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Hallgerdur: Deconstructing the Sign

*A Derridean Analysis of the Ambiguity of Language
Choice and Semantic Spillage Across Genres in the Saga of
Njal*

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

Hallgerdur Höskuldsdóttir has been considered one of the wicked women of the Icelandic Saga of Njal. This essay proposes to explore the truth behind this semantic assumption through a close reading of the text under the lens of Derridean deconstruction and some of its key concepts regarding “Speech/Writing,” “Trace,” “Aporia” and “Dissemination” as expressed in his *Of Grammatology* and other writings. Using the evidence found, the text attempts to disclose the disunity of meanings with regards of the character of Hallgerdur, in which one semantic value has been privileged and spilled across the borders between adaptations and into other genres such as the theatrical adaptation of the saga for Borgarleikhus and Björn Br. Björnsson’s drama film version from 2003. This endeavour is conducted in three stages, preceded by a short exposition of the need for language scepticism and an examination of some contradictions, binary oppositions, omissions and semantic shifts and styles found inside the text according to Derridean deconstructionism. These are reflected in the layers of the text at a micro and macro level, present in the form of dualistic tensions. This analysis shows the impossibility of a complete and homogeneous balance of the character and discloses information about the technical pragmatism of the kind of force the character holds for the plot.

After the question on the adequacy of language has been developed and discussed, and our inability to obtain a fixed depiction of the character of Hallgerdur given the tensions in the text, there follows the undoing of the saga’s narrative, which results in the possibility of new interpretations in which language is not pre-eminent. Finally, we delve into some alternative readings that present her character more sympathetically or on an equal standing in respect to other females in the saga.

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1.Introduction

A vast amount of knowledge is available with regards to the Saga of Njal, nonetheless the tendency in analysis of the character of Hallgerdur Höskuldsdóttir has mostly privileged the one semantic spectrum in which the character has been portrayed as a villain (see Mallet 310, O'Donoghue 87, Lektion 557). By means of a close reading analysis that looks to deconstruct some fragments from the text, I would like to question the set of meanings privileged in connection with the character and prove how this predilection may have created a semantic spillage that has influenced the translations of the saga as well as its readings.

By the deconstruction of the values assigned to the character, the meaning that has contaminated our perception will be obliterated, leaving us the opportunity to start the process afresh and aware of the existing preconceptions.

The analysis is set to be conducted in three phases (the version of the saga translated by Lee M. Hollander will be used throughout, unless otherwise specified). The first phase of this analysis looks at paradoxical items found at the verbal level of the text, as well as the binary oppositions found inside the signs themselves; the second stage's pursuit is to look at the reflection of these polarities as they project on binary oppositions on a larger scale present in the textual panorama; and the final phase intends to find the general textual instability and disunity that is revealed in the omissions and conflicts with regards to language use. All this to reinforce what Derrida highlights in *Of Grammatology* about the arbitrability of the signs (65) and that permits us in the case of Njal's saga to consider the values assigned to Hallgerdur and see additional semantic perspectives other than the one that has been predominantly privileged until now.

2.Theoretical Framework

The following argumentation seeks to discover the disunity of the text of the Saga of Njal in connection to the character of Hallgerdur Höskuldsdóttir. To enable this analysis, I have chosen some concepts found in the work of Jacques Derrida as points of criteria for the evaluation of the text and specifically of Hallgerdur as a sign inside a system of signs. Given that the vast amount of knowledge available in deconstructive theory and in Derridean deconstructionism would surpass the aim of this text, the theoretical focus for this analysis will be based in the concepts of “Speech/Writing,” “Trace,” “Aporia” and “Dissemination” as expressed in some of Derrida’s works. Behind this approach is a desire to act according to the author’s view of the absence of absolutes in the world of signification.

Initially the need for taking a position of language scepticism as a tool to generate a different reading of the text is explored. What is proposed is the re-evaluation of the capacity and veracity behind the writer of the text of the Saga of Njal. For Derrida,

The writer writes in a language and in a logic whose proper systems, laws and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. [...] And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force but a signifying structure that critical reading should produce. (OG 158)

It is this critical reading, less dependent on the writer and based on the lack of his absolute dominion of language, that the deconstructive approach can offer.

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida examines the problem of language, “Speech/Writing” and how language itself is a derivate, a “signifier of the signifier.” This “secondarity that seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds in general the moment they enter the game. There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language” (OG 93). The evidence that this essay seeks to find is present in the paradoxes or contradictions

that the text reveals at the micro level, specifically in the analysis of some syntagma that show that Hallgerdur, as a sign inside this structure, has been affected, and that a “proper meaning” cannot be ascribed to her as the text reveals more than one.

