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"MAN IS MAN'S DELIGHT": THE MAIDEN KING IN THE LONGER VERSION OF *HRÓLFS SAGA GAUTREKSSONAR*[1]

Introduction

In a classic monograph study published in 1938, Eric Wahlgren coined the term "maiden king" for a character trope frequently encountered in medieval Icelandic romance literature: a female protagonist who assumes rulership under a male royal title and not infrequently becomes the target of a male protagonist's bridal quest[2]. Reading this figure as a distinct literary motif, Wahlgren postulates

[1] I extend my thanks to the organizers and audience of the conference on "Gendering Viking-Age Rulership in Medieval Scandinavia", which took place at University of Silesia in Katowice in February 2019 and where an earlier version of this article was presented. Lead quotation in the title taken from the Eddic poem *Hávamál*: "maðr er manns gaman" (*Sæmundar-Edda. Eddukvæði,* ed. by Finnur Jónnsson, Reykjavík 1905, p. 30). All translations in the present study are mine unless otherwise noted.

[2] For more on maiden kings as a distinct literary motif, see M.E. Kalinke, *The Misogamous Maiden Kings of Icelandic Romances*, "Scripta Islandica" 37 (1986), pp. 47–71; M.E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland.* Ithaca, NY 1990 (esp. pp. 66–108); Henric Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom. Sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk identitet på det senmedeltida Island*, Göteborg 2009 (esp. pp. 127–130 and 155–186); Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *From Heroic Legend to 'Medieval Screwball Comedy'? The Origins, Development and Interpretation of the Maiden-King Narrative*, [in:] *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson, A. Lassen, A. Ney, Reykjavík 2012, pp. 229–249; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power,* New York 2013 (esp. pp. 107–133). Marianne Kalinke further elaborates on distinguishing characteristics of the maiden king formula as it has largely been accepted in scholarship: "1. the desired bride is the sole ruler, *meykóngr*... of

that "the notion of a Maiden King took hold of the saga writers' imagination to the extent that it became a convention"[3] – popular in medieval Iceland to the point that imported queen characters became re-stamped as "maiden kings" (*meykóngar*) in many translated romances[4].

Following in Wahlgren's footsteps, saga scholarship on maiden kings has overwhelmingly focused on classification, origins, and formulaic elements of this literary motif – approaching *meykóngar* collectively as a category group, or even as a sub-genre. References to "the maiden-king sagas" abound in literary studies, and while this makeshift label serves only as a focusing prism and not a claim of generic demarcation, it does however contribute to reading maiden king characters as belonging to a collective stock group or distinct category. Their forceful independence and challenge of gender norms have been linked to fabled martial females of Old Norse legendary matter such as valkyries and shieldmaidens[5]; their misogamous" latter's sometimes violent conquest of their persons were linked to

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a country [...]; 2. she disdains and mistreats all suitors; 3. like other suitors, the hero is humiliated and rejected...; 4. the hero returns to engage in a battle of wits and wiles with the misogamous ruler; 5. only after the hero has discerned the woman's major flaw is he able to outwit and then marry her" (*Bridal-Quest Romance*…, p. 36). Conflation of the maiden-king motif with the bridal-quest motif has recently been questioned, however: see Védis Ragnheiðardóttir, *Kynjuð yfirnáttúra. Samband kyngervis og galdurs í meykóngasögum*, Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Iceland, Reykjavík 2014, pp. 144–145. Available at: https://skemman.is/handle/1946/18194 (accessed: 8.18.2020).

[3] E. Wahlgren, *The Maiden King in Iceland*, The University of Chicago Libraries, Chicago 1938, p. 20.

[4] For the sake of disambiguation, it bears clarifying that medieval Icelandic literary corpus contains romances, or *riddarasögur*, of two kinds: Old Norse translations/adaptations of continental European romances as commissioned by Norwegian court in the thirteenth century (and thus imported to Iceland, as attested by their preservation in Icelandic manuscripts), and indigenous Icelandic romances that were written in Iceland as original compositions loosely inspired by continental courtly matter but not directly sourcing it. For an overview of *riddarasögur* and state of their scholarship, see Stefka Eriksen, *Courtly Literature*, [in:] *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Saga*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson, Sverrir Jakobsson, London and New York 2017, pp. 59–73; for a survey of translated *riddarasögur,* see J. Glauser, *Romance (Translated Riddarasögur)*, [in:] *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture,* ed. by R. McTurk, Oxford 2005, pp. 372–386. For more on development of romance literature in medieval Iceland, see M.E. Kalinke, *Scribe, Redactor, Author: The Emergence and Evolution of Icelandic Romance,* "Viking and Medieval Scandinavia" 8 (2012), pp. 171–198.

[5] C.J. Clover, *Maiden Warriors and Other Sons*, "Journal of English and Germanic Philology" 85 (1986), pp. 35–49; M.E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*…; L. Norrman, *Woman or Warrior? The Construction of Gender in Old Norse Myth*, [in:] *Old Norse Myths, Literature, and Society. Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference*, ed. by G. Barnes and M. Clunies Ross, Sydney 2000, pp. 375–85; W. Layher, *Caught Between Worlds: Gendering the Maiden Warrior in Old Norse*, [in:] *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the limits of Epic Masculinity*, ed. by S.S. Poor, J.K. Schulman, New York 2007, pp. 183–208; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdótir, *From Heroic Legend to 'Medieval Screwball Comedy'*…

"taming of the shrew" motif[6], while their endurance of these hardships drew comparisons with the Griselda trope made famous by Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*[7]. Some connections with Byzantine and Arabic material have even been suggested, illustrating geographic and temporal breadth of this character type which appears not to have been unique to the North but present across many cultures[8]. Medieval Icelandic maiden king literary figure thus emerges as hybrid conglomeration of multiple literary layers, origins, and generic cross-pollinations. However, looking closer at specific textual sources for some of these comparisons, it becomes clear that they do not always add up, and do not always reflect the whole upon the part. Not all maiden kings are cut from the same cloth: there are variable degrees of severity or laity in their interaction with male protagonists, and variable degrees of gender dynamics and narrative tensions such differences afford[9]. While categorizing literary motifs sheds light on sagas' transmission history and is valuabe for source criticism, the maiden-king category demarcation somewhat occludes these characters' individual nuances and unique narrative details from receiving due scrutiny in closer readings on their own merits. An overzealous emphasis on formulaic motifs may inadvertently lead to missing the trees for the forest, losing sight of textual variation and projecting upon it expectations of conformity to a pre-assumed generic standard.

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[6] *Clári Saga*, ed. by G. Cederschiöld, Halle 1907, p. xvi. For an exploration of medieval Icelandic romances' occasional depictions of sexual violence in strictly historical context, see H. Bagerius, *Romance and Violence: Aristocratic Sexuality in Late Medieval Iceland*, "Mirator" 14:2 (2013), pp. 79–96. These violent undercurrents may be seen as literary reactions to the overt idealizations of the feminine ideal that many medieval romances engage in. For more on these literary engantlements, see R.H. Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, Chicago 1991.

[7] Shaun F.D. Hughes, *Klári saga as Indigenous Romance*, [in:] *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland. Essays in Honor of Marianne Kalinke*, ed. by K. Wolf, J. Denzin, Islandica 54, Ithaca, NY 2008, pp. 135–163, p. 152.

[8] M. Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland*, London 1934, pp. 92–93, 62–63; F. Amory, *Things Greek and the Riddarasögur*, "Speculum" 59 (1984), pp. 509–523, p. 517; M.E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*…, pp. 106–108. There are also some intriguing and heretofore unexplored parallels with Slavic folklore, namely in the figure of Царь-Девица (*Tsar-devitsa*, translated from Russian as literally "Tsar-maiden") whose royal title is likewise gendered as male. For a detailed elucidation of extant scholarship on origins and development of maiden kings as a literary motif in medieval Iceland, see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *From Heroic Legend to 'Medieval Screwball Comedy'*…

[9] As noted by Daniel Sävborg, many *riddarasögur* do not indulge in sexual violence towards women (*Sagan om kärleken. Erotik, känslor och berättarkonst i norrön litteratur*, Uppsala 2007, p. 578), which makes positing said violence as part of the maiden-king categorical formula not unproblematic. Ármann Jakobsson likewise draws attenion to variance and complexity of these characters' functionalities within their own respective narratives (*Queens of Terror. Perilous Women in Hálfs saga and Hrólfs saga kráka*, [in:] *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi. Handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8–2.9.2001*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson, A. Lassen, A. Ney, Uppsala 2003, p. 174).

