As simple as it may at first appear, this sentence is more than just an introduction into the king's family circumstances. In fact, it suggests not only that the king does not seem to have much time left to live, but it also implies that he is in crucial need of a male heir. The subsequent events are not unfamiliar to us either, since the King Hergeir does not let much time pass before he attaches himself to a new woman. Although the saga does not give us a direct report on how the king got to know Hlégerðr, his second wife-to-be, it is

[124] Barnes, "Romance in Iceland," 266–68.
[125] Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature*, 164; Jürg Glauser, "Nachwort", 403.
[126] "*Sigrgarðs saga frækna*," in *Late Medieval Romances*, vol. 5, 45.

only the result that matters: The enigmatic woman has successfully managed to marry herself into the royal family. Nevertheless, it seems likely that she had some means at her disposal in convincing the king to marry her. What else could have motivated his decision to bind himself to a woman about whom he does not know anything about? As the most powerful man in the country, Hergeir should have been much more careful about whom he trusts. In neither being acquainted with Hlégerðr's lineage nor with her economic background, he acts like an old fool in love instead of considering the warnings of his retainers. While everyone else who is introduced to Hlégerðr and her brothers Skjǫldr and Hjálmr is amazed at their arrogance and dismissive nature, it is generally assumed that Hergeir, must have been afflicted by a powerful love spell. His oldest daughter Ingigerðr, is, in particular, not very fond of her stepmother. When Ingigerðr's father is about to agree to his wife's proposal of marrying the two younger daughters Hildr and Signý to her equally dubious brothers, the princess can no longer refrain from intervening:

> marger men undrast þat at þü leggur so miked uppa fölk þetta er menn vita ejnge skil ä, og grunar suma um þä sem ydrer viner eru hvad kono at drottnïngenn er sem þier hallded so miked til, enn ef sistur mïnar villdu mïn räd hafa, þa skilldu þær bïda betra giafordz en þessa, og ætla eg lïted firer þvi.[127]
>
> (Many people were astonished that you think so highly of these people about whom they do not know much, and some of them who are your friends are suspicious of what kind of a woman the queen is, whom you appreciate so much, but if my sisters wanted to have my advice, than they should wait for a better proposition than this, and also I think little of this.)

Unlike her father, Ingigerðr does not let herself be deceived by Hlégerðr, and goes on high alert when her father is almost about to make another precipitous decision. Although he is not very pleased that his daughter tries to tell him what to do, Hildr and Signý are also clearly opposed to the idea of marrying two men of unknown identity, and since the king would never force his daughters into marriage, the whole idea is eventually rejected. It does not come as a surprise that Hlégerðr is not very amused about the harsh assessment of her stepdaughters, and she and the king launch into a great argument about the situation: "*enn hun sagdi, ad sier þætte hann giora sig ad litelmenne, at hann lete bǫrn räda firer sig*."[128] ("*And she said that she thought that he had degraded himself by allowing his children to rule over him.*") The next morning,

[127] "*Sigrgarðs saga frækna*," 46.
[128] Ibid.

the king is found dead in his bed. Since we do not get to know what actually happened during the night, it remains uncertain whether King Hergeir's sudden death was due to his old age – or if his wife had anything to do with it. While Hlégerðr considers the incident a good chance for improving her relationship with her oldest stepdaughter, the princess blames her widowed stepdaughter for having her father killed. Whether or not they are warranted, Hlégerðr is not at all happy about these allegations: "*laungu var mier þess von, at ek munde ïllt af þeir hliöta.*"[129] ("I have been expecting for a long time that I would only get trouble from you.") Although it is referring to Ingigerðr, the same comment could, in fact, also be made about the stepmother herself, who loses all of her self-restraint now. In order to seek revenge for Ingigerðr's rejection, she lays a curse upon the two younger stepdaughters, turning Hildr into a sow and Signý into a foal. Since Ingigerðr, however, is far superior to her stepmother, Hlégerðr cannot achieve anything against her in a direct manner: "*þier er laginn hȯfdïngskapr so mikell, at eg get honum ei hneckt.*"[130] ("*You are of such nobility that I cannot affect you.*")

There are some fundamental qualities needed in order to be ranked among the powerful. Nobility, as well as a flawless outer appearance, eloquence and faultless courtly manners are clearly included in the set of requirements.[131] In light of the previous events, however, it appears highly questionable whether Hlégerðr is in possession of any of these features. In order to gain access to the court and to make the king compliant to her demands, she has to draw on dark magic and otherworldly powers instead. That these resources are not unlimited is clearly demonstrated through the confrontation with her stepdaughter Ingigerðr, whose dignity and outstanding beauty markedly underscore the social distinction between the two characters.[132] This, on the other hand, does not prevent the wicked stepmother from harming her superior opponent indirectly:

> legg eg ä þig at þü skallt aungvum trü vera, og hvorn þinn biðil forräda, alldrej er þier so vel til hans at þü skallt ei æ sitja um hans lïf enn þü skallt vera so eigingiorn, at þü skallt allt vilja eiga þat sem þü sier, enn allt skalltu þat ïllu launa.[133]
>
> (I lay this curse on you that you shall never be faithful to anyone, and betray every one of your suitors, never should you like him enough not to try to do away with him, and you shall be so

[129] "*Sigrgarðs saga frækna*," 47.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Jürg Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas*, 161–91.
[132] Ibid.
[133] "*Sigrgarðs saga frækna*," 61.

greedy that you will want to acquire everything you see, but you shall repay everything with evil.)