Posterior to this, we proceed to examine some binary oppositions that reveal a text’s subconscious, taking as a reference Derrida’s proposition on the semantic ambivalence of signs, which says that “[t]he sign is originally wrought by fiction. [...] Whether with respect to indicative communication or expression, there is no sure criterion by which to distinguish an outward language from an inward language or, in the hypothesis of an inward language, an effective language from a fictitious language” (SP 56). To frame this proposal the concepts of Aporia and Trace lie underneath the analysis.

Derrida explores the concept of Aporia extensively. Aporia is a matter of “the nonpassage,” that is, “a project, or a projection, that is, at the point where the very project or the problematic task becomes impossible” (A 12). In the case of Hallgerdur inside the saga this appears in the larger textual narrative structure and reveals its self-contradictory nature through moments larger than the syntagma.

This application is connected to how Derrida relates the concept of Aporia to Aristotle’s *Physics* and which uses the subject of being and time to present an Aporia as impossibility or as “nonviability.” In this argument, Derrida uses the syntagma “my death” to signal at an Aporia, saying that it relates “the possible to the impossible” (A 24). This Aporia or projection signals at an unstable layer under the text that refers to other texts inside the text and that appears as a fissure. This conceptual frame applied to the Saga of Njal allows us to confirm the conflict that arises when Hallgerdur is examined as a sign and the signifieds are found inconsistent, in the form of different sets of binaries—sometimes arbitrarily chosen and at times serving the need of the text—in which sign acts as the absence needed for presence.

Bearing this in mind, the text starts to reveal its instability in the form of shifts in the semantic values assigned to Hallgerdur and that lead to further detected anomalies in the textual unity.

For this purpose, the Aporia previously revealed informs us of the need to find what Derrida calls Traces:

[I]t has been necessary to analyze, to set to work, within the text of the history of philosophy, as well as within the so-called literary text, [...] certain marks, shall we say, [...] that by analogy (I underline) I have called undecidables, that is, unities of simulacrum, "false" verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics. (P 42)

These Traces hint to the whole problematic of the text, and can be further proven through some omissions and changes in the style of the text of the saga which, in connection with Hallgerdur, propose the need of a critical reading of the character sustained outside the privilege or desirability of a particular semantic value.

The concept of Aporia and Trace continue to be applied to the premise that the semantic value privileged in several genres in connection to Hallgerdur has spilled, crossed borders, and affected other genres, pointing at how when we cross the border we change the word, because we are navigating in a different inventory of semantic codes. When Derrida talks about death in his *Aporias* he enunciates that “one no longer speaks the same death when one no longer speaks the same language” (A 24). This fits the crossing of the text of Njal and of Hallgerdur to other arenas, cultural settings and languages, resulting in a disruption of its semantics.

Finally, the last conceptual frame is Derrida’s “Dissemination,” of which he affirms:

All translations into languages that are the heirs and depositaries of Western metaphysics thus produce on the pharmakon an effect of analysis that violently destroys it, reduces it to one of its simple elements by interpreting it, paradoxically, in the light of the ulterior developments that it itself has made possible. (D 99)

This premise connects to the initial purpose of this essay, which is to show the multiplicity of meanings available in language and their diffusion inside and outside itself. As Derrida maintains, this requires us to connect to the text above its “form,” deciphering “the law of their internal conflicts, of their heterogeneity, of their

contradictions and [...] not simply cast[ing] an aesthete's glance over the philosophical discourse which carries within it the history of the oppositions which are displaced" (WP 222). This allows alternative readings of the sign of Hallgerdur in the Saga of Njal, in which the hierarchies are reversed or the desirability or privilege given by the text to one semantic value over another is erased.

A Deconstructive Analysis

2.1 Language Scepticism and Contradictions/ Paradoxes

In Derrida's *Writing and Difference* he addresses Merleau-Ponty's view that "[t]he writer's thought does not control his language from without; [that] the writer is himself a kind of new idiom, constructing itself" (WD 11) and then proceeds to argue that "writing is inaugural, in the fresh sense of the word, that it is dangerous and anguishing. It does not know where it is going" (WD 11). This is precisely what we have in the case of the saga of Njal: we have a series of texts, of signifieds that become signifiers, a kind of language expressed orally, as speech, and taken to the written form (Karlsson 70), which moved then into the channel of a writer and transformed into additional texts by the means of the channel of translation. The original text, if there could be such a thing, is transferred across five conduits before reaching its final expression. To be able to reveal a text closer to that original, it is necessary as readers to doubt the premise of the reliability of the writer and their capacity to guide the reading journey, as the product we have is a derivative that has been contaminated in the process of arriving to us.