Previous studies on *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* have not been immune to such tendencies. This saga is notable for containing both the earliest extant appearance of a maiden king figure in indigenous Icelandic literature, and perhaps the most memorable[10]. Two extant redactions of this saga differ significantly (more on which below). In the longer version, the maiden king Þornbjörg takes on a whole male persona in addition to the kingly title, essentially becoming male: from that point onward the saga begins to reference this character by masculine name Þórbergr and using male pronouns. The shorter version contains no gender transformation and consistently calls this character Þórbjörg (in feminine form), whose only masculine feature is the kingly title she assumes. Saga variants differ in their portrayal of her suitor Hrólfr as well: in the shorter he is forward and brusque; in the longer he is articulate and courteous[11]. Literary interpretations of this saga have largely sought to reconcile the two versions and read one through lens of the other, tendentious of traditional philological pursuit of a "lost original" text.

Past assessments of Þornbjörg/Þórbergr/Þórbjörg have in no small part been shaped by genre expectations of the critics, not infrequently resulting in reading this character into the generic androcentric bridal quest formula, conflating her with a no less formulaic and generic maiden-king category group, and attempting to reconcile maiden kings with their pre-discursively assumed femininity[12]. This has resulted in some rather bizarrely overwrought interpretations of the maiden kings' behavior, such as claiming them to be "in a pre-pubertal state" until "the hero comes along and captures their hearts"[13], which neatly explains away their presumed submission to feminine gender norms. In similar vein, maiden kings' rulership has been discursively reduced to mere adolescent phase, resulting

[10] M.E. Kalinke singles out *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*'s female protagonist as "the most masculine of the maiden kings" because she alone is depicted as actually "engaging in activities, notably warfare, ordinarily reserved for the male" (*Bridal-Quest Romance*…, p. 72).

[11] A detailed comparison between the two versions of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* as far as they relate to characterizaion of its protagonists may be found in M.E. Kalinke, *Textual Instability, Generic Hybridity, and the Development of Some Fornaldarsögur*, [in:] *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development,* ed. by A. Lassen, A. Ney, Ármann Jakobsson. Reykjavík 2012, pp. 201–227 (see esp. pp. 204–209). It is worth noting that Hermann Pálsson and Peter Edwards follow the longer version in their English translation of the saga (*Hrolf Gautreksson: A Viking Romance*, Edinburgh 1974), yet their pronounced reluctance to present Þornbjörg's gender-bending at face value to English-speaking readers results in such editorial intrusions as inserting quotation marks in narrative references to "King Thorberg" (ibidem, p. 36) and persisting in occasional female pronoun usage after the original Old Icelandic text decisively switches to male pronouns in references to this character (ibidem, pp. 53, 66).

[12] E. Wahlgren, *The Maiden King in Iceland*; C.J. Clover, *Maiden Warriors and Other Sons*; Helga Kress, *Máttugar Meyjar: Íslensk fornbókmenntasag,* Reykjavík 1993; J. Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, Philadelphia 1996; L. Normann, *Woman or Warrior?...*; W. Layher, *Caught Between Worlds*…

[13] L. Norrman, *Woman or Warrior?...*, p. 381.

from these saga heroines "not having found their 'gender-identity' yet"[14] and terminating in "becoming aware of their female sexuality"[15]. The critics, however, do not elaborate any further on how this presumed "female sexuality" is to be understood in this context, or whether the term as it is used today is applicable here at all. In strained efforts to fit Þornbjörg into conventional maiden-king formula, the details setting her story apart have not been duly emphasized – such as the fact that she quite willingly takes up feminine activities, and that Hrólfr does not seem to capture Þornbjörg's heart as much as her army and her physical person in an open battle. Short of having actual intimate encounter on the battlefield that would make her, to quote Aretha Franklin, "feel like a natural woman", Þornbjörg does not easily fit the mold of such arguments[16]. It is not difficult to observe some preconceptions and category assumptions leaking into these interpretations: gender is interpreted as if intrinsically linked to sex as a point of departure, pitting this presumed femininity in opposition to these characters' masculine identities and taking for granted that they cannot coexist.

It is only fairly recently that different manuscript variants in saga literary corpus started attracting scholarly attention on their own textual merits, indicative of the paradigm shift in Old Norse philology "to an interest in the individual manuscript as a communicative act performed by the scribes"[17]. Instead of downplaying textual divergence as inferior or defective, it has become widely accepted that medieval textual variation attests to vibrancy and liveliness of a non-linear, rhizomatic literary growth[18]. As literary criticism increasingly started

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[14] Ibidem.

[15] J. Jochens, *Old Norse Images*…, p. 111. For a historical perspective and a departure from tendency to shoehorn *meykóngar* into narratives of female subordination, see H. Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom...,* which locates the source of the maiden kings' power precisely in their status as outsiders to social order. It must be emphasized, however, that Bagerius is discussing strictly the maiden kings in *riddarasögur*, without applying his conclusions to the unique situation of Þornbjörg. The maiden king may be seen as standing outside the social hierarchy, with no ties or obligations to a higher authority. Upon entering marital and/or sexual union with a male champion (which, in *riddarasögur*, does herald an end to the maiden king's sovereignty), a gendered social contract is established between the two (*Mandom och mödom...*, p. 197). Despite its usage of the gender binary, this reading is more convincing than Norrman's and Jochens' as it does not fixate on some unclarified and mysterious "discovery of sexual identity", and bases itself rather on contextualized historical social contract that a marital union brings within the gendered structure of medieval social order.

[16] A. Franklin, *(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman*, from the album *Lady Soul*, Atlantic Records, 1968.

[17] K.G. Johansson, *The Hauksbók: An Example of Medieval Modes of Collecting and Compilation*, [in:] *The Dynamics of the Medieval Manuscript. Text Collecting from a European Perspective*, ed. by K. Pratt, B. Besamusca, M. Meyer, A. Putter, Göttingen 2017, p. 131.

[18] See the classic manifesto by Bernard Cerquiglini for an eloquent elucidation of medieval scribal practices and manuscript transmissions (*In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology*, Baltimore 1999). For applications and ramifications of these new philological approaches to Old Norse manuscripts, see J. Quinn and E. Lethbridge ed. *Versions, Variability and*

favoring the particular over the general, critical theory in gender studies underwent the same phenomenological shift "in praise of the variant", turning to vantage points of individual narratives long dismissed as incompatible with hegemonic stemmatic hierarchies[19]. Revaluation of the maiden king episode in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* is therefore very opportune.

The present article offers a close reading of the Þornbjörg/Þórbergr episode in the longer version of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, focusing on its creative repurposing of the maiden-king motif and engaging it on its own narrative merit as a singular text. Its unique narrative features are presently embraced as original and integral to the story it unfolds, without invalidating or downplaying them by generic or formulaic comparisons. While past scholarship on maiden kings has nearly universally focused on them from a post-feminist perspective of women studies[20], the present article departs from this trend and contends that critically engaging these figures through their masculinity offers a nuanced vantage point to examining gender dynamics in Old Norse imagination. Distancing from past attempts to relegate Þornbjörg/Þórbergr's masculinity to mere imitation, I posit this maiden king figure as inherently provocative, throwing into question discursive boundaries of gender demarcations and exposing their contingency.

By exaimining a narrative clearly intended as fictitious entertainment, I make no claim of mining it for grand historical truths. However, the very existence of such a narrative suggests that saga compilers and their audiences did not entirely take standard social norms at face value, but in circulating such stories participated in creative reinterrogation and reimagining of possibilities and affordances such fictional gender fusions and infusions could yield. Instead of seeking to generalize how literary portrayal of gender dynamics in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* is supposedly reflective of pan-Nordic gender paradigms, the present inquiry aims rather to undo the strands of such generalizations by demonstrating how this longer saga variant's portrayal of gender dynamics is reflective of multimodal complexities inherent in culturally dynamic constructions of gender in medieval Icelandic milieu.

Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature, Odense 2010. See especially Matthew James Driscoll's chapter in the afore-cited volume (*The words on the page: Thoughts on philology, old and new*, [in:] *Versions, Veriability and Editorial Interpretations…*, pp. 87–104). For case studies on how these critical approaches bear upon a single saga's manuscript transmission, see E.Lethbridge, Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir ed. *New Studies in the Manuscript Tradition of Njáls saga:The historia mutila of Njála*, Kalamazoo, Michigan 2018.

[19] B. Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant*…, title.