The curse is a manifestation of where all the discord and hatred between stepmother and stepdaughter have derived from: Hlégerðr is obsessed with the political power and economy of matrimony. Due to the failed marriage arrangements, she is not allowed to expand and consolidate her social position, and projects all her anger about the squandered chance onto her stepdaughters. Unless the curse can be broken, her stepdaughters shall never have the chance of entering into a promising marriage either. Despite her undeniable wickedness, stepmother Hlégerðr's behavior suggests that she is actually less smart than she pretends to be because she provides rather precise information on how the bonds of the wicked curse can be dissolved:

> skulu þesse unmæle halldast so leinge sem þü lifer nema þvi at eins at ejnhvor bidell þinn spreinge þat egg sem ï er faled fiǫr mitt ï nǫsum þier og eg gejme siälf og villde eg at þat være seint ï ydrum hǫndum.[134]
>
> (These curses shall last as long as you live unless one of your suitors breaks the egg, which contains my life-force on your nose, but I am myself in hold of it and do not want it to come into your hands soon.)

But whom is Hlégerðr actually addressing at this point? Although she is, on the surface of the narrative, talking to her stepdaughter, the woman's words are only of little avail for the cursed one. Since Ingigerðr cannot break the curse herself but is dependent on the help of a man, Hlégerðr's instructions send an unambiguous challenge to her stepdaughters' suitors. As this challenge, however, does not only imply the subjugation of the recalcitrant maiden king but ultimately also the extermination of the stepmother, Hlégerðr, in this respect, scores yet another goal on herself. Lastly though no less importantly, her detailed commentary on how to break the bonds of the curse also prepares the audience for the events that follow in the further course of the saga, which can be referred to as a prime example of a maiden-king narrative.[135]

While Hlégerðr and her brother temporarily disappear from the picture at this point, Ingigerðr proclaims herself as the sole ruler of Taricia, and, as anticipated,

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[134] "*Sigrgarðs saga frækna*," 49.

[135] The maiden king motif in *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* has been thoroughly explored by, among others, Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas*, 208–14; Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom*, 160–63; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, "From Heroic Legend to 'Medieval Screwball Comedy'? The Origins, Development and Interpretation of the meykongr Motif," in *The Legendary Sagas. Origins and Development*, ed. Annette Lasse et. al. (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2013), 229–49; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir. "The female Ruler," 107–33.

becomes haughty and ferocious. Her new role implies also that she assumes a male name (Ingi), dresses like a man, and demands to be treated as one. Although she is still the most beautiful maiden (or, maiden king) far and wide, she kills most of those who propose to her and has their severed heads put up on poles. Prince Sigrgarðr is among Ingi(gerðr)'s numerous suitors, but he is no more successful than the others. On the contrary, the maiden-king repeatedly rejects the prince and even accuses him of being impotent. Although it takes several attempts, he manages in the end to conquer and subdue the misogamous woman, and can now undo the curses that Hlégerðr has laid upon her stepdaughters. It is should be emphasized, however, that Sigrgarðr's victory over the trouble-making women is not at all due to his own resourcefulness and abilities. On the contrary, he is in fact so powerless against the humiliation that Ingigerðr inflicts on him that he is led to seek the help of his foster-mother Gerðr. His foster-mother advises him to refrain from any further rough actions against Ingigerðr and advocates peace rather than violence. She then provides the prince with a magical bag that allows him and his foster-brothers (who accompany him during his whole quest, and without whom he would be utterly lost) to exchange their appearances.

Although it may, at first sight, be a surprise that Gerðr, as a female character of low social status, surpasses by far the cleverness of the male hero of the saga, Sigrgarðr's foster-mother is rarely motivated by her own agenda. Unlike Hlégerðr, who is interested in nothing but her own advancement, Gerðr keeps within the boundaries of a more conformist female image, and thus represents a mirror image of the wicked stepmother.[136] Moreover, the character of Gerðr shows that women are indeed allowed to be wise and, at least to a certain extent, independent, albeit on the condition that their agency benefits the male protagonist and does not call his masculine supremacy into question.[137] Thanks to the insight of the incredibly wise Gerðr, Sigrgarðr also comes to understand that the maiden-king does not act according to her own will but must have been put under a powerful and evil curse. This also reveals another distinction between the different female characters in the saga: While Ingigerðr's haughtiness is based on a curse, the wickedness of the stepmother lies in her nature. Since it is an inherent and immutable part of her being, Hlégerðr has to be eliminated in order to restore and uphold peace and security in the narrated world of the saga. As illustrated in the