The initial inference is that the writer acts as the agent that provides the direction of the narrative, but a more important task is ingrained: the writer's choice of words shapes the way in which characters are perceived by the reader. As readers of a text in translation, we are bound to remember that some amount of authorial liberty is exercised in the process of re-assigning meaning to characters and actions. The combination of the primary source and the vision of the writer and subsequently of its translator permeates the end product, as we see in this saga.

What the writer tells us in the Saga of Njal about Hallgerdur sets an initial

paradox that reveals an internal contradiction in which the signifiers do not agree with the signified and gives origin to a pair of binary oppositions in which one value is privileged in the text and so by the reader in turn. This value is embodied in the descriptions of Hallgerdur that range from “Evil genius” and “Jezabel [sic]” (Crosthwaite 18) to “the beautiful and incarnate demon of Slaughter, Revenge and Mischief” (Lecture 557).

At the beginning of the saga we are told that Hallgerdur is “headstrong and of a harsh disposition” (21) and throughout the development of her story we encounter statements that reinforce the privileged value of her character as a villain and bring it to prominence: O’Donoghue (87) cites her laughter at Þjóstólfr’s impending death (see Cook 2002 37). Yet, not long after, we are presented with a scene that contradicts the assumptions of this semantic value. The text narrates how, after Hallgerdur returns to her father after Thorvald’s death, “She went to her chests, unlocked them, called all the members of the household around her and then gave some gift to each one of them. They were all very sad to see her go” (27). This opposing value emerges inside the sign itself which presents an imbalance to the whole structure of the privileged “strata” of meanings assigned to her in the saga.

Language’s signification capacity is multidimensional, which results in a world of intertextuality inside the text, and outside its borders; this nature of the text allow us to see the underlying structure, the existence of not only of multiple texts inside the text, but of layers inside themselves. “Texts are ‘stratified’ in the sense that they bear along with them a whole network of articulated themes and assumptions, whose meaning everywhere links up with other texts, other genres or topics of discourse. This is what Derrida calls the ‘disseminating’ force always at work within language, written or spoken” (Norris 25), and what we see here is a value inside this structure disturbed by the appearance of a contrasting semantic value.

Firstly, on a behavioural basis, the reader faces the affectionate response of the servants to Hallgerdur’s departure. The concern, nonetheless, focuses on the binary opposition that is summarised when the writer describes these traits the moment Hallgerdur takes the supervision of Hlidarendi, saying that “She was very lavish and domineering person” (66).

Now, the first descriptive word the translator chooses is “lavish.” According to

the Oxford English Dictionary, the word comes from “the late Middle English (as a noun denoting profusion)” (“Lavish”). The first problem we confront is that the definition of the adjective gives us the options “extravagant or very generous.” Thus the sign is given the first value (composed of two elective values), which in itself is contradictory, as it is not definite. The word “extravagant” has a value associated with a flaw, from late middle English (in the sense of “unusual, unsuitable”) (“Extravagant”). Opposite this, the meaning of the word “generous” is connected with a set of qualities, according to the OED, via Old French coming from Latin *generosus*, “noble, magnanimous” (“Generous”). As a result we have in the first statement the kind of value we should assign to the sign with a proposition formed by two qualitative values that contradict each other.

From the first element, lavish, the semantic value of the sign is at war with itself, for it already holds a set of binaries, and so offers us two different spectrums. Now, the conflict continues with the word chosen to accompany this statement, the word “domineering,” which comes from late 16th century, from the Latin *dominari* and which has been assigned by etymologists a value that implies some sort of loss in the object of the action, and the exercise of force on the side of the agent (“Domineering”).

Since as readers, we have a structure that is ambiguous, to be able to decide the final value of the sign “lavish,” our predisposition would be to choose from evidence found nearby within the text. Here in the sentence we are told that Hallgerdur is “domineering,” which, being a sign that conforms with one of the binaries, augments the chances of thinking that the corresponding value of the other sign must conform to this value, thus ending in the privilege of the majority of elements on one side of the spectrum as the final value of the whole statement.

It is here that the Aporia is revealed, disclosing the conflict at the heart of the text, showing that the “text involuntarily betrays the tension between rhetoric and logic, between what it manifestly means to say and what it is nonetheless constrained to mean” (Norris 16). Now, if the narrative that is presented fails in its construction to be completely homogenous in the set of words that are used and starts emanating opposing forces of meaning, the first step to follow, when this absence is discovered, is to become skeptical of the narrator and in turn of the set of words he has chosen to present the text in written form.