[20] C.J. Clover, *Maiden Warriors...*; M.E. Kalinke, *The Misogamous Maiden Kings*…; M. McLaughlin, *The Woman Warrior: Gender, Warfare, Society in Medieval Europe*, "Womens Studies" 17 (1990), pp. 193–209; H. Kress, *Máttugar Meyjar*; J. Jochens, *Old Norse Images*…; L. Norrman, *Woman or Warrior?...*; W. Layher, *Caught Between Worlds*…; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *From Heroic Legend...*; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*…

Setting the scene

The oldest extant redaction of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* is the so-called shorter version, whose composition has been dated to the late thirteenth century, while the saga's longer version has been dated to the late fourteenth[21]. As noted earlier, the most striking differences between the short and long versions are the longer version's narrative details concerning its female protagonist Þornbjörg after she becomes king: the change to a male name and the saga's inclusion of male pronouns in references to this character. This gender transformation has been interpreted by earlier critics as a stylistic influence or borrowing from the legendary *Hervarar saga* (whose titular protagonist receives the same gender-bending narrative treatment), a reading which inadvertently diminishes these features' own contextual originality and narrative impact[22]. If this interpretation of source derivation is correct, then the very fact these stylistic elements are present in the later, rather than earlier, extant version of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* points to non-linearity of its development, as well as to persistent interest in older indigenous legendary matter that appears not to have waned in late fourteenth-century Iceland amid preponderance of newer *riddarasögur* with their courtly aeshetics. These newer literary tastes do nevertheless bear upon *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar's* narrative tone, causing some consternation among saga critics due to its genre hybridity: while based upon indigenous legendary matter, and thus a *fornaldarsaga*[23], its obvious continental chivalric coloring distances it

[21] This manuscript dating follows L.M. Hollander, *The Relative Age of the Gautrekssaga and the Hrólfssaga Gautrekssonar*, "Arkiv för nordisk filologi" 29 (1912), pp. 120–134. The shorter version of the saga may be found in Ferdinand Detter's edition of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (in *Zwei Fornaldarsögur. Hrólfssaga Gautrekssonar und Ásmundarsaga Kappabana. Nach Cod. Holm. 7, 4to.*, Halle 1891), based on the manuscript Stockholm. Perg. 7 4to which Detter dates to the early fourteenth century. The longer version of the saga may be found in C.C. Rafn's edition (*Saga af Hrólfi konúngi Gautrekssýni*, [in:] *Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda eptir Gömlum Handritum*, Vol. 3, Kaupmannahöfn 1830) from which all subsequent citations in the present study will be drawn. Rafn's edition is based on the early sixteenth-century manuscript AM 152 fol. and its paper copy from the seventeenth century, AM 590 b-c 4to.

[22] F. Detter ed. *Zwei Fornaldarsögur...*, p. xii; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *From Heroic Legend*…, p. 244. Detter considered the longer saga version to be of little literary merit, remarking it was begging for editorial intervention ("sie eine erweiterte Redaction bietet", *Zwei Fornaldarsögur...*, p. v.) and all but worthless ("ebenfalls werthlos", ibidem, p. vii). The gender-shift from Þornbjörg to Þórbergr is interpreted by Detter as a later splitting of the "original" Þórbjörg into two names, male and female. Yet this onomastic permutation may just as well have occurred in reverse: it is not altogether unlikely that the gender-shifting Þornbjörg/Þórbergr character was conflated into the single name Þórbjörg in the saga's shorter redaction. For a detailed study on the dynamics of gender transformations in *Hervarar saga*, see M. Mayburd, *'Helzt þóttumk nú heima í millim...' A reassessment of Hervör in light of seiðr's supernatural gender dynamics*, "Arkiv för nordisk filologi" 129 (2014), pp. 121–164.

[23] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* owes its status as a *fornaldarsaga* thanks to C. C. Rafn, who included it in his 1829–1830 printed edition of *fornaldarsögur* and who indeed coined the term *for-*

from heroic tone of other *fornaldarsögur,* and its playful repurposing of some medieval romance formulae have led it to be featured alongside other indigenous *riddarasögur* in many studies, hence leading to the afore-referenced lumping of this saga's female protagonist into generic category formula of maiden kings at large. But what nuances does the saga's longer version hold if we approach its narrative on its own terms? Due to frequent conflation of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*'s two redactions in past literary studies, it becomes worthwhile at this point to offer a brief overview of the longer version's portrayal of Þornbjörg.

Þornbjörg enters the saga[24] as the only child of the Swedish king Eirekr, raised at home by her parents. The saga narrator distinctly comments on her femininity, noting that *hún var hvörri konu kænni... um allt þat er til kvennmanns handa kom* ("she was keenest among women... in all that concerns feminine pursuits")[25]. Þornbjörg, then, is quite aware of her own femininity – excelling at it, in fact – and her subsequent decisions, interests, and choices thus cannot be attribued to some deficiency or inadequate self-awarenes. Her proficiency in feminine matters notwithstanding, she occupies herself just as much in masculine activities, mastering jousting, sword-fighting and other warlike feats to the point of being equal to any capable knight. Her preference for those activities causes her father to voice displeasure and request her return to female chambers. Þornbjörg's reaction is to demand a part of his kingdom, stating her intent to use her masculine skills for military defense of the realm against the inevitable swarm of unworthy invading suitors. Eirekr sees the prudence in his daughter' 's request for sovereign autonomy and is willing to grant it, perhaps glad to be rid of responsibility for any consequences caused by her belligerence. There is a hint of intimidation and dismay in his deliberation, which further illustrates this request was no mere plea for self-defense but a product of a willful personality: *þótti honum eigi ólíkligt, at hann ok ríki hans fengi ónáðir af hennar ofsa ok kappgirnd; tekr þat ráðs, at hann fær henni til forráða þriðjúng af ríki sínu...* ("it seemed to him not unlikely that he and his realm would fall to unrest through her pride and ambition; he resolves to give her governance of a third of his kingdom")[26]. But Þornbjörg does not stop there. Once she assumes rulership over the third of Sweden from her autonomous personal estate at Ullarakr, she transforms herself into a full-fledged king in the masculine sense, publicly taking the male royal

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naldarsögur ("sagas of ancient times") in reference to this compilation's contents. For critical evaluations and reassessments of generic demarcations in referece to *fornaldarsögur*, see studies collected in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson, A. Lassen, A. Ney Reykjavík 2012; see especially M.E. Kalinke, *Textual Instability, Generic Hybridity*…, pp. 201–227.

[24] Here and henceforth, references to "saga" and "saga nararter" denote strictly the longer version of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* on which this study focuses specifically. All citations are from C.C. Rafn's edition, which utilizes this longer version.

[25] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 68.

[26] Ibidem, p. 69.

title and changing her name to the male form Þórbergr. Right in mid-sentence and without breaking pace, the saga switches to male pronouns and begins referring to this character as male: *skyldi ok engi maðr svá djarfr, at hana kallaði mey eða konu, en hvörr, et þat gjörði, skyldi þola harða refsíng* ("and no one should be so daring as to call him a maiden or a woman, and any who does so shall pay hard")[27], perhaps with a pinch of playful obeisance in timing this pronoun shift with reportage of the king's first public decree.

Several things are interesting here. Eirekr's initial reprimand aiming to lead Þornbjörg back towards the feminine only results in her more extreme entrenchment in the masculine. As in Newtonian laws of motion, any action prompts equal and opposite reaction. But instead of explaining away this behavior in light of presumed inability of the masculine to coexist with the feminine, as earlier critics of the saga have done, it is perhaps more fruitful to observe in this dynamic a reaction against the very "either-or" notion of gender. I choose not to read this as some teenage protest against authority, nor a rebellion against some oppressive patriarchy[28]. In her behavior pattern, Þornbjörg demonstrates her unwillingness to retract her steps and "go back" to an earlier status quo. She is, essentially, refusing to buy into the "either-or" construct of gender and cancel masculinity in favor of femininity, revealing the inadequacy of applying this model in her context. As further discussion below will show, Þornbjörg in her decisions and choices positions herself in such a way as to remain fully in control of her gender dynamics, mediating her public person in relation to others and actively renegotiating her enacted self-construct.

The man in drag

Returning to Þornbjörg's kingship in the saga, she clarifies, in her own words, that motivation to seek autonomous rule and develop military strength is to ward off invasions and unwanted suitors, knowing that marriage is inevitable in the long run and not wanting to take anyone against her will. These reasons are understandable in their logic and prudent foresight. Which invites the question: why assume the title of a male king and a male name – and presumably male clothing as well, as would befit a warlike monarch this character becomes?[29] She is already strong-willed and assertive even without any male titles or names. She is, furthermore, already versed in warcraft, and thus quite capable of defending her realm without resorting to any public acts. As practical as the reasoning behind her actions is,

[27] Ibidem.

[28] As, for instance, is done in H. Kress, *Máttugar Meyjar...*

[29] The saga does not explicitly mention it, but it is implied: in the chapters following, this king is portrayed in full armor and battle gear, obviously masculine attire.

assumption of an entire male identity on top of the royal title appears extraneous to her goal[30]. Does she, in fact, need it? Is this an attempt at self-assertion to ensure her masculinity (and, paradoxically, her femininity) will not be threatened? Is it indeed masculine, or is her masculinity itself only a put-on mask?