[136] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, "Women Speaking," in *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 25–28.
[137] Ibid., 29.

beginning of the story, Sigrgarðr's actions are far from conforming to what is regarded as socially appropriate or desirable behavior. But still, there is much more to be excused in the conduct of the wicked stepmother than in his.[138] Sigrgarðr's actions may sometimes be premature and mischievous, but in the realms of Icelandic romance, they are not considered transgressive. Hlégerðr, however, transgresses social, gender and spatial boundaries. After virtually dashing into the story, pretending to be someone she is not, and causing a lot of chaos and irritation, she is eventually defeated with her own weapons and has to abandon the field. By virtue of the magical bag that Sigrgarðr has obtained from his foster-mother, he is able to trace and get to Hlégerðr's location, and put an end to her existence. Although Hlégerðr has, by the time of the slaying, given up her human form in order to take the shape of a crow, this does not obscure the fact that she is mercilessly killed by having her neck wrung while in sleep. In light of the more than fifty manuscripts that preserve the text, *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* seemed to have enjoyed great popularity among its audience.

As it has become clear from the texts so far discussed, the stepmother of Icelandic romance is an unscrupulous and highly dubious figure that gives rise to a lot of speculation. In fact, the stepmother is perceived as so different from the other characters that in *Valdimars saga*, the uncertainty about her identity is expressed at the moment she enters the story. In suggesting that Lúpa and her entourage look more like trolls than human beings, the audience is prepared for the peculiar events that follow, and the guesswork about the stepmother's true nature continues unabated. Although both Lúpa and Hlégerðr have successfully managed to mislead and deceive their husbands-to-be, not everyone falls for their dark magic. Ingigerðr, for example, is immune to the tricks of her malicious stepmother and expresses her suspicion about Hlégerðr's identity without much discretion: "*fareð til þess edles sem þier erud til skǿpuð, því at þier meguð heiti tröll.*"[139] ("*Go back to your true nature because you should be called troll.*") Although this ostensibly is hard talk, what is, in fact, entailed by the usage of the world *troll* in the realms of medieval Icelandic literature?

Among those who are familiar with Icelandic folk tales, the notion of the troll probably evokes the image of a huge and not very attractive, though somewhat human-

[138] Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, "*Viktors saga ok Blávus*: Sources and Characteristics," in *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Handritastofnun Íslands, 1964), cxxxviii.
[139] "*Sigrgarðs saga frækna*," 47.

like creature that dwells in hidden caves beyond the mountains.[140] It seems however rather unlikely that this conception is based on native Icelandic tradition.[141] The sagas are full of trolls and troll-like individuals, but almost none of the mentions of the word *troll* are accompanied by a proper description of what it actually implies. In fact, there is seldom provided any information at all on how the troll in question is imagined to look. Of course, there can also be encountered individuals who distinguish themselves through their unpleasant facial characteristics and their distorted bodies, but in general, it is rather difficult to draw any unambiguous conclusions about their physical appearance. On account of the evidence found in the Old Norse-Icelandic literary corpus, it becomes nevertheless clear that the word *troll* is laced with rather negative connotations since it is used to refer to individuals who deviate, in one way or another, from what is considered normal. No matter whether it is humans who seem to be normal but are in possession of supernatural powers, or non-human beings that only pretend to be normal, the usage of the word *troll* seems to suggest severe doubts about the identity of a particular character.[142] Along with this, the term also seems to be used descriptively in order to refer to abilities and powers that are beyond the normal range for the average human being. When the antagonist, for example, appears to be much harder to overcome than other men (or women!), he or she is often compared to a troll. The same applies to strangers and outsiders whose behavior or outer appearance is so unusual that it is hardly possible to declare it as normal. In addition to that, the word *troll* can also be used as an invective or a byname, and proves helpful to condemn someone or something.[143] Being a troll, it appears, is certainly not a self-constructed identity.[144] Instead, the term is frequently employed to articulate social and cultural distinctions of various kinds. Common to all of these trolls, however, is the note that they belong to the "others" rather than to "us". Regarding distinctions, what then does distinguish trolls from, for example, *risar* or *jötnar*? In fact, giants are seldom among those who antagonize the hero of Icelandic romance, but figure, as in *Valdimars saga*, mostly in

[140] The Icelandic folk tales have been collected, carefully categorized and published by Jón Arnarson, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1862–64).
[141] Martin Arnold, "Hvat er tröll nema þat? The Cultural History of the Troll," in *The Shadow-Walkers. Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. Tom Shippey (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies in collaboration with Brepols, 2005), 111–55.
[142] Ármann Jakobsson, "Vad är ett troll? Betydelsen av ett isländskt medeltidsbegrepp," *Saga och Sed* (2008): 104–05.
[143] Ármann Jakobsson, "Vad är ett troll?" 105–06.
[144] Ibid., 110.

supporting roles.[145] While it does not seem to be a problem to get involved with the daughter of a giant, no man in the realms of Icelandic romance would willingly want to have anything to do with a troll woman. If, however, he finds himself in a situation like this, something must have gone terribly wrong. But how can a man make sure whether his sweetheart is not a troll in disguise?