An argument against this scepticism would be that only one translation is being used against the reliability of the narrator, but it is important to remember that despite the election, for pragmatic purposes, of one translated version, three translated versions of the saga present the same ambiguities. The same syntagm in Robert Cook's translation says that Hallgerdur was "bountiful and assertive" (57; see also Webbe Dasent 53), which shows again how the choice of words of each translator are ambiguous enough in themselves, inside syntagms, against the general structure of the text and against adaptations of the text.

This skepticism, however, needs to be extended to the narrator, as previously stated, and in support of this, as will be developed later in this essay, is that although most of the narrator's descriptions of Hallgerdur rest on the privileged side until now, the inconsistencies found through the deconstructive analysis show that he neither can be trusted.

If we say then that there is a sentence with opposing semantic values assigned inside the whole text, no matter how much evidence rests on one side, there is still an incongruence that provokes a tension and leads us to the need to undo the text and find another text that excludes the writer or the translators.

To make this possible, which is from a literal point of view not feasible, we have found the above; the fissure through which we are able to transcend the superficial text to enter the subconscious of the text. And so, unable to find points of reference in meaning outside it, the path towards a less corrupt set of meaning is only found but by looking deeper inside it.

2.2 Binary oppositions/revelation of the textual subconscious

This Derridean approach requires us to look at the text as "no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but of a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces" (LO 84). It is this "fabric of traces" that we find in the large landscape of the text, whose "differential traces" are exemplified in the form of the characteristics assigned to Hallgerdur which serve the mechanics of the binary oppositions needed by the narrator, but that are inconsistent with some of the feelings expressed in connection with her.

Hallgerdur fulfils the contrasting need of an anti-hero: “the author of *Njáls Saga* depicted the degeneration of Hallgerður into the coarse-styled and irrepressible antagonist of the house of Njáll” (Dronke 14) because she satisfies the need of the other, the lack, and the absence in the saga to balance the opposite masculine binary.

As Judith Jesch argues (1992), the value assigned to men as a category in the text is positive, and the existence of the binary creates the female as the opposite. Men are the arbitrators, problem solvers, makers of the law, the moral examples, peacemakers, the heroes and depositories of the task of keeping and preserving honor (see 68). Women on the contrary stand on the other side, as the cause, initiators, and detonators behind war and murders and all of which gives origin to the goodness in men (see 8, 9, 19, 69, 88, 227).

As a first binary opposition we deduct that the privileged value assigned to Hallgerdur the sign is instrumental, rather than intrinsic. It is in her absence, in her darkness, that the light of characters such as Gunnar and Njal can be observed.

The *Saga of Njal* is a text driven by conflict, and is through the appearance of these conflicts that the Icelandic male hero is able to exercise his qualities.

The underlying dualistic opposition between Hallgerdur and Bergthora works as arbitrarily, and the narrator’s preference for Bergthora is evident. This statement is further developed in the alternative readings that this essay proposes for Hallgerdur, but it can be argued that the linguistic choices of the author present her on the opposite spectrum from which Hallgerdur is located. One example is that Bergthora is described in the text as “drengur góður,” “a term normally used of men, and rather rarely of women” (O’Donoghue 88). A factual overview of the text shows how “[b]oth Bergthora and Hallgerd felt that blood was a more accurate measure of the debts needing requiting” (Miller 84) and how both of them are responsible for roughly the same amount of deaths (Miller 76). Bergthora is as manipulative as Hallgerdur and even “better at working around her husband” (Miller 93). She even goes as far as saying that Njal will not care about her arrangement of killings, showing no emotion even when these occurrences are perpetrated by her side.

Miller (92) points out a very interesting contradiction in the text, in regards of the semantic value that has been associated with her, when Bergthora sends Atli to kill Kolar. He replies: “That is fitting enough, because both of us are villains” (71). Instead

of refusing the term she seems indifferent, and as William Miller argues in his analysis of her character in relation to that of Hallgerdur, “Bergthora has very little capacity for fear [...] she is ruthless in defense of her own and her family’s honor” (98). Despite this, what we find in the narrative of the saga is that the semantic value of the sign of Bergthora, and privileged by the writer, stands in direct opposition of that of Hallgerdur.

One of the projections of this binary opposition surfaces when these two characters have to choose between life and death at certain points in the saga. Bergthora decides to sacrifice herself, staying next to her husband to die (258). Her “unswerving loyalty to Njáll at the burning dominates our impression of her, and we are inclined to see her as an exemplary wife in direct contrast to Hallgerð” (O’Donoghue 88). Hallgerdur on the other hand denies her husband a chance to live (hypothetically speaking) through the rejection of his request for two strands of her hair to mend his bowstring, and instead decides to take revenge on him while reminding him of the slap he gave her (151).

