

# Gunnarr and Hallgerðr:

## A Failed Romance

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In contrast to the medieval French romances, which are centrally concerned with defining the nature and effects and obligations of love, the Sagas of Icelanders have usually been thought to have feud and honor as their controlling themes. The love stories in the sagas—between Kjartan and Guðrún in *Laxdœla* saga, Gunnlaugr and Helga in *Gunnlaugs saga*, Kormákr and Steingerðr in *Kormáks saga*, to take some of the best known examples—appear mute and truncated in comparison with the fulsome treatment of love and emotions in the French romances, with their extensive authorial comments and internal monologues and direct expressions of love.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, there has been a tendency to avoid reading love as a central theme in these sagas.<sup>2</sup>

The recent work of the Swedish scholar Daniel Sävborg forces us to rethink the role of emotions and love in the sagas.<sup>3</sup> He shows that the continental literary tradition of courtly love was known and understood in the North and followed in the *riddarasögur* in much the same style. The fact that the Sagas of Icelanders are written in a different

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1. See, for example, the lengthy passages dealing with the hero's falling in love in Chrétien de Troys, *Yvain (Le chevalier au lion)*, ed. T. B. W. Reid (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), ll. 1356–1406 and 1416–1427 (author's comments), 1428–1506 (Yvain's monologue).

2. M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, *The Saga Mind*, trans. Kenneth H. Ober (Odense: Odense University Press, 1973), pp. 86–95, is a case in point.

3. Daniel Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken. Erotik känslor och berättarkonst i norrön litteratur*, Acta Universitatis Upsalensis, Historia Litterarum 27 (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2007).

and restrained style, however, should not blind us to the presence there too of strong passions. Earlier scholars, such as Vésteinn Ólason and William I. Miller,<sup>4</sup> have pointed to the presence of emotions in the sagas, but Sävborg is the first to provide a meticulously detailed account of the way that brief but loaded formulas such as *sitja á tali* (*við*) and incidents of exchanges of clothing can add up to a powerful depiction of love, which in some cases becomes a formative element in the sagas.

Sävborg does not analyse, as I propose to do, the Gunnarr-Hallgerðr relationship, and with good reason: it has few of the indicators of an emotionally charged love relationship. And yet, in a saga that is virtually obsessed with sex and marriage and divorce and sexual innuendo and ambiguity and identity,<sup>5</sup> the relationship between Gunnarr and Hallgerðr plays a dominant and to some extent formative role, and deserves analysis on its own terms.

#### **An interest in how people get along (interpersonal relationships)**

The author of *Njáls* saga shows more interest in emotional states than we would expect, given the neutral style of the Sagas of Icelanders. He is particularly keen to comment on relations between characters, either through brief statements of his own (“things went well between them”) or through utterances of his characters (“Yes, our love goes well”). The persistency of such remarks, which supplement the events themselves, reveals that he was indeed interested in the status of relationships and the emotional state of persons in relationships.

When Hǫskuldr has given Hrútr his first sight of Unnr—without her

4. Vésteinn Ólason, “Emosjon og aksjon i *Njáls saga*,” *Nordica Bergensia* 3 (1994), pp. 157–172; William I. Miller, “Emotions and the Sagas,” in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992), pp. 89–109.

5. This has been well covered, from different perspectives, in at least three articles: Helga Kress, “‘Ekki hǫfu vér kvennaskap.’ Nokkrar laustengdar athuganir um karlmennsku og kvenhatur í *Njálu*,” in *Sjötú ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. júlí 1977*, ed. Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977), vol. 1, pp. 293–313; Ursula Dronke, “The Role of Sexual Themes in *Njáls saga*,” *Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture, University College London, 27 May 2980* (London: University College London, 1980); and Ármann Jakobsson, “Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*,” *Viator* 38 (2007), pp. 191–215. I am grateful to Ármann for giving me an early version of his paper and for much useful counsel during this writing.