She may pass for a man in her kingly raiments, but she is not fooling anyone by her new name, attire, and behavior: Þornbjörg's assumption of the male Þórbergr persona is, emphatically and by her own design, very public. Her no less public prohibition against being called by any feminine term contains implicit and ironic reminder that she could still be perceived as such even after becoming *Svíakonungr* (Swedish king), as the saga narrator starts referring to this character from that point onward. What is more, it is her public display of assuming the masculine kingly identity that leads her renown to spread all the way for Hrólfr to hear about her and become interested[31]. Indeed, Þórbergr's masculinity is a large part of Hrólfr's attraction: it is hearing enumeration of her martial talents that draws his attention and causes him to regard her so highly as to initially count himself out of her league[32]. Is it all a sort of baiting, a provocation? With the tongue-in-cheek tone of the narrative, Þórbergr's act is hard to be taken entirely seriously. Yet at the same time, Þórbergr does not take this "gender game" lightly and amasses more sinister overtones: the saga alludes to many suitors whom this king had maimed and castrated[33].

Rather than making a switch from one gender to another, Þórbergr's behavior is destabilizing the very notion of gender binary. This character becomes a blur of ambiguity, neither entirely a man nor a woman. The very same seemingly-unquestionable masculine pursuits of building fortifications, sitting in a hall with weapons hanging on the walls in the company of armed retainers, and meting out cruel punishments to lesser underlings could at the same time be interpreted as startlingly effeminate in these desperate, hysterical efforts to put on a bold front, stemming from insecurity and a sense of personal weakness. If a male character was

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[30] Irina Matyushina points out that the female royal title *dróttning* – which can be applied as much to an unmarried ruler as to a king's wife – implies a somewhat limited power as compared to the sovereign male title *kongr* (Поэтика Рыцарской Саги [*Poetics of Riddarasaga*]), Moscow 2002, p. 88). Thus, even without assuming a male personal name, the adoption of the *kongr* title already makes a powerful statement on its own.

[31] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, chapter 6.

[32] Hrólfr's brother offers the following praise in describing her: *þat hef ek frétt, at Eirekr konungr í Svíþjóð á sér dóttur væna ok vitra, þá er Þornbjörg heitir ...en hún hefir suma hluti til jafns við hrausta riddara; þat er burtreið ok at skilmast við skildi ok sverði, þat hefir hún umfram allar konur, þær ek hefi spurn af* ("I have news that Eirekr king of Sweden has a daughter named Þornbjörg, fair and wise ... yet in some ways she is equal to valiant knights, namely jousting and fighting with shield and sword; in that she is foremost to all women that I know of"). This causes Hrólfr to ponder: *ekki berum vér áræði til slíkra hluta ...* ("we are not daring enough for such undertaking..."). *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 73.

[33] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 85.

doing all this, a modern reader might have called it "overcompensating". Þórbergr emerges thus as a somewhat effeminate king, prone to temper flares when his masculinity is being challenged[34]; – and yet, simultaneously and contrastingly, Þórbergr is a calculating, prudent monarch whose primary agenda is a muscular defense of the realm and who does not hesitate to draw sword and be foremost in battle. This character never ceases to be a woman – after all, she is still attracting bride-seekers – though she actively destabilizes the female identity category by assumption of this new name and public persona. Yet due to retaining a degree of female identity in the public eye (insofar as attracting bridal seekers), she succeeds in destabilizing her masculine identity at the same time, ending up as neither of the two – an "other" within an "other".

Þórbergr's hypermasculine identity may tickle the male saga characters the wrong way. There is something more unsettling about a woman in drag than in the open, no matter how jocular or tongue-in-cheek portrayal; especially a vicious woman in drag capable of castrating the suitors she does not fancy. Could her being in male guise deliver a harder blow on their own masculinity, suggesting that theirs too is a parody that can be stripped away? Does it induce the creepiness of dealing with this queer? The tension created by this destabilization of identity categories inevitably plays on the desire of this character's suitors, as they are greeted not with a courtly lady but with a figure potentially more masculine than even they are. The masculine and feminine cease to be discrete identities, becoming blended and inseparable. In the words of Judith Butler, as "both terms lose their internal stability and distinctness from each other […] the very notion of an original or natural identity is put into question"[35]. In the figure of Þórbergr, a new identity is being presented: a remix, a fusion and reconfiguration of gender norms into a nuanced pattern of behavior that avoids being easily gendered – simultaneously unsettling and yet (or perhaps all the more), to the suitors, irresistible. In approaching this figure with their courtship requests, they are of course casting themselves in light of transgressive behavior, inherently compromising and weakening their own gendered identities.[36]

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[34] Reacting to Hrólfr's reminder that the king is a woman, *konungr Þórbergr ... var svá óðr ok æfr, at hann vissi trautt, hvat hann skyldi at hafast*. (*Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 88. "King Þórbergr ... was so wroth and furious, that he hardly knew what he should do"). Compare this momentary lapse of self-mastery with Skarphéðinn Njálsson's reaction to hearing a malicious insult in *Njáls saga*: *Ekki höfu vér kvenna skap ... at vér reiðimsk við öllu* (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit XII, Reykjavík 1944, p. 114. "We are not fashioned like a woman ... that we get enraged at everything"). For a discussion of this latter quote in broader context of medieval Icelandic constructions and conceptions of masculinity, see Ármann Jakobsson, *Masculinity and Politics in Njáls Saga*, "Viator" 31:1 (2007), pp. 191–215.

[35] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York 1990, p. 123.

[36] In this context, it is interesting to consider Judith Butler's description of the anatomy of male transgender attraction in this regard, arguing against interpreting it as yet another solidified entity

Hrólfr consciously demonstrates this transgressive aspect on his first audience with the king: *Hrólfr konungr tók hjálminn af hofði sér, ok hneigði konunginum, en stakk blóðreflinum í borðit, ok mælti: "Sitið heilir, herra, ok i náðum allt yðvart ríki"* ("King Hrólfr took off the helmet from his head, and bowed to the king, then struck the blade tip into the table and spoke: 'hail, my lord, and peace to all your realm'"). Having made this courteous entrance, he reveals the purpose of his visit: *Ek er svá kominn, herra, at binda við ýðr unaðsamligt eptirlæti, þat sem hvárr okkar má öðrum veita eptir boði náttúrunnar* ("I have come, sir, to bind with you in delightful ecstasy, which we may serve to each other at nature's bidding")[37]. In his obsequious manners, deferential tone, and consistent use of the masculine title *herra* ("sir, my lord"), Hrólfr is validating Þórbergr's royal person – fully befitting a courtly guest at a greater sovereign's court. His petition, given the context, comes across less like a marriage proposal and more like illicit solicitation of same-sex relation. Crossing the line of propriety, Hrólfr gambles on displacing his host's masculinity by the insolence of his request, yet in making this move – in public no less – he puts his own manhood in jeopardy. Þórbergr at once takes advantage of this opening by reinterpreting it as petition for food and drink (an embarassing reminder of suspicion voiced earlier that Hrólfr was driven to Sweden by famine ravaging his homeland), delivering a blow to Hrólfr's dignity and effectively reasserting dominance and control over the scene as "the host with the most". When Hrólfr makes the blunder of provocatively "gendering" Þórbergr as a woman, perhaps not a little exasperated by his own diminishing stature, it bears an air of desperation, which immediately backfires on him as he

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of one's own gender opposite: "As masculinity is brought into relief against a culturally intelligible female body, it is this dissonant juxtaposition and the sexual tension that its transgression generates that constitute the object of desire. In other words, the object of desire is neither some decontextualized female body nor a discrete yet superimposed masculine identity, but the destabilization of both terms as they come into erotic interplay" (*Gender Trouble…*, p. 123). It must be emphasized that queer theory, from Butler and onward, explicitly seeks to theorize individual modes of personhood by highlighting complex rhizomatic motility in gender constructs and identity categories, instead of creating alternative monolithic identity categories. Bringing up the above-cited passage is therefore meant to illustrate the inadequacy of applying conventional category labels to the individual in question, and is by no means intended to generalize this very particular mode of personhood. It is likewise worth noting that conflating gender with sexuality by resorting to discursive essentialist tautologies (as most of the previous scholarship on *meykongar* has done) is epistemologically naive. As a mode of personhood, gender is the sum of enacted iterations of a social identity which consequently emerges through the performance of those acts. It is therefore a socio-cultural product, and not innate. Instead of presupposing some "core identity that exists prior to performance", it becomes more accurate to observe that it is rather "through the performance of identity scripts that identity is produced" (Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessical Claire Hancock, *Introduction*, [in:] *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. by G.L. Evans, J.C. Hancock, Cambridge 2020, pp. 1–18, p. 3; see also R. Alsop, A. Fitzsimmons, K. Lennon, *Theorizing Gender: An Introduction*. Cambridge, UK, Maldon, MA 2002, pp. 97–100).