2.3 Semantic Shifts

This apparent stability of the semantic value imposed by the author to Hallgerdur is nonetheless incongruent when juxtaposed with what has been otherwise expressed in the text. The author says of Hallgerdur that she is “skaphörð,” an adjective that has been translated as “of harsh disposition” (21), “harsh tempered” (Cook 2002 18) and “hard hearted” (Webbe Dasent 31).

The premise appears to be conflicting with when the author refers to Hallgerdur in connection to Glum’s death, saying that “She was unable to check her tears, and wept bitterly because she loved him very much” (36). The sign has de novo become unstable as we have two dissonant values converging into the same signifier found across the text. Hallgerdur is “of a harsh disposition” (21) and at the same time “unable to check her tears” (36). This fragment shows an “important and positive side of her character” (Cook 2008 19), bringing uncertainty about the fixed privileged value she has been assigned, or what in Derrida’s terms would be a manifestation of the “undecidability” of the text (OG 74).

We are offered an overview of the traits of the character, but the text itself is

affected and ambiguous. This shift breaks the steadiness of the definition and destabilizes meaning, pointing at the possibility of more hidden meanings that have been repressed in the subconscious of the text.

2.4 Omissions and Changes in Style

A sign of the above can be observed in the omissions that the narrator decides to make, and that Dronke points out, saying that “[a] contrasting device of suppression of information is also used by the author of *Njal's saga* to achieve the continuity he wants for his narrative” (Dronke 4).

Inside the saga we do not find dialogue to bring light on the dynamics of the relationships Hallgerdur had with her husbands, and as Robert Cook points out in his analysis of the failed love relationship between her and Gunnar, “[o]nce the deadly feud between Hallgerðr and Bergþóra is over, as well as the episode of the theft at Kirkjubær, Hallgerðr plays a very small role in Gunnar’s life, only surfacing again when he is under siege at Hlíðarendi” (2008 23). Again, we see how her appearances serve a pragmatic need for the writer.

When Hallgerdur and Gunnar meet at the Assembly and he asks for her hand, the author changes from dialogue to description (60-61). Initially he describes their encounter and when he shifts back to dialogic form her answers are ambivalent. When Gunnar asks her, “Is there no one good enough for you,” her response to his question is magnificently ambiguous: “It’s not that . . . but I’m very demanding when it comes to men” (Cook 2002 12).

Shortly after their meeting she directs Gunnar to her father (62). This action eliminates the opportunity for the reader to see more of Hallgerdur’s psyche and conceals important information about her character which could have been disclosed if further advancement would have been granted by the writer. The description is brief: “They sat down and talked” and “They talked aloud for a long time” (Cook 2002 12). With this mere “portrait of their external appearance,” as Cook argues, “the author raises a suspicion that their attraction is superficial [and that w]hat was said during this long conversation is less important than what they looked like” (2008 12).

After this encounter, we are not given any more details about the way in which

their relationship develops privately. When the sign of Hallgerdur appears, it does so as part of a system inside the plot when a quarrel is about to happen and with the privileged value assigned to her to trigger the conflicts to follow. As Dronke says: “She behaves, accordingly, like the devil they all think of her” (15).

3. Language Adequacy and the Possibility of a New Interpretation

The contradictions that have so far been examined inside the text itself show that the language used by the writer, or chosen by the people who have adapted the saga into the English language, is unreliable and paradoxical. The translations of the saga have been permeated by the values that the mediums through which it has been expressed and carried to the reader have privileged. If it is true that “[n]o one inflection enjoys any absolute privilege, no meaning can be fixed or decided upon. No border is guaranteed, inside or out,” as Derrida claims in “Living On” (78), what we have in the text of the Saga of Njal is the transgression of the borders of the text from this conflict between the signifiers and the signified which has slipped into other genres.

3.1 Translation and Adaptation

Very important arguments that throw light on the subject of the translation process and how this can be contradictory are advanced in detail by Ursula Dronke and Robert Cook. In regards to the description of Hallgerdur’s personality traits, the problems that arise in the election of semantic values for Hallgerdur, and how these have been addressed differently by translators of the saga:

The key features of her personality are fixed early in the saga: “she was lavish and harsh-tempered” (*Hon var orlynd ok skaphorð*, 9.29), but the precise meaning of the two adjectives is open to conjecture. Ursula Dronke suggests “unyielding” for the second one, while Heather O’Donoghue has “hard-hearted.” Translators have been said to be too harsh on Hallgerður, and I suspect now that “generous and proud” might be closer to the true sense—certainly “lavish” is unfairly severe as a translation of *orlynd*. She is a woman with a sense of her own dignity, and she does not tolerate offense. This, along with her open-handedness, is a fixed part of her being. (Cook 2008 17)