knowing it—and asks him how he likes this prospective bride, Hrútr replies “Well enough, but I don’t know if we’re meant to be happy together.”<sup>6</sup> At the wedding, which was postponed in order for Hrútr to claim an inheritance in Norway, there is the sudden but somehow not unexpected statement that “the bride had a sad look about her,” and shortly after this we read that “there was little intimacy between her and Hrut, and so it went all through the winter.” In the spring she went to the Althing to meet her father Mǫrðr; “her spirits were rather heavy”<sup>7</sup> and she soon burst into tears. Mǫrðr finds no evidence of a problem in their relationship and sends her back to continue her life with Hrútr. Here again we are given an inside view: “Then Hrut rode home from the Althing, together with his wife, and things went well between them that summer. But when winter came the difficulty returned, and it became worse as spring drew on.”<sup>8</sup> At this point the audience is as ignorant of the underlying problem as Mǫrðr is, but unfortunately for Hrútr, all the embarrassing details of this troubled relationship soon come into the open. This, the first marriage presented in the saga, is unsparingly anatomized.

The relationship between Hrútr and Unnr may be the most exposed in the saga, but the author’s interest in personal and marital relationships is seen throughout, from the curt “Thrain had little love for her,”<sup>9</sup> to the elaborate deliberations over Hallgerðr’s character and its suitability for the wedded state, to Gizurr hvíti’s statement that Mǫrðr (Valgarðsson) loves Gizurr’s daughter “like the eyes in his head.”<sup>10</sup> One marriage in the saga, that of Hallgerðr and Glúmr, is specifically portrayed as harmonious: “Glum and Hallgerd got along well together, and things went this way for a while.”<sup>11</sup> This very positive

6. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954), 2.8: “Vel, . . . en eigi veit ek, hvárt vit eigum heill saman.” All references will be to this edition, by chapter and page. The English is taken from my Penguin Classics translation of 2001.

7. 6.22: “ok var brúðrin dǫpr heldr. . . . En fátt var um með þeim Hrúti um samfarar, ok ferr svá fram allt til várs. . . . en henni var skapþungt nokkut.”

8. 6.23: “Síðan reið Hrútr heim af þingi ok kona hans með honum, ok var nú vel með þeim um sumarit. En þá er vtraði, þá dró til vanða með þeim, ok var þess verr, er meir leið á várit.”

9. 34.87: “Þráinn unni henni lítit.” This refers to Þráinn Sigfússon and his first wife Þorhildr skáldkona.

10. 13.355: “. . . hann ann henni sem augum í hǫfði sér.”

11. 14.46: “Þau komu vel ásamt, Glúmr ok Hallgerðr; ok fór svá fram um hríð.”

statement is soon reinforced by her response to Þjóstólfr's question; "Yes, our love goes well."<sup>12</sup>

Such pronouncements, whether positive or negative, do not accompany all marriages in the saga, so that their absence is noticeable and itself perhaps significant. Ursula Dronke points out that instead of being told that all went well with Hildigunnr and Höskuldr, we learn only that "Hildigunn and Bergthora got along well."<sup>13</sup> Einar Ólafur Sveinsson noticed this, but still wrote of "the affection which is obviously beginning to awaken between her and Höskuldr."<sup>14</sup> This may be reading too much into the story, for the only glimpse we get into the workings of this marriage comes when Hildigunnr whets Flosi to avenge her husband (ch. 116).<sup>15</sup>

An insight into the dynamics of the relationship which concerns us most in this paper is provided during the reciprocal slayings instigated by Hallgerðr and Bergþóra. After Hallgerðr's insulting assertion that both her husband and Njáll are "soft" (*blauðr*), we read: "Then Gunnar was cold with her for a long time, until she became more yielding."<sup>16</sup> Gunnarr seems to have found a way to tame her, if only temporarily, but the over-riding fact is that in spite of all the hints the author gives about that relationship, there are none to indicate that it is a happy one.

The author's interest in personal relationships is also apparent in comments on how one person influences another. About Þjóstólfr, Hallgerðr's Hebridean foster-father, "It was said that he did nothing to improve Hallgerd's character."<sup>17</sup> Gunnarr warns his kinsman Sigmundur Lambason about his Swedish companion Skjöldr: "I've been told about him . . . that he does not improve your character—and what you certainly need is some improvement."<sup>18</sup> We are soon told that the foolish

12. 15.47: "Vel er um ástir okkrar."

13. 97.247: "ok fór allt vel með þeim Hildigunni ok Bergþóru." Dronke, "The Role of Sexual Themes," pp. 4–5.

14. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Njáls Saga. A Literary Masterpiece*, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), p. 106; see also p. 112.

15. See Carol J. Clover, "Hildigunnr's lament," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, ed. John Lindow et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), pp. 141–83.

16. 38.102: "Var þá Gunnarr lengi fár við hana, þar til er hon lét til við hann."

17. 9.30: "Þat var mælt, at hann væri engi skapboetir Hallgerði."

18. 41.106: "Svá er mér frá honum sagt . . . at hann sé þér engi skapboetir; en þú þarft hins heldr, at boett sé um með þér."

Sigmundur is falling under the influence of Hallgerðr, who persuades him, together with Skjöldr, to kill Þórðr leysingjason. Rannveig is aware of the influence of her daughter-in-law and warns Sigmundur that “if you rise to Hallgerð’s bait again it will be your death.”<sup>19</sup> After Gunnarr has made a settlement with Njáll for the slaying, he repeats the warning and adds a keen analysis of the Sigmundur-Hallgerðr relationship: “you must never rise to Hallgerð’s bait again. You’re not at all like me: you are given to mockery and sarcasm, while I am not. You get along well with Hallgerð, because you have more in common with her.”<sup>20</sup> Inevitably Sigmundur rises to Hallgerðr’s bait again, which leads to his death. Hrappr Örgumleiðason is another character who has a malign effect on others, first on Þráinn in Norway and then at Grjótá in Iceland, where in an unusual repetition it is said twice that he had a harmful influence.<sup>21</sup> His role is apparent in the slanders against the sons of Njáll: “Killer Hrapp and Grani were the ones who spoke most abusively about the sons of Njal and they saw to it that there was no offer of compensation.”<sup>22</sup>

The most extreme example of a person exerting evil influence is of course Mörðr, who ingratiates himself with the sons of Njáll by giving them gifts and telling them lies which rupture their fine relationship with Hǫskuldr Þráinsson, so that eventually they slay him.<sup>23</sup>

It is in keeping with saga style that authorial comments are made by events as well as by words. On this account—turning again to marital relationships—the union of Bergþóra and Njáll must be considered a success, though this is never stated explicitly. Bergþóra’s concern for family honor, her gracious acceptance of the grieving Hróðný and her insistence on dying by the side of her man—a noble sacrifice clearly

19. 42.109: “En ef Hallgerðr kemr annarri flugu í munn þér, þá verðr þat þinn bani.”

20. 44.111: “. . . ok skyldir þú nú eigi annarri flugu láta koma í munn þér. Ert þú mér ekki skaplíkr; þú ferr með spott ok háð, en þat er ekki mitt skap; kemr þú þér því vel við Hallgerði, at it eiguð meir skap saman.”

21. 88.220: “ok bjó Hrappr þar [at Hrappsstaðir]; hann var þó lengstum at Grjótá. Hann þótti þar öllu spilla.” 91.225: “Hrappr átti bú á Hrappsstöðum, en þá var hann at Grjótá jafnan, ok þótti hann þar öllu spilla.”

22. 91.227: “Þeir lögðu verst til þeira Njálssona Víga-Hrappr ok Grani ok öllu mest, er þeim var engi sætt boðin.”

23. For a fuller and kinder view, see my “Mörður Valgarðsson,” *Sagnaheimur. Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson*, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir and Rudolf Simek (Vienna: Fassbaender, 2001), pp. 63–77.

meant to contrast with Hallgerðr's refusal to help her husband at his dying moment—all these define her as a supportive wife, living harmoniously with her husband.

These contrasting couples—Njáll-Bergþóra and Gunnarr-Hallgerðr—are at the heart of the saga. Our task now is to tease from the reticent narrator the nature of the more problematic of these relationships.