[37] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 87.

is shamefully routed from the hall and forced to make a humiliating escape – yet with his transgressive attraction intact, for he will return again.

While the maiden kings' misogamy and trading rounds of humiliation are common tropes in medieval romances, the saga narrator artfully turns the tables on conventional formulae by inverting gender expectations and recasting this scene in another literary motif: an upstart visitor challenging the more powerful host in his own hall[38].

The Þórr factor

The irony of the cross-dressing, temperamental, posturing *Svíakonungr* calling himself by the most masculine-prefixed name, Þórbergr, could not have gone unnnoticed by saga-audiences familiar with Norse mythological matter. The symbolism of this name prefix escalates from remembering how Þórr, enshrined in popular imagination as the hypermasculine champion of the Æsir, had an awkward and uncomfortable stint with cross-dressing in the Eddic poem *Þrymskviða*: bereft of his hammer, he had to penetrate Jötunheim dressed as Freyja to get it back. The poem carries an obvious layer of slapstick humor, whose entertainment value has not gone unnoticed in previous scholarship[39].

Yet how feminine is Freyja, and to what extent does the audience's assumption of her gender govern the poem's interpretative affordances? It may be auspicious at this moment to consider Freyja's own masculinity, which colors the story as perhaps a little less ironic. Þórr is not dressing up as any ordinary girl: to impersonate Freyja is to immerse oneself into a twisted dimension of otherness and sexual deviance. She is, after all, the mistress of *seiðr* sorcery, which notoriously marks its practitioners with ominous deviance[40]; and from her it was that Óðinn got his own magic powers in this craft[41]. To dress up as Freyja, furthermore, is

[38] Such battles of wits in Old Norse literature were staged as transpiring between two males, whether being grilled with difficult questions (such as in the Eddic *Váfþrúðnismál*), or more broadly engaging in *flyting* which comprised of trading speech acts where each intended to one-up himself by feminizing and othering his opponent. Although contexts and scenes could vastly differ and stem from differing sources, these acts' gendering as a distinctly male activity is notable here. For disambiguation between different verbal contests of *flyting* and debate, see W. Parks, *Flyting, Sounding, Debate: Three Verbal Contest Genres*, "Poetics Today" 7:3 (1986), pp. 439–458.

[39] J. McKinnel, *Myth as Therapy: The Function of Þrymskviða*, [in:] *Essays on Eddic Poetry*, ed. by D. Kick, J.D. Shafer, Toronto, Buffalo, London 2014, pp. 200–220.

[40] For a detailed textual study of deviance (the *ergi* complex) inherent in Old Norse magic practice, see Ármann Jakobsson, *The Trollish acts of Þorgrímr the Witch: The Meaning of Tröll and Ergi in Mediaeval Iceland,* "Saga-Book" 32 (2008), pp. 39–68. For an overview of past scholarship on *seiðr* pertaining to its transgressive qualities, see M. Mayburd, *A reassessment of Hervör...*, pp. 129–140.

[41] *Ynglinga saga*, [in:] *Heimskringla* I, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit XXVI, Reykjavík 1941, p. 13.

to dress up as someone who receives half of the slain warriors that die in battle (one of Freyja's more sinister attributes, contrasting with the overtly feminized image she bears in popular imagination), on par with Óðinn who receives the other half of the slain[42]. An even more striking, and less-cited, attribute of Freyja is that one of her many by-names happens to be *Göndul* – a word which, apart from its deep entanglement in conceptual imagery of Old Norse *seiðr* sorcery, is a transparent reference to male reproductive anatomy[43]. Suddenly, Þórr's impersonation of this character becomes exactly the opposite of what it seemed at first glance.

This *Þrymskviða* episode is noteworthy for several details in its gender dynamics. Perhaps it was not such a big change for Þórr to dress up as someone who was occasionally known as Göndul. The gods certainly thought he would be convincing enough in Freyja's place to passably get by. Many literary critics interpret the theft of Þórr's hammer as the cause of his impotence and effeminacy even before the female dress was put on, reading his famous Mjöllnir as a symbol of his virility or a physical representation of his manhood[44]. Þórr may indeed be rendered passive and impotent from the very beginning of the poem (including his idle wait while Loki gathers news; obeying Loki's order to effectively "shut up" when Þórr

[42] Snorri Sturluson offers this depiction of Freyja in *Gylfaginning (Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. by A. Faulkes, London 2005, p. 24) citing a stanza from *Grímnismál* as its source (Finnur Jónsson ed. *Eddukvæði...*, p. 77. *Halfan val / hón kýss hverjan dag / en halfan Óðinn á*. "Half of the slain / she chooses each day / and half does Óðinn own"). Apart from the valkyric connotation, her association with the dead casts her as an ominous chthonic being.

[43] Freyja appears under this name in *Sörla þáttr eða Heðins saga ok Högna,* whose only extant copy is preserved in the fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók* codex but whose narrative content is based on older legendary matter (see *Sörla* þáttr *eða Heðins saga ok Högna*, [in:] *Flateyjarbok. En Samlong Af Norske Konge-Sagaer*, Vol. 1, ed. by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and C. Unger, Christiania 1860, pp. 275–283). The name *Göndul*, along with its close cognate *göndull*, are derived from Old Norse word *gandr* and rife with occult and transgressive underpinnings. Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon interpret *gandr* as "anything enchanted or an object used by sorcerers, almost like *zauber* in Germ[an], and hence a monster, fiend" (*An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, Oxford 1874, p. 188). Semantic links between *gandr* and magic staffs (in their capacity as ensorceled implements) have opened it to phallic connotations, as evideced by *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* using the word *göndull* in explicitly sexual context (*Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, [in:] *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, Vol. 2, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Reykjavík 1944, p. 486. This scene is tellingly absent from Rafn's 1830 edition). For a survey of scholarship on g*andr*'s deviant connotations, see M. Mayburd, *A reassessment of Herv*ör..., pp. 133–136; for an in-depth study of the same, see Eldar Heide, *Gand, seid og andevind,* Bergen 2006, especially pp. 79–155.

[44] R. Perkins, *The Eyraland Image: Þrymskviða*, stanzas 30–31, Sagnaþing II, Reykjavík 1994, pp. 653–64; J. McKinnell, *Myth as Therapy*… Snorri's comment in *Skáldskáparmál* that Þórr keeps his hammer inside his coat and that it shrinks when not in use (ed. by A. Faulkes, p. 42) does not help the mental imagery: few have dared to cite it in context of Þrymskviða within a scholarly publication.

complains he will be called a pervert; and uttering no words for the remainder of the poem after hearing that notorious *Þegi þu, Þórr*!)[45] – yet if the poem takes his impotence as a point of departure, then dressing up as the most sexually deviant (and active) goddess in Norse mythology may be seen as a sure step of progress towards recovery[46]. As Jón Karl Helgasson notes, Þórr's protestations of *ergi* perversion and Freyja's own retort that she will be called *vergjarnasta* if they ride to Jötunheim seem to echo a common notion that Jötunheim was a place where sexuality warped into weird dimensions beyond even Ásgarðr's supra-human standards[47]. Þórr is effectively assimilating the opposite extreme of the proverbial gender gradient spectrum, as it were, in order to restore his fractured wholeness. His act of transvestism is already the means towards this end, a means without which the end result (recovery of his masculinity and reaching his personal equilibrium) is impossible to achieve. Þórr's embodied masculinity, then, is not a fixed status quo, but always in progress. His reliance, dependence even, on his hammer, and his anxiety when familiar arrangement of his attributes is interfered with, reveal his constructed identity to be "a discontinuous, nontotalized series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, intensities, and durations"[48].

Returning now to the *Svíakonungr* in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, it becomes possible to observe similar dynamics playing out. Þórbergr's entrenchment in masculine identity is not an iteration of some monolithic masculinity, nor is it static. It contains multiple gender variables within itself, inherently blurring boundaries between them in the ungendered liminality of its kaleidoscopic motility. This assumed identity is so hypermasculine that it paradoxically comes across as effeminate in its very public display of dominance and insecurity; the power act is so overbearing it paradoxically borders on desperate and shrill. The presence of Þór- in the name Þórbergr fortifies the king's formidable image – yet

[45] Jón Karl Helgasson, *Þegi þu, Þórr! gender, class, and discourse in Þrymskviða*, [in:] *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. by S.M. Anderson, K. Swenson, New York 2002, p. 164.

[46] Freyja's obsessive promiscuity may be gauged by Loki's statement in *Lokasenna* that she slept with every god presently in attendance at a rather crowded feast; yet as a fertility goddess it is in her nature not to be bound by any perceived limitation or sexual taboos.