5.4. Unbridled Lust in *Hjálmþés saga ok Ǫlvis* and *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*

The fifteenth century saga about the two sworn-brothers Hjálmþér and Ǫlvir also features a recently-widowed king who attaches himself to a woman of unknown ancestry.[146] It is the same pattern, though in a slightly different context: Lúða, King Ingi's chosen one, is a beauty so ravishing "*at konungr þóttist enga slíka sét hafa at allri kurteisi ok sköruleik, ok rann honum þegar mikill ástarhugr til hennar*" ("*that the king thought he had never before seen anyone of such grace and nobility, and inside of him, there immediately welled up a great desire for her*")*.*[147] Since a cruel and fierce king, Lúða claims, wanted to force her into marriage, she had to leave her home in order to seek shelter with someone more powerful than her evil persecutor. It is probably needless to say that this terrible story immediately awakes King Ingi's protective instincts for the fair lady. Lúða, however, is rather straightforward in expressing her agenda: "*ek vil yðar eiginkona vera, en eigi frilla.*"[148] ("*I want to be your wife, but not your concubine*.") Apparently, the king has got over the loss of his wife rather quickly since he welcomes Lúða's idea with much enthusiasm: "*Hér hefir mjök lukkuliga at borizt, því at mín drottning deyði fyrir skömmu, ok munum vit gera þetta at góðu ráði.*"[149] ("*Things have turned out very luckily here, because my queen died a little while ago, so the two of us would do well to do that*.") Although his son Hjálmþér warns the king about allowing his passion to overrule his reason, it does not take long until Ingi and Lúða become husband and wife. By now, however, it should no longer come as a surprise that the true nature of the bride is only revealed after the wedding. Besides

[145] Ármann Jakobsson, "Identifying the Ogre: The Legendary Saga Giants," in *Fornaldarsagaerne. Myter og virkelighed*, ed. Agneta Ney et al. (København: Museum Tusculanums Forlag, 2009), 182.
[146] Richard Harris, "*Hjálmþés saga*," in *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (New York: Garland, 1993), 285; Ralph O'Connor, "Introduction," 52.
[147] "*Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*," in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 4, ed. Guðni Jónsson (1954; reprint, Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1981), 182.
[148] Ibid., 183.
[149] Ibid.

her physical charms, Lúða does not really seem to be endowed with any other positive qualities. On the contrary, she is not only suspected of being the sister of a troll, it also appears highly likely that she is skilled in magic and illusion. Her beauty, in this respect, is elusive, and considered unpredictable and utterly dangerous.[150] But underneath Lúða's attractive outer appearance, there lurk even darker forces. In fact, this stepmother is so lecherous that she, the saga indicates, had her first husband killed due to his inability to satisfy her sexual needs. King Ingi does not belong to the youngest and physically fittest anymore, and this soon turns out to become a serious problem for their marriage. Since her second husband cannot fulfil Lúða's sexual expectations either, she begins to devote her attention to her handsome and vigorous stepson Hjálmþér instead. Ironically enough, it is King Ingi himself who pushes his wife into the arms of his son by praising him as being more skillful and magnificent than any other man in his kingdom. When it finally comes to the desired encounter between her and her stepson, Hjálmþér shows himself well-disposed towards Lúpa at first and even praises her for her beauty. As a true knight, he is of course acquainted with what courtesy and courtly manners imply. Lúpa's desire, however, grows even stronger now, and eventually, she cannot curb her lust any longer:

> Hví mun mér svá hamingjuhjólit valt orðit hafa? Betr hefði okkr saman verit hent, ungum ok til allrar náttúru skapfelldligum, ok minn kæri, þat má ek þér satt segja, at þinn faðir hefir mér enn ekki spillt, því at hann er maðr örvasa ok náttúrulauss til allra hvílubragða, en ek hefi mjök breyskt líf ok mikla náttúru í mínum kvenligum limum, ok er þat mikit tjón veröldinni, at svá lystugr líkami skal spenna svá gamlan mann sem þinn faðir er ok mega eigi blómgast heiminum til upphalds. Mættu vit heldr okkar ungu líkami saman tempra eptir náttúrligri holdins girnd, svá at þar mætti fagrligr ávöxtur út af frjóvgast, en vit mættum skjótt gera ráð fyrir þeim gamla karli, svá at hann geri oss enga skapraun.[151]
>
> (Why would the wheel of the world have turned so badly for me, twice as good would it have become if the two of us had got each other, young and pure, and beautiful by nature, and listen, my sweet and dear one, this can I truly say to you, that your father has not spoiled me because he is a worn out man, impotent and incapable of making love, but I have very weak flesh, and great potency in my womanly limbs so that it is a great loss for the world that such a lustful body shall clasp such an old man as your father, and cannot blossom for the world's continuity. Instead, we could let our young bodies merge with each other of carnal desires which are only natural so that beautiful fruits can grow from them, and we can soon get rid of the old man so that he does not get in our way.)