In the same essay, Robert Cook, one of the translators of the saga, examines another problematic that occurs in the text when Hallgerdur and Gunnar meet at the

Assembly and she replies to his question of whether there is a man enough for her. The translation of the word, “mannvond,” she uses to describe herself “is magnificently ambiguous,” and according to Cook it “can mean that [Hallgerdur] is indeed hard to please [or] that she is very difficult towards men” (2008 13) Thus, the sign itself, having a dual nature of value and the election we therefore make, influences the way in which we assess Hallgerdur’s reply affecting how the whole reading experience of the character is conducted.

Faced with this paradox, which was subject of a close reading earlier in this essay, we have evidence that confirms that according to the translation we choose, the value implied for the sign of Hallgerdur is conflicting and directly oppositional in itself, against the text and against other texts outside its borders.

Derrida in “Living On” describes how “[t]ranslating [...] immediately comes to contaminate what it translates with meanings that it imports in turn” (76). The contamination that we find in translation is found in other kinds of adaptation which have also privileged the negative value assigned to Hallgerdur. This dissemination in other genres is present for instance in the theatrical adaption of Njal's saga at Borgarleikhúsið (the Reykjavik City Theatre) in Iceland in 2015.

In the adaptation of the saga for the stage, the scriptwriters not only accepted the privileged value in the connection of Hallgerdur as a sign, but asserted it by making the actress that interpreted her also take the role of Mörður Valgarðsson, the mastermind behind the burning of Njal and the plot against Gunnar, authenticating her nature as criminal, material author and going against the text itself by establishing her as directly responsible for the deaths of Gunnar and Höskuldur and the burning of Njal and his family (Helgason 2016).

The Icelandic film adaptation of 2003, directed by Björn Br. Björnsson, the only one of this kind in this medium, proposes an equally unfavourable picture of Hallgerdur. The film opens with a description of Gunnar as kind and gentle. Terms of praise that echo the writer of the saga are used as well to refer to Njal. Following this we hear the narrator of the film describe Bergthora as an outstanding person, fine and just a “little harsh.” When Hallgerdur is introduced however, we are told that her husbands “were killed after they struck her”—this is a very ambiguous statement as it proposes that she is the direct cause of their deaths, that once they strike her they are killed off by her.

This despite the fact that, for example, she does not desire her second husband's death and loves him dearly (26) but is unable to stop "the sexual jealousy of her foster father" who is obsessed with her and incapable of staying away and "destroys all other relationships for Hallgerður, in the hope that the two of them may revert to that old confederacy, when he was her closest confidant, the only man she needed to serve her" (Dronke 17) and so ends up killing both her first and second partner.

Directly after, the voice of the narrator closes her first appearance in the film by saying that she "will be a source of evil events" and that her match to Gunnar was one "inspired by lust." As a result, viewers are from the beginning given a set of statements, selected from the saga, that will likely direct them to form a biased concept of Hallgerdur.

The assessment is further intensified when Otkell refuses to sell food to Gunnar and we are presented with a short conversation between Njal and Bergthora. Here a very fitting dialogue for the description previously given of the latter is shown. Njal seems worried about the fact that Gunnar has not been able to get supplies, and Bergthora immediately declares that they "ought to share" their food and hay with him. Once again, what we see is a portion of the saga that depicts Bergthora in the best possible light. It would alter the viewer's perception if the scene in which Hallgerdur is a guest at her house and is humiliated by Bergthora who commands her, against hospitality rules, to move away from her place, asserting she is the one "who gives the orders" (66) at her house, would have been adapted to the screen. In contrast with the suggestion from Bergthora to be generous with the house of Gunnar, we are shortly after offered a close up-of Hallgerdur's face when she sees Njal arriving with the supplies and is welcomed by Gunnar.

She seems angry with his generosity and although it could have been the case that she felt offended by being given food from the house from where she had received humiliations, this is a piece of information that is not in the saga, but rather reflects the filmmaker's interpretation, reading experience and subjective evaluation of her character. Other scenes are equally chosen to confirm what the narrator has stated at the beginning and seek to heighten her agency as the source of the unfortunate events that follow after the feud with Otkell and that has Hallgerdur's theft as the inciting incident.

We see consistently how these elements of the saga that have been adapted

privilege one semantic value of Hallgerdur, the one of a villain, and further modify it adding other negative statements that lack evidence and that expose the need to reconsider other possible and less biased readings.