[47] Jón Karl Helgasson, *Þegi þu, Þórr!...*, p. 161, where *vergjarnasta* is translated as "nymphomanic".

[48] E. Grosz, *A Thousand Tiny Sexes: Feminism and Rhizomatics*, [in:] *Gilles Deleuze and Theater of Philosophy.* ed. by C.V. Boundas, D. Olkowski, New York 1994, pp. 187–212, pp. 193–194. The Norse god Þórr has been subject to extensive revaluations in recent years in efforts to disentangle his extant archaeological and folkloric source material from popular mythological stereotypes still prevalent and seldom-questoined to this day. See, for instance, R. Perkins, *Thor the Wind-Raiser and the Eyraland Image*, London 2001, where Þórr's under-represented connections with wind are explored. See also D. Taggart, *How Thor Lost his Thunder: The Changing Faces of an Old Norse God*, London, New York 2018, which challenges Þórr's presumed association with thunder.

at the same time adds a dimension of apprehension and alarm. It reminds this is a masculinity in need of perpetual maintenance and reassertion lest it be stripped away. It is simultaneously threatening and under constant threat[49].

In assuming this male kingship, complete with haughty provocations and public displays of power, Þórbergr controls and directs his own destiny by ensuring the only road to femininity he leaves open for himself passes clear through the masculine layer of gendered normativity. As noted earlier, Þórbergr's public acts do not deter but in fact draw potential candidates for partnership, who in this aspect are cast not so much as marriage suitors but as political rivals and potential allies. Emphatic in this entire embodiment of masculinity is how Þórbergr sets it up. The only way for this character to assimilate the feminine is through undergoing gender displacement by a stronger invading conqueror in open war, on equal terms, man to man. To put it more colloquially, Þórbergr wants to be effectively rendered as someone's male bitch, as it were, and Þórbergr's present capacity as an alpha monarch is both a challenge and a test to weed out lesser and weaker callers. On one hand, gender becomes desexualized and reduced to power on a sliding scale[50]. Yet on the other hand, and at the same time, this unraveling of gendered normativity casts all involved in ambiguously transgressive light tinged with suggestive tension.

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[49] Þór-prefixes in personal names are disproportionately popular in Icelandic sagas. While far from all such name-prefixes are portentious, a number of supernaturally-empowered female characters do notably contain Þór- in their names. Consider, for instance, the prophetic Þórbjörg litilvölva from *Eiríks saga Rauða*; the cross-dressing witch Þórhildr from *Ljósvetninga saga*; the shape-shifting witch Þórdís from *Kormáks saga*; and the incestuous battle-ogre Þorgerðr Hólgabrúðr from *Jómsvíkinga saga* (a figure explored in J. McKinnell, *Þórgerðr Hölgabrúðr* and *Hyndluljóð*, [in:] *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz (1922–1997)*, ed. by R. Simek, Wien 2002, pp. 265–90, and more recently in Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir, *A Normal Relationship?: Jarl Hákon and Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr in Icelandic Literary Context*, [in:] *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland, 1150–1400*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson, M. Mayburd, Boston 2020, pp. 295–310) – all of whom have explicit connections with sorcery and/or otherworldly powers. An exhaustively thorough documentation of Old Norse textual references to these and other supernatural empowered magic figures in medieval Iceland may be found in F.X. Dillmann, *Les magiciens dans l'Islande ancienne: Études sur la représentation de la magie islandaise et de ses agents dans les sources littéraires norroises*, Uppsala 2006.

[50] Equating gender with power may appear somewhat reminiscent of Carol J. Clover's theory of a one-sex model, which perceives gendering system in the Old Norse world as *hvátr* (sharp) versus *blauðr* (weak). However, she inadvertently subverts her own argument by reading *hvátr* as "masculine", effectively bringing this model back into a polarized and sexist gender binary narrative with its implicit assumption of female disadvantage (*Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe*, "Speculum" 68 (1993), pp. 363–87, p. 379). Clover's argumentation has gone unchallenged for decades in saga scholarship and only recently started drawing criticism for its ahistoric depiction of gender as a monolithic hierachy: see M. Mayburd, *A reassessment of Herv*ör..., p. 123 note 3; and G.L. Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, London, New York 2019, pp. 14–15.

Þórbergr's gender displacement in action

When Hrólfr defeats Þornbjörg/Þórbergr in a large-scale military campaign and physical battle, the latter character is often regarded by critics as being overpowered and subdued in her female capacity[51]. What is remarkable, however, is that Hrólfr recognizes her masculinity and essentially yields to her self-construct. In his exchanges with her on the battlefield – even after his victory – he continues to respectfully address her using masculine terms as a fellow king, and the saga narrator continues to call this character *Svíakonungr* along with the male pronouns, thwarting the notion that a "discovery of female sexuality" has somehow managed to take place.[52]. Their dialogue is more reminiscent of a stalemate between equals in its reconciliatory tone, rather than banter between a victor and his downtrodden foe:

> *Hrólfr konungr mælti:* "*við, herra, erum nú svá samankomnir, at ek vil yðr í öllu sæmdar leita, ok bið ek orskurð okkar máls í umdæmi föður þíns, ok mun þat mælt, ef hann skipar okkar í milli, at þér halðið fullum veg yðrum með sóma*"[53].
>
> "King Hrólfr spoke: look, sir, now that we have come together thus, I seek only for your dignity, and bid you take our case to your father; and it will be said, if he judges between us, that you keep your honor fully intact".

Suggestion for seeking intervention of the maiden king's father to settle their strife is put forth not as imposition of authority but as a concession favoring her position with his familial bias, allowing her to save face. Þórbergr's reaction to her captor likewise does not resemble that of a humiliated prisoner; without missing a beat the *Svíakonungr* steps up to the conqueror and grandly declares that *viljum vér nú, Hrólfr konungr, svá gera sem kurteisir menn eru vanir, ef þeir verða sigraðir ok yfirkomnir; at vér viljum bjóða yðr við öllu yðru liði til náða ok veizlu vegligrar, ok launa svá yðr, er þér gefið grið vorum mönnum* ("we wish now, king Hrólfr, to do as is customary for gentlemen who've been vanquished and overcome, namely we wish to invite you and all your retinue to peaceful rest and glorious feast, and thus repay you for giving mercy to our men")[54]. This lavish generosity echoes Þórbergr's earlier display of public dominance over Hrólfr from their first meeting. The posed invitation to enjoy rest and food together may perhaps echo Hrólfr's transgressive advance from that first visit, in which case the double entendre is no less transgressive in current context as one king publicly bids another to share a round of pleasure and delight. The saga narrator never

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[51] J. Jochens, *Old Norse Images*...; L. Norrman, *Woman or Warrior?*...; W. Layher, *Caught Between Worlds*.

[52] L. Norrman, *Woman or Warrior?*..., p. 381.

[53] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 102.

[54] Ibidem, p. 102.

breaks immersion of the scene, going on to inform that *bundu kónungar þetta sín í millum með sterkum trúnaði* ("the kings tied this agreement between them with strong bonds")[55]. Had the reader not known the maiden king's background and happened on this exchange, one wouldn't have found the slightest indication of this scene being anything other than words shared between two martial champions of equal stature when one bests another in open fight; perhaps indeed because there isn't. To borrow a line anecdotally attributed to Freud, sometimes a pipe is just a pipe[56].

The gender transformation from Þórbergr to Þornbjörg unfolds before the saga audience only after both step off the battlefield, and the detailed context is worth quoting at length:

> *...Svíakonungr ríðr til Uppsala með öllu sínu föruneyti, ok svá sem hann var þar kominn, gekk hann fyrir Eirek konung, föður sinn, lagði skjöldinn niðr fyrir fætr sér, tók hjálminn af höfði sér, hneigði konunginum ok kvaddi han ok mælti: "Minn kæri faðir, ek em orðinn farflóta ríkis þess, er þér gáfuð í mitt vald, ok sökum þess at ek varð yfirunnin af sterkum bardagamönnum, þá bið ek, at þér gerið þat ráð fyrir mína hönd, sem yðr er nú mest at skapi". Konungr mælti: "Gjarna viljum vér, at þú hættir styrjöld þessi, ok viljum vér, attu takir upp kvenligar atferðir ok farir í skemmu til móður þinnar. Síðan viljum vér gifta þik Hrólfi konungi Gautrekssyni, þvíat vér vitum enga hans jafníngja híngat á Norðrlönd". Konungs dóttir mælti: "Eigi viljum vér bæði gera at vera komin á yðvarn fund til umráða, enda vilja þá eigi hlíta yðvarri forsjá". Eptir þat gekk hún til skemmu, en gaf í vald Eireki konungi vápn þau, er hún hafði borit...*[57].
>
> "The Swedish king rode to Uppsala with all his retainers, and as he arrived here, he came before Eirek his father, laid the shield down before his feet, took the helmet off his head, bowed to the king and greeted him and spoke: "My dear father, I have been chased out of the kingdom that you gave into my power, on the account of me being beaten by strong warriors; I bid that you advise as pleases you the most concerning my hand". The king said: "We gladly want you to stop this war, and we want you to take up feminine pursuits and fare to your mother's chamber. Afterwards we want to marry you to Hrólf Gautreksson the king, for his equal is not known to us across the Northern land". King's daughter spoke: "Both of us would not have wanted to come before you for counsel, had we not wanted to take your advice". After that she went to the chamber, and gave the weapons that she bore into Eirek's custody".