[150] Katharine M. Rogers, *The Troublesome Helpmate. A History of Misogyny in Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), 14–22.
[151] "*Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*," 194–95.

Hjálmþér, admittedly, is rather staggered by his stepmother's attempt to seduce him: "*Er þér þetta alvara?*"[152] ("*Are you serious about that?*") His astonishment, however, soon turns into rejection and anger, and he gives the woman such a hard punch on her pretty nose that the blood gushes all around. Lúða is insane with rage by this point and bents on revenge: "*Vit skulum finnast í annat sinn*."[153] ("*We will meet each other again.*") Then, she sinks down into the earth just "*sem hún var kominn*" ("*as she had come*").[154] While Hjálmþér now dedicates himself to enhance his renown and honor by travelling to near and far places, there is nothing heard from the stepmother for a long time. When they later meet each other again, Lúða's beauty has vanished completely and she has resumed her trollish form. In the context of *Hjálmþés saga* (as well as in most other *fornaldarsögur* which feature troll women), this means that she is almost too ugly and gruesome to look at. Instead of soliciting her stepson, the lustful Lúða now attempts to wreak vengeance on the man who mercilessly rejected, insulted and abused her, and thus curses him with a spell that compels him to go on a challenging bridal-quest. Hjálmþér, however, finds only laughter for his stepmother's magic and counters immediately:

> Ekki skaltu fleira á mik leggja, því at kjaftr þinn skal opinn standa, en þat þykkir mér einskis vert at þreyja eftir eina konungsdóttir. Hamrar hávir standa niðr við skipalægit. Þar skaltu á stíga sínum fæti á hvarn hamarinn, en fjórir þrælar föður míns skulu kynda eld undir þér, en við ekki skaltu lifa nema þat, sem hrafnar færa þér, þar til ek kem aftr.[155]
>
> (You shall not put any more curses on me since your mouth shall gape open, and I do not think much about yearning after the daughter of a king. High cliffs stand down by the harbor. There you shall stand with one foot on each crag, and four of my father's servants shall light a fire beneath you, and you shall live on nothing but that which the ravens bring you, until I come back.)

The male hero of Icelandic romance, this episode clarifies, always has the last word, and by virtue of his counter-curse, Hjálmþér can clearly demonstrate his superiority over his wicked stepmother. Since Lúða has become incapable of moving her lascivious limbs and her ill tongue, the unbridled lust of that woman can do no harm to the relationship between him and his father any longer. Although he cannot undo it, the evil curse is not a real threat to Hjálmþér's objectives to enter a promising marriage. In fact, and rather similarly to *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, it is only the curse that provides

[152] "*Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*," 195.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.

the motivation for Hjálmþér's later adventures. When he later returns home from the – successful – quest, Lúða is still standing on the edge of the cliffs, and "*er Hjálmþér leit stjúpu sína, fell hún niðr í eldinn*." ("*when Hjálmþér looks at his stepmother, she tumbles down into the fire*").[156]

But Lúða is only one of a whole array of troll women that the saga boasts of. Each and every one of these troll women, however, distinguishes herself through an incredibly naughty and indecent attitude towards the male characters of the story. This is, however, not all at all unusual for a text which is a relatively young member of the Icelandic saga family. On the contrary, the late medieval sagas with their strong attraction towards the realms of the unknown and the fantastic feature far more female monsters than the older representatives of the genre, and in most cases, their shameless behavior, unbridled sexual lust and bizarre outer appearance pose a great challenge for the hero.[157] As literary embodiments of "otherness", troll women, the *fornaldarsögur* seem to suggest, are there "to be acted upon rather than to act."[158] Since they deviate so much from what is considered normal, they prove helpful in emphasizing the hero's superiority and defining his masculinity if he succeeds in subduing and defeating them. (And of course, he succeeds.) Unlike a troll woman, the male protagonist is generally sincere and honorable in his desire to marry and refrains from wasting his time with unwholesome and unworthy females.[159] In some instances, however, the licentiousness of women is causing so much harm that they receive an especially harsh and violent treatment from the ones whom they have offended by her behavior. The extraordinarily wicked stepmother Hvít, who figures prominently in the saga about the legendary Danish king Hrólfr kraki, is probably "*hid mesta trǫll*" ("*the greatest troll*") of all.[160] *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans* delineates a courtly society that is considerably based on male-dominated structures, and, as the title suggests, on the homosocial order among the king's champions.[161] The mutual loyalty and understanding of these men is, in fact,

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[156] "*Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*," 242.
[157] Henric Bagerius, "Vidunderliga kvinnor vid vatten. Konfliktskapande intimitet i myt och verklighet," in *Fornaldarsagaerne*, 223–24.
[158] Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, "Nasty, Brutish, and Large. Cultural Difference and Otherness in the Figuration of the Trollwomen of the *Fornaldar sögur*," *Scandinavian Studies* 73 (2001): 107.
[159] Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest-Romance*, 74.
[160] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay (København: Ejnar Munksgaard,1960), 58.
[161] *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans* is a text which has been found rather difficult to date, although it was probably not composed before the second third of the thirteenth century. See Ármann Jakobsson, "Le roi chevalier," 140.

stronger than any other-worldly power.[162] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, however, is also a text in which the discrepancy between appearance and reality threads its way through the whole of the narrative, and this is especially well expressed in the events that precede the story about Bǫðvarr bjarki.