3.2 Other Possible Interpretations

Concluding that the value assigned to Hallgerdur cannot be said to be fixed, and that our experience as readers has been altered by the perceptions of those who have served as mediums of the text, we have a sense of freedom in how we can reconstruct the reading: whether the value we assign to Hallgerdur is on one side or the other of the spectrum of possibilities. Conscious of prejudices, we are able to see that the subconscious of the text has signs enveloped inside other signs, and that if they do not provide enough foundation to bring together the text, even a historical and behavioural reconsideration of the actions of the characters outside the context of language itself can give us access to a new and more stimulating inventory of interpretations.

Additional evidence for the possible readings of this sign as a character inside the saga break through when the reader, unaffected by preconceptions, decides to look for the “true” narrative of the story of Hallgerdur, one marked by verbal, physical violence and rejection suffered on the hands of different people.

A close look at a chronology of her life can help elucidate and frame the conditions and the environment in which her personality was developed. Naturally, reading Hallgerdur through this behavioural lens and setting aside the negative or positive statements given by the writer with regards to her character, we are presented with a slightly different persona. If we observe the timeline of her relationships and view her as a woman who experiences abuse repetitively and acts accordingly, we are able to understand her position as being driven by a configuration of deep psychological trauma.

One of the few facts we can dissect from the saga about Hallgerdur is that her life is filled with rejection, repudiation and social exclusion. First, we see how this pattern begins inside her family nucleus starting with her father’s statements about her (21-22). The haste behind his desire to marry her off leaves the question of his motivations unanswered.

In the same manner we never hear of any close bonds with relatives except with her foster father, who had murdered many, but “never paid reparations for any of them” (22) and whose behaviour surpasses the codes of honor that allowed blood vengeance; her uncle and father-in-law too, as we see later in the words of other characters, only expect the worst from her even though she has not behaved wickedly before they pronounce their judgement on her character (21-23).

There are two clear examples of this in the text. The first is found in the scene in which Hallgerdur is introduced in the saga and both her father and uncle are talking about her; the description given about Hallgerdur seems to be tailored for the scenes to come: “Hoskuld remarked to Hrút: ‘What do you think of this girl? Don’t you think she is beautiful?’ [...] Hrút answered ‘Beautiful this maiden certainly is, and many are likely to suffer for it, but I don’t know whence thief’s eyes have come into our kin’” (4). What we see here is a statement without foundation: Hallgerdur is not a thief, but based on her eyes Hrút’s conclusion aided by his foresight is that she will be.

The second example is found Njal’s statement about her when he hears of Gunnar’s marriage to her, his reaction is equally justified in his ability to predict the future: “Nothing but trouble will result from her coming east here” (63).

As Cook argues, “Hallgerður’s thief’s eyes and the great harm which her beauty will cause: both are sweeping, absolute proclamations rather than predictions of specific acts. They anticipate an evil, destructive situation. Unfortunately, Hrútr’s comments on her destructive potential and her mixed character and Njáll’s anticipation of an evil time prove to be true” (2008 20).

Some other information that is important to have in mind is that Hallgerdur is obliged to marry presumably at a very young age (Jochens 53), like her daughter betrothed at age fourteen (65) and we are told several times that she is depressed (22, 24), she feels no one cares for her and when she first faces marital life, inexperienced in the management of a large household, she is slapped by her first husband, who is described in the saga as “strong, well-bred and somewhat quick tempered” (21).

When she then marries for the second time, she falls in love (35) and has a daughter with her beloved. Newly married, she learns of the death of her uncle and we are told that “she considered it a great loss” (34). Then things complicate further: a young widow, married for the second time, who has already experienced abuse in

different forms, she is torn between her foster father who, in spite of his nature, is the only one who has shown her respect (see Hollander 35) and the first and probably the only man she ever loved, Glúmur. This part of her life is again marked by different kinds of loss: first she loses the love of her husband who abuses her physically when she tries to defend her foster father, and then she loses him when the foster father in turn proceeds to murder him, despite her petition that he not interfere in her marital affairs (36).

Later in the saga, when we are told of her third marriage to Gunnar, we find that, in spite her social station, she is socially rejected, a fact that can be justified by her status as a divorced woman (see Jochens 44). People speak of her as if she had planned the deaths of her two husbands (30) and proof of this is when we see Bergthora using this argument to humiliate her publicly when she is invited to her house (67). In addition to this, her marriage to Gunnar is complex; when he marries her, he does not seem very convinced after her family starts to relate to him very openly about how many faults they find in her (63). As Dronke points out (20-21), the wedding is to be kept quiet (63) and from this we can only assume that Gunnar is not very proud of marrying her. What follows in the course of her life makes it evident. Gunnar's preference for everyone but her is displayed throughout the saga: he only listens to Njal's advice and leaves Hallgerdur humiliated, be that in private or the public arena. He always stresses that his friends are above her in any matter and his words are ratified when, despite being guests at Njal's house and seeing Bergthora bullying his wife, calling her a murderer and insulting her, he fails to defend her and adds to the insults rebuking her in front of everyone (67). Later in the story he slaps and insults her again as publicly, in front of her guest and in her own house (96).