The mid-paragraph gender switch is striking, but under what circumstances does it occur? The given set-up is rare in visual detail even by this saga redaction's long-winded standards: the Swedish king takes off his weapons, kneels, and ad-

[55] Ibidem, p. 102.

[56] This often-cited, yet documentally unverifiable, quip gained wide circulation in popular media no doubt due to its alleged attribution; an exaple of such reference may be found in J. Hobsbawm, *Where the Truth Lies: Trust and Morality in PR and Journalism,* London 2006, p. 144.

[57] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, pp. 103–104.

mits his utter defeat at the hands of stronger men – precisely the scenario that he was gambling with, the outcome of the game whose rules he himself had set. It is neither a lament nor a complaint, but an open proclamation of a fair result, having gotten what he had coming. Overcome by a more powerful king, the Swedish king is ready to become his vassal and submit to Hrólfr's dominance. Already pushed out of power, there is no shame for the defeated king in assuming a feminine role, given this feminitity is being willingly embraced. There is no patriarchal tyranny here; in asking for king Eirekr's advice, the Swedish king already knows what it will be and is anticipating it. The transformation from *Svíakonungr* to *konungs dóttir* is smooth and effortless – this is not a "there and back again" regression to femininity, nor is it a sudden "discovery of sexuality" (though the fact that it happens through her father would undoubtedly make Freud happy). Þornbjörg is not retracing her steps back towards her maidenhood status quo, but attaining femininity as a direct result of her masculinity. In other words, this is an illustration of gender displacement wherein the masculine Þórbergr is rendered effeminate (and female) by virtue of Hrólfr's greater comparative masculinity, no longer managing to be an alpha wolf[58].

This is what Þornbjörg wanted all along, setting herself up in a dominant position of power liable to get overthrown – but only by one who is brave, cunning, and audacious enough to defeat her in an open military campaign on equal terms, man to man. In this position, it is easy to deal with those weaker than herself, and the only way to be overcome is by someone with both superior battle strategy and physical fighting strength. In Hrólfr, she more than meets her match. As noted earlier, Þornbjörg resists being pushed into the perceived feminine sphere as it would spell negation of the masculine, and the greater the effort to "gender" her as female, the more powerful is her entrenchment in masculinity – in effect, destabilizing both extremes. The only acceptable way for her to integrate into feminine normativity is to appropriate it through the prism of masculinity – a similar dynamic that Þórr conversely illustrates in *Þrymskviða*.

Having already been made Hrólfr's vassal (the proverbial male bitch) by the military defeat, *Svíakonungr* can now flawlessly absorb the feminine not as an imposition, but as direct consequence that does not threaten nor negate this character's self-construct. In other words, Þornbjörg/Þórbergr is fulfilling the "most masculine of fantasies", the weapon-brotherhood, as Joseph Harris puts it; the "fantasy [...] of a man's meeting his match in battle and, after fighting to a draw, creating a brotherhood of arms"– where the couple becomes "the warrior male and his double"[59]. Þornbjörg does not relinquish her masculinity: it is only in

[58] The irony of the personal name "Hrólfr" assigned to this champion lies in its derivation from "Hróð-úlfr", its alpha-wolfish association fully intact.

[59] J. Harris, *Gender and Genre: Short and Long Forms in the Saga Literature*, [in:] *"Speak Useful Words or Say Nothing" – Old Norse Studies by Joseph Harris*, ed. by S.E. Deskis, Th.D.

comparison to Hrólfr that she is as feminine as she appears. Hrólfr, by continuing to address her in masculine terms even after overcoming her in battle, acknowledges this fact, thus removing from her the need for further reassertion.

While Þornbjörg's masculinity is displaced by Hrólfr's, it is nevertheless not an absolute one-off superimposition, and their gender dynamic remains fluid and fluctuating in a give-and-take of contrasts and comparisons. When Hrólfr falters, she takes a step forward, such as his earlier stumble in calling her a woman, or such as his captivity in the later part of the saga which renders him passive and prompts her to amass an army for his rescue:

> *Tók hún þá skjöld ok sverð ok réðst til ferðar með Gautreki, syni sínum... Ok í ákveðnum stað fundust þau öll saman með miklu liði. Hafði drottning ráð ok skipan fyrir liði þeirra"*
>
> "she then took shield and sword and rode out on the journey with Gautrekr, her son ... and in agreed-upon place they all met together with a great army. The queen had authority and command over their army[60]".

In the end, it is no trouble for Þornbjörg to put on war gear and be an active leader of military campaign in coming to Hrólfr's aid, as her masculinity remained fully in place (after bearing him a son, no less). By his incapacitation she is ascendant once more as the most dominant character on the scene.

E unum pluribus

Becoming a vassal within a homosocial courtly framework does not equate servile subjugation for Þornbjörg. Continental European chivalric literature, upon reaching medieval Iceland, has brought with it a "radical re-envisioning of masculinity and heroism" that stems from this literature's own Christian cultural roots, as noted by David Clark[61]. Contrary to the prevalent assumption that medieval Catholicism implicitly denotes stricter gender delineations, quite the opposite may in fact be noted once careful distinction is drawn between doctrinal stipulations on one hand and situationally specific enactments on other, conditioned as the latter are by cultural constructions and interpretations of multiple masculinities and femininities in simultaneous circulation[62]. This resulted in reimagining of the

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Hill, Ithaca 2008, p. 266. As Harris further notes, illustrations of this motif are reflected in other cultures and literatures as well, such as the bond between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, or Robin Hood and Little John.

[60] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 175.

[61] D. Clark, *Between Medieval Men: Male Friendship and Desire in Early Medieval English Literature,* New York 2009, p. 150.

[62] See Caroline Walker Bynum's seminal collection of essays for the thought-provoking explorations of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century spirituality (*Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality*

masculine heroic ideal through a new set of gender variables which medieval Catholicism brings. To assume the masculine identity of a warrior, Clark goes on to note, "is to submit to being feminized, impotent, placed in the passive and subject position by Christ". The medieval Christian perspective, where "passive masculinity" is revalued "as a positive and indeed heroic attribute", has inevitably left a mark on continental chivalric romances, in which the act of submission (before a lord or a lady) becomes regarded as noble and virtuous[63]. Such revaluations of masculinity and femininity effectively imbue the former with distinctive aspects of the latter, and this dynamic goes the opposite way as well. In a recent study, Védís Ragnheiðardóttir draws parallels between maiden kings and virgin martyrs from medieval Icelandic hagiographies (*heilagra meyjar sögur*), noting a number of similarities in their characterizations, not least that their very being is predicated upon their refutation of "gendering" attempts[64]. These parallels may be deepened further by recent historical scholarship on medieval female saints, which reads their rejections of embodied femininity as effectively reaching a state of gender-exemption, noting that these figures' self-narrated images tend to be androgynous[65]. As such figures were no longer definable by standard female

of the High Middle Ages, Berkeley 1982), a period distinctly marked by the rise of laity in reaction and opposition to religious authorities. This resulted in many reconfigurations of past doctrines and practices, including rise in affective spirituality with its often radical reimaginings of gender and gender roles. This broader cultural context of medieval Europe is not infrequently overlooked in literary saga scholarship, which has a history of perpetuating tendentious reduction of medieval Christianity to political church power and monolithic authority of its clergy.

[63] D. Clark, *Between Medieval Men*..., p. 150, in his interpretation of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Dream of the Rood* within context of homosocial desire. By reading the Cross, from whose perspective the poem is presented, as male, Clark sees in it a destabilization of gender identities as they merge to form new fusions and possibilities: "there is neither male nor female, but individual men and women can, like the Cross, be a bride of Christ. In a poem constructed upon a paradox [where Christ is presented as both a human warrior and a divine figure] ... it should perhaps not be surprising that gender is also a fluid and paradoxical characteristic" (ibidem, pp. 150–151).