After a long time of feeling deep grief and mourning over the loss of his queen, Bǫðvarr's grandfather Hringr sends out his retainers in order to find him a new wife. Although they intended to sail south, their ship is blown off course due to a storm, and eventually they are driven ashore in the sparsely populated area of Finnmark (the medieval name of today's Lapland).[163] It is also there that they meet the incredibly beautiful Hvít and her no less attractive mother Ingibjǫrg, who introduces herself as the mistress of the King of the Laps. Since the king is away at war and cannot protect his daughter and her mother, Ingibjǫrg contends, the two women were forced to go in hiding from a suitor Hvít has rejected. Due to the adorability of these two lovely ladies, and not least of all because of Hvít's own royal descent, Hringr's men are confident they have found a proper bride for their king, and do not hesitate long to offer Hvít the opportunity to become their new queen. Hvít, however, is reluctant to agree to the marriage without her father's consent and turns to her mother for advice. Although Ingibjorg seems to feel no less uneasy about deciding upon the proposal without consulting with Hvít's father, eventually the innocent girl is sent to the court of King Hringr. The old man is greatly delighted by his gorgeous bride and the two of them get married instantly. While the king is certain his bridal-quest has ended more than successfully, the episode concludes with a much less enthusiastic assessment of his way of handling the woman: "*Giefur hann ǫnguan gaum ad þott hun sei eij rijk. Er kongur nǫckud vid alldur og fanst þad brätt áá drottningu.*"[164] (*"He was not concerned about that she was neither rich nor powerful. At this time, the king was getting on in years, and the effects of his age were soon apparent in the queen's behaviour.*")[165] And who would have thought it, after the wedding, it turns out that the whole pleasure of her appearance belies an utterly fickle and, more importantly, exceedingly lecherous personality. Although Hvít's name ("White") suggests purity, devotion and loyalty, and

[162] Carl Phelpstead, "The Sexual Ideology of *Hrólfs saga kraka*," *Scandinavian Studies* 75 (2003): 14.
[163] *The saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, trans. Jesse Byock (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), 82.
[164] *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 53–54.
[165] *The saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, trans. Jesse Byock, 35.

thus all the aspects that are desired in the ideal woman to marry, Hringr's bride does not really care much about the underlying value of these qualities. Since her husband is often away at war, and cannot provide her with the sexual satisfaction she is craving, Hvít turns her attention to her stepson Bjǫrn instead.

If not through the pure irony of her name, in consideration of Hvít's ethnic origin, the medieval audience will probably already have realized the deceitfulness of the bride's nature since Laps (the ancestors of the modern Saami) are usually associated with magic and sorcery in medieval Icelandic literature, and thus virtually always classified as different.[166] The king's rather precipitous decision to marry the woman would also have certainly caused a lot of head-shaking. Have we not all learned by now that the arrangement of a marriage must be weighed with prudence, and that a man should never allow his passions to infuse his actions? The fact that King Hringr does just the opposite of this is, however, deliberately understated by the narrative, and it is the woman alone who is blamed for all the mischief and calamity that follows. Much to the dismay of Hvít, Bjǫrn has not the slightest interest in his stepmother. Not only does his heart already belongs to another woman, but much more importantly, he would never allow anything or anyone to come between him and his father – certainly not a woman who is unable to bridle her impetuous desires. He takes such severe offence at her attempts to seduce him that he rages with anger and gives her a hard slap across the face. Hvít is, of course, not at all willing to accept this rude treatment, and it now turns out that she is, in fact, versed in the darkest forms of magic. Due to her skills she could make herself appear as the most attractive woman in the world, which is what ultimately allowed her to deceive and manipulate the king and his retainers. As it appears, however, the stepmother is not yet at the limits of her performance: In order to seek revenge for the rejection and the gross assault that she had been subjected to, she turns her stepson into a bear, has him killed, and forces the woman with whom he is in love with to eat his flesh. Although Hvít, thereafter, continues to establish herself as a real "*queen of terror*," it goes without saying that she eventually will have to pay for her cruelty. Portrayed in conventional medieval terms as dangerous, women's sexuality is

[166] *The saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, trans. Jesse Byock, 82; Johanna Denzin, "*Hrólfs saga kraka*: A Tragedy, Comedy, History, Pastoral, Pastoral-Comic, Historical-Pastoral, Tragical-Historical, Tragical-Comical-Historical-Pastoral … Romance," in *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland. Essays in Honor of Marianne Kalinke*, ed. Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Library, 2008), 216.