The bullying that happens inside her social sphere is based on assumptions that appear before she conducts herself in any reproachable way. Bergthora bullies her because she thinks of her as a "woman of bad character and not socially acceptable" (Dronke 22), and to some the evil aura that surrounds Hallgerdur is started by prophecies of wizards, such as the ones pronounced by Njal and Hrút (23).

By her third marriage, we already have a woman who has spent her life experiencing physical and verbal abuse (96), who has dealt with the loss of the people she loved and does not have any friends or circle of support close to her. After Gunnar's

death, her third loss of a husband, the humiliations continue thanks to her mother-in-law, who is said to be “so embittered against Hallgerd that she came near killing her,” and she is forced to leave her own house (152). Looking at her life from this perspective can offer some explanation for her actions and render a different impression of her.

On the other hand, other readings can be suggested if we see her character through a historical lens. In this case the reader can see her actions as driven by socially justified conventions: some of Hallgerdur’s responses or most reproachable acts seem to be supported in the context of the codes of honour that ruled women in Old Norse society. Firstly we are reminded that “In the Icelandic Commonwealth violence was the legitimate tool of anyone to restore justice, and the moral demand for courage turned that right into a duty” (Karlsson 57), and secondly that blood feuds were considered a more honorable way of settlement of disputes than financial agreements (Miller 83; Halsall 26).

Hallgerdur had a privileged social position and great beauty that enabled her to marry Gunnar. In light of her status it was her duty to keep her honor and good reputation. This reputation however did not rest only on her own actions but on the way she administered her household and the way in which her husband carried himself.

The Icelandic system of honor was based on the capacity of an individual to protect himself, his family or his property (Rivenbark 1) and it is this precisely which she perceives to be at risk when she starts to command the killing of slaves and members of the house of Njal, or when she decides to steal from Otkell’s farm in order to protect the honor of her husband and her property after Otkell has affronted them by refusing to sell them provisions needed for their house. As Daniela Hahn explains, some women in the Icelandic sagas “use stealing as a final, desperate attempt to get their way after they failed to manipulate the men of their families by other means” (168). In the case of Hallgerdur, her actions can be seen in this specific scene as a stratagem to drive Gunnar to fulfil his role and exact revenge by blood feud.

This perhaps less redeeming reading leaves Hallgerdur on the same level as most of the other female characters in the saga. Under the codes of Old Norse society, we are unable to see her responses and involvement in blood feuds as criminal, except for the theft from Otkell’s farm in strictly legal terms. She is responding to social norms and her behaviour cannot therefore be classified as antisocial, as Bergthora—called by the

author “a most excellent woman” (40)—and most of the females in the saga, such as Hildigunn, are behind or responsible for blood feuds (69, 88).

Therefore, as we have seen, a socio-historical overview of Hallgerdur’s behaviour demonstrates that similar adjectives and behaviours are used and can be used in regarding her as well as Bergthora in the saga. The decision of the writer can be said to be based on a preference and on plot requirement and with that, that she becomes the representative of the female contrast needed for the exaltation of the Icelandic hero, which is essentially circumstantial.

4. Conclusion

After navigating very superficially the text of the saga and its references to Hallgerdur, is evident that no fixed judgement can be reached regarding her story. No one reliable text exists, but instead a series of texts available inside its subconscious located in different stratas of its structure, which present a more complex truth. The semantic value privileged until now by the original text and its adaptations in different genres has been established either in preference to or under the influence of one value privileged by the source.

Derrida’s propositions regarding the instability of language, its signs and how their semantics are displaced, replaced, relocated and transformed in the process, have served to illustrate the instability, contamination and ambiguity regarding any value attached to Hallgerdur inside the saga. However, it is this same deconstructive approach to the sign that has opened the door to other possibilities of signification, always privileging the reader, but in any case providing a more extensive range of semantics and an engagement aware of the contradictions always present in language choice.

Although the sign of Hallgerdur inside the narrative of the Saga of Njal cannot be located on the side of one specific binary, the recognition of her as a sign has permitted us to see her as such, rendered to the laws of undecidability and subject to the instability of language’s paradoxical nature.

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