[64] Védís Ragnheiðardóttir, *Kynjuð yfirnáttúra...*, pp. 60–62. For more on literary contexts of medieval Icelandic hagiographies of female martyrs, see Sverrir Tómasson, *Kristnar trúarbókmenntir í óbundnu máli*, [in:] Íslensk bókmenntasaga I, 2nd edition, ed. by Vésteinn Ólason, Reykjavík 2006, pp. 419–479; as well as K. Wolf, *Transvestism in the Sagas of Icelanders*, [in:] *Sagas and the Norwegian Experience. Sagaene og Noreg. Preprints for 10th International Saga Conference*, Trondheim 1997, pp. 675–84.

[65] J.E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, London 1991, p. 109; C. Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York 1991, pp. 165–171. Describing female crossdressing saints from Apocryphal Acts, J.E. Salisbury writes "they became androgynes, embodying the principles of both male and female; this neutralized their gender, making them asexual. Furthermore, this new asexual being would be so complete that he/she would need none of the social structures that supported and completed imperfect sexual beings. Indeed, the androgyne is exempt from such structures" (*Church Fathers*…, p. 109). Such conceptualization of androgynous identity is in line with the broader motif of supernatural empowerment present across many eras, cultures, and beliefs, namely "that a union of male and female elements in

terms, their hagiographers were left no choice but to imbue their qualities with masculine terminology, necessarily limited by language constraints yet portraying them not as transgressive but noble[66].

In light of these nuanced gradients, it becomes innacurate to assume that gender identities became any more monolithic or any less fluid with the arrival of Christianity (and eventually, romance literature) to Iceland, opening further discourse on, and inviting reconceptualizations of, how medieval European selfhood was constructed and understood. It reveals innumerate new gender (or perhaps more accurately, agender) identities that fall entirely outside standard modern binary polarities; indeed, to attempt interpretation through the prism of the latter is to miss them entirely[67].

The same observation may be drawn for development and growth of saga literature in Iceland, as for development and growth of the historically contingent

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one person would create a superior being" (L. Motz, *The Magician and His Craft*, [in:] *Samtíðarsögur – The Concemporary Sagas. Preprint for the Ninth International Saga Conference*, Akureyri 1994, p. 596). For this dynamic of gender liminality in Old Norse context, see M. Mayburd, *A reassessment of Hervör*..., pp. 140–142. See also W.A. Meeks, *The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity*, "History of Religions" 13:3 (1974), pp. 165–208, which explores deep conceptual entanglements of the androgyne archetype in Christian gnosticism.

[66] E.M. Harney, *The Sexualized and Gendered Tortures of Virgin Martyrs in Medieval English Literature.* Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2008, p. 58. Available at: https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/16804/1/Harney_Eileen_M_200811_PhD_thesis.pdf (accessed: 18.08.2020).

[67] See M. Mayblin, *People Like Us: Intimacy, Distance, and the Gender of Saints*, "Current Anthropology" 55:10 (2014), pp. 271–280, especially p. 278 where she draws attention to stylistic tendencies across medieval visual art for dressing saints and other sacred figures in free-flowing robes, underlining their asexual aspect and "intensify[ing] the ambiguous nature of sacred bodies". Bestowal of androgynous facial features upon such figures in traditional icongraphy and manuscript illumination may be seen as extension of the same paradigm. Some recent studies of Old Norse masculinity have attempted to depart from strict binary gender polarities and take into account multimodal complexities inherent in the culturally dynamic constructions of gender. See for instance Bjørn Bandlein, *Man or Monster?Negotiations of Masculinity in Old Norse Society,* Oslo 2005 and Védís Ragnheiðarsdóttir,´Meir af viel en karlmennsku': Monstrous Masculinity in Viktors saga ok Blávus, [in:] *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson, M. Mayburd, Boston 2020, pp. 421–432 where masculinity is repositioned on a sliding scale with the monstrous; and G.L. Evans, *Men and Masculinities*…, which cautiously avoids gender absolutisms in favor of positing a model of multiple concurrent masculinities. This emerging multiplicity of concurrent masculinities is the focal point of the recent edited volume which emphatically features this plurality in its title and calls for an "urgency" in studying the titular subject as plural and multimodal (G.L. Evans, J.C. Hancock, *Afterword: The Ethics and Urgency of Studying Old Norse Masculinities*, [in:] *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature,* ed. by G.L. Evans, J. C. Hancock, pp. 237–240, p. 237). Only a greater critical focus on the multimodality of concurrent masculinities can collapse the problematic and oft-stereotyped paradigm of monolithic masculinity "as an umimpeachable, 'natural' category" so that it may come "to be recognized as socially constructed" (ibidem, p. 238). The awareness of historical contingency inherent in any model of masculinity is critical for shedding light on these models' "socio-political effects" upon their respective cultural climates insofar as privileging certain gender configurations at the expense of others (ibidem).

concept of gender itself. Both are "culturally specific process[es] of becoming... a kind of alchemy" brimming with "multiple transubstantiations, equations that map trajectories of perpetual motion rather than models that trace the contours of closed and lifeless systems"[68]. As recently noted by Gareth L. Evans, "an individual's relationship to the hegemonic is situationally specific", as are the gender parameters that are "produced for each situation and for any given point in time"[69]. To put it another way, constructions of gender identities are always informed by their historical contexts and pragmatic circumstance, and their solidity and stability (themselves products of cultural narratives) are illusory.

Multiple saga variants and plot permutations for the above-examined maiden king narrative were in active circulation in thirteenth and fourteenth century Iceland: some entering the stage earlier, some later, but each experimenting with a set of different literary variables to see how different configurations of gender dynamics play out within each variant of the story. The ominous, supernatural, indigenous motifs are still alive and flickering within this rich tapestry of interwoven matter, yet to unravel these strands in attempts to categorize them is to lose sight of the very images these tapestries depict. The longer version of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* is clearly playing on these ambiguities, rapidly and rabidly shifting frames of reference to the point that any attempt at static gender demarcations becomes absurd. This is summarily illustrated in partnering Hrólfr (an 'alpha wolf' yet a temperate, courteous hero of continental romance) with Þornbjörg/Þórbergr (who is fully fleshed out as an active and dominant war king, yet who yields when yielded to) in a bond where marriage itself may be metaphoric of a brotherhood in arms. The dynamic and malleable masculinity of both throws into question the discursive boundaries of gender identity categories by revealing their contingency. The dialogic relationality of these characters itself remains but one of innumerate possibilities and permutations, as the saga narrator directly acknowledges in a conscious stance against rigid absolutism when approaching this work: *Man svá um þessa sögu sem um margar aðrar, at eigi segja allir ein veg* ("it may be said of this saga as of many others, that there's not one way of telling them"), consequently advising an audience of critics *at finna eigi til, þeir eigi umbœta* ("to find no fault that you're unwilling to improve")[70].

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[68] J.J. Cohen, B. Wheeler, *Becoming and Unbecoming*, [in:] *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. by J.J. Cohen, B. Wheeler, New York and London 1997, p. xi.

[69] G.L. Evans, *Men and Masculinities…*, p. 19.

[70] *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 189.

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„CZŁOWIEK JEST ROZKOSZĄ CZŁOWIEKA”: DZIEWICZY KRÓL W DŁUŻSZEJ WERSJI *HRÓLFS SAGA GAUTREKSSONAR*

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł na ma celu zmianę pozycji dyskusji na temat płci w średniowiecznej literaturze islandzkiej poprzez podejście do płci nie jako stałych kategorii tożsamości, ale jako serii dynamicznych procesów. Biorąc pod uwagę, że tożsamość społeczna w średniowiecznej Skandynawii była niestabilna i trzeba ją nieustannie renegocjować, uważam, że staronordyckie koncepcje płci nie były zgodne z ustalonymi rolami binarnymi (jako przedstawienia stabilnych męskości/kobiecości), ale były raczej aktami władzy wywierającymi zróżnicowane dynamiki społeczne w przestrzeni publicznej. Biorąc dłuższą wersję *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* jako studium przypadku, skupiam się na jej twórczym przekształceniu motywu literackiego dziewiczego króla, a zwłaszcza na męskości tej postaci, która żywo ilustruje te wielopłciowe zagrania. Wyraźnie staram się „pozbawić płci” męskość sag, interpretując ich prowokacyjną dynamikę jako wyzwalacz zmian społecznych dla zaangażowanych postaci, które mają również wpływ na ich własne konfiguracje tożsamości. Choć to produkt fikcyjnej rozrywki, a nie rzeczywistości historycznej, twierdzę, że postać *meykóngr* w tej sadze odzwierciedla podwyższoną wrażliwość opinii publicznej na zmiany klimatu kulturowego średniowiecznej Skandynawii, wskazując na społecznie i historycznie uwarunkowaną naturę normatywności płciowej.