considered deeply worrying. No matter what the circumstances are, a woman, the saga seems to suggest, has to remain faithful to her husband and must not seek satisfaction outside the marriage.[167] Men's fear of women's adultery was certainly also part of a more general fear and distrust of female independence, reflective of a high medieval society that had to do everything possible to keep power concentrated. A woman who disregards the rules of holy matrimony and threatens the purity of the bloodline has to expect severe consequences, and this applies also to our not-so-white stepmother Hvít.[168] In fact, she receives a much more violent treatment than any of the other women, trolls in disguise, and witches that have been encountered in the course of this examination. After putting a leather bag over the woman's head (maybe to veil her pretty "female" face?), Bǫðvarr bjarki, the greatest among King Hrólfr's champions and the son of Hvít's stepson Bjǫrn, physically abuses her severely, virtually slaughtering the woman and pulling her corpse through the streets of the town.

5.5. Summary

In order to enable the hero to demonstrate his chivalrous prowess, the narratives discussed above are almost entirely focused on the actions of the young protagonist. Even more important than this is the fact that the hero is usually superior to the other characters in almost every way. If these other characters do not contribute beneficially to the hero's personal advancement, they often enjoy very little sympathy from the saga author.[169]

Speaking in Greimassian terms, the hero is the subject of Icelandic romance, and the object of his quest is to safeguard and increase his status as a great knight. This also includes the acquisition of a suitable wife for his kingdom. The respective opponent of Valdimar, Sigrgarðr, Hjálmþér and Bǫðvarr (who avenges the moral affront against and the subsequent murder of his father Bjǫrn) is embodied by an incredibly wicked woman who is only following her own agenda. In accordance with the ideals and values that

[167] Ármann Jakobsson, "Queens of Terror. Perilous Women in *Hálfs saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*," in *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi*, 183.
[168] Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom*, 150.
[169] Compare also Northrop Frye on the mode of romance: "*If superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being.*" Herman Northtrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 33–34.

govern the realm of Icelandic romance, the character of the stepmother is the incarnation of all those qualities which are considered inappropriate in women. Since she displays no respect for the norms of marriage and cannot curb her sexual desire, her intrusion into the world of the knight is accompanied by a lot of trouble. Due to the innate qualities of the protagonist – that is, his aristocratic background and his social standing – the endeavors of the stepmother are doomed, if not "programmed" to fail from the outset. Nothing and no one can harm the hero. Despite his inherent superiority, however, the protagonist also enjoys the benefit of magic devices and the help provided by other characters. The latter include, for example, his sworn-brother(s), with whom he has established a deep, unbreakable friendship, but even giants and other non-human beings may aid the hero. Although neither the sender nor the receiver is mentioned explicitly, the hero is not only impelled to set out because of his desire for glory and honor, but also by worries about the potential consequences which the disruption from outside could have for his own lineage and the established order in his kingdom. Central to these concerns are the questions of which roles, in the male homosocial communities of Icelandic romance, were to be assigned to women, how they should behave, and what they should avoid. Since a woman, who infringes the nexus of sexual and social norms of courtly society and transgresses the traditional boundaries of femininity, counterbalances and thus also defines the relationships between the hero and the other knights, she has to be taken out of action.[170] Hence, the stepmother, as presented in the sagas discussed in this chapter, is a particularly deep source of worry for the male characters. The benefactor of her elimination from the plot is thus not only the protagonist himself, but the entirety of the chivalrous men that are gathering around him.

Not all women, however, are a threat to aristocratic male friendship. If women conform to the ideals of the innocent maiden and the loyal and faithful wife, and only give their humble opinion when they are explicitly invited to, there is nothing objectionable about them. Unlike the stepmother, the biological mother, for example, seldom appears to be a bad character. In fact, she is often not even treated as a very interesting figure at all. Once she has fulfilled her ultimate function for the plot – which is to give to give birth to a male heir and guarantee the family's continued existence –

[170] Peggy McCracken, "Chaste Subjects: Gender, Heroism, and Desire in the Grail Quest," in *Queering the Middle Ages*, ed. Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger. Minneapolis 2001, 126.

she often simply disappears from the narrative and is occasionally substituted by a woman from *outside* the familiar world of the protagonist and who is not related to the protagonists by blood. Just like the biological mother, the stepmother has to leave the story once she has done her job, which is to introduce and motivate the main plot of the saga. As we have seen above, that very woman, however, usually does not want to leave voluntarily. Rather than submitting herself to the rules of Icelandic romance, the stepmother deliberately seeks to transgress the order of the very society that she illegitimately stepped into. Because all of the stories indicate or expressly state that she is not a proper human being at all, the stepmother, moreover, also transgresses the boundaries of humanness. Regardless of whether it is sexually, socially or racially, in the realm of Icelandic romance any confrontation with "otherness" proves helpful to enhance the superiority of the male hero. In order to achieve this advancement, he has to interact with his antagonist, subdue it, and, if necessary, eliminate it.[171]

[171] Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom*, 26, 204–06.

6. Conclusion

When Iceland gave up its political sovereignty in the course of the thirteenth century, the country's social elite was closely attached to the Norwegian monarchy, and it is probable that most or all of the former ruling-class chieftains were progressively integrated into the royal retinue. Since the distribution of offices was now heavily dependent on one's relationship with the king, this development gradually led to the formation and consolidation of a distinct social class that indeed deserves to be referred to as aristocracy. Due to the fact that the king did not reside within the borders of the country, there did, however, also arise uncertainties about the question of how power should be distributed in the long view. This led to the emergence of a strong and unprecedented sense of solidarity among the members of the aristocratic class. Unlike the chieftains of the Free State, the new Icelandic officials sought more often for mutual understanding between each other. It was important to have powerful friends, and those were only to be found within the ranks of aristocracy.[172]

Along with the reorganization of the Icelandic social elite and the new ways of legitimizing power, there also emerged new ways of thinking about sexuality. Since power was now more and more based on social standing and personal wealth, an aristocratic man had to make sure to keep property within the family. As a result, aristocratic marriage became to be considered a major political alliance. At the same time, and under the influence of the Church, which elevated marriage to the status of a sacrament, sexual restraint and virginity were no longer exclusively regarded as religious ideals: If the certainty of rightful heirs were to be guaranteed, only a virgin was considered worthy of being married. The late medieval political discourse, in other words, was extremely preoccupied with women's sexuality.

Iceland may not have had the material resources necessary for the development of a courtly culture, but what they had was ideological and cultural resources.[173] The secular literature that was produced during this time, and which was commissioned by and written for the new elite, allowed them to distinguish themselves as a group. It

[172] Sigríður Beck, *Kungens frånvaro*, 183; Ibid., "Att vinna vänner. Vänskap som politisk redskap på Island ca. 1250–1400," in *Vänner, patroner och klienter i Norden 900–1800. Rapport till 26:e Nordiska historikermötet i Reykjavík den 8–12 augusti 2007*, ed. Lars Hermanson et. al. (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2007), 120.
[173] Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom*, 43.

marked the differences between aristocratic men and all those who did not belong to them and who could destabilize their homosocial network. Insofar as the romances describe a milieu in which knights and other noble men hold together, Icelandic romance illustrates the aristocratic ideal of how a perfect world could look. Unlike reality, this world could be overviewed and was, most of all, predictable.[174] This is especially true in regard to the representation of the female characters.

In the romances, any attempt at transgressing the clearly defined and highly sensitive social boundaries of gender roles is regarded as a potential threat to the homosocial order of the aristocracy.[175] In particular, the kind of female character who tries to adopt male behavior patterns and engages in rebellious activities caused so much offence that there were no limits set to men to what men were entitled to do in order to re-assimilate her into the traditional female role.[176] The maiden king is a figure that features prominently in many of the Icelandic romances yet. But also literary stereotypes such as the wicked and lustful stepmother served well to negate a woman's ability to act independently and to exert control in society. Fueled by the aspirations of patriarchy, her agency and sexual self-determination are rendered into something morally so reprehensible that it is not to be excused. This makes the stepmother an excellent foil for the protagonist of Icelandic romance. The interaction with her, however, did not only allow the hero to manifest his masculinity. The illustration of ideal and not-so-ideal modes of female conduct also contains a note of warning for the audience: Unless they want to end like the stepmother of Icelandic romance, women should consider their behavior very carefully.

Thanks to the elaborate re-assessment of the younger Icelandic saga literature that has taken place in the course of the last decades, the romances are today no longer considered as escapist pulp fiction but rather impressively demonstrate the intellectual dynamics of Iceland under foreign rule. Furthermore, these younger Icelandic sagas also feature a range of motifs and characters that later became staples of the Icelandic folk tales, and are also known from oral wonder tales and from the literary fairy tales of other cultures. As this thesis has shown, in the form of the wicked stepmother, one of the most popular stock characters in the worlds of fantasy and magic has also found her

[174] Jürg Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas*, 230–33.
[175] Barnes, "Romance in Iceland," 279.
[176] Bagerius, "Romance and Violence," 85, 90; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, "The Female ruler," 109.

way into the quintessentially patriarchal realm of late medieval Icelandic romance. It is interesting to note that she can even be encountered in sagas that are not set in the world of the court, although they seem to have been written at the same time. *Grettis saga*, probably one of the youngest *Íslendingasögur*, mentions a woman who has no love for her stepson Þorbjǫrn ǫngull and eventually pays for this with her life.[177] The results of this thesis can thus also provide an impulse for further research on the development of the motif.

[177] Unlike the hero of Icelandic romance, Þorbjǫrn, however, is not exactly the fine example of a courtly knight but rather a great troublemaker. *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. Íslenzk fornrit VII, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936), 126–128. According to Anthony Faulkes, Grettis saga was composed sometime around 1320. Anthony Faulkes. *Three Icelandic Outlaw Saga: The Saga of Gisli. The Saga of Grettir. The Saga of Hord* (London: University College London, 2004), x.

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