### Love at first sight

The best part of the Gunnarr-Hallgerðr romance is its beginning. Hallgerðr has been marked as a tall beauty from her first appearance in the saga; her long silk-like hair is described several times (1.6, 13.44, 33.85). It should be noted, however, that she falls short of superlative beauties like Helga Þorsteinsdóttir in *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*, said to be the fairest woman in all Iceland,<sup>24</sup> or Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir in *Laxdæla saga*, the loveliest woman then growing up in Iceland.<sup>25</sup> If they are Miss Iceland, Hallgerðr is Miss Akureyri; her hair, though long and silky, is no match for Helga Þorsteinsdóttir's, and her dress is emphasized more than her natural beauty. When she is brought out to meet Glúmr she is wearing a woven black cloth, a scarlet tunic and a silver belt (13.44). When she meets Gunnarr at the Althing, she is the best-dressed of a group of well-dressed women<sup>26</sup>—this time she is wearing an ornamented red tunic and a scarlet cloak trimmed with braids<sup>27</sup> down to the hem. He himself is in a company of superlatively dressed men who capture the admiration of everybody, and with the stately garments he received from King Haraldr Gormsson and the gold bracelet from Jarl Hákon (see 31.82–83) he must have been

24. ÍF 3, p. 60: “Helga var svá fǫgr, at þat er sǫgn fróðra manna, at hon hafi fegrst kona verit á Íslandi. Hár hennar var svá mikit, at þat mátti hylja hana alla, ok svá fagrt sem gull barit. . . .”

25. ÍF 5, p. 86: “hon var kvenna vænst, er upp óxu á Íslandi, bæði at ásjánu ok vitsmunum. Guðrún var kurteis kona . . . Allra kvenna var hon kænst ok bezt orði farin; hon var ǫrlynd kona.”

26. 33.85: “þá sá hann [Gunnarr] konur ganga í móti sér ok váru vel búnar. Sú var í ferðarbroddi konan, er bezt var búin.”

27. This rendering of *búin hlöðum* is taken from a 2007 Ph.D. dissertation at University College London by Anna Zanchi, “*Dress in the Íslendingasögur and Íslendingaþættir*,” p. 80.

by far the best-dressed man at the Althing. He and Hallgerðr are a match for finery, but the origins are different: Gunnarr's are royal gifts in return for exploits abroad; Hallgerðr's have been acquired at home and proclaim her status as a member of a leading family.<sup>28</sup> For personal, physical beauty, Gunnarr is more than a match for her: "He was handsome and fair of skin and had a straight nose, turned up at its tip. He was blue-eyed and keen-eyed and ruddy-cheeked, with thick hair, blond and well-combed."<sup>29</sup>

The meeting between two such paragons of beauty and finery and lineage is bound to be momentous. They were surely the Couple of the Year at that Althing, also because their mutual attraction to each other is immediate and spontaneous. She takes the initiative and greets him; she knows who he is, and indeed, he must have been the talk of the Althing. He, at a disadvantage, has to ask her name. After identifying herself she continues to hold the initiative and suggests a topic of conversation: like Desdemona, she wants to hear about his travels. "She spoke boldly to him and asked him to tell her about his travels, and he said he would not refuse."<sup>30</sup> This appeal to his ego is sure to please Gunnarr, especially after the gloomy reception he received at Bergþórshváll: Njáll listened but was not interested in the adventures themselves, only in their consequences. He predicted trouble from envious men and suggested that Gunnarr would do well to stay away from the Althing (32.84). After such a cold shower, Gunnarr needs comfort, and we may suspect that this discouraging visit to Njáll made him vulnerable to Hallgerðr's feminine glamor at the Althing which Njáll did not want him to attend.

The new friends sit down to talk and, at this point the author delays presenting the dialogue in order to describe their clothing (see above). It is as though he wishes to freeze for a moment a tableau of the two handsome young people getting acquainted at their leisure. He achieves

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28. I owe this observation to Anna Zanchi. It may be pointed out that Gunnarr had earlier worn gold lace and red cloth and a gold ring underneath his Kaupa-Heðinn disguise (23.64); later, when he comes to the horse-fight, he is wearing a red tunic and a wide silver belt (59.150). The latter are probably not royal gifts, the former certainly not.

29. 19.53: "Hann var vænn at yfirliti ok ljóslitaðr, réttnefjaðr ok hafit upp í framanvert, bláeygr ok snareygr ok roði í kinnunum; hárit mikit, gult, ok fór vel."

30. 33.85: "Hón mælti til hans djarfliga ok það hann segja sér frá ferðum sínum, en hann kvazk ekki mundu varna henni máls."

this by placing a six-line description of their attire between “They sat down and talked” (*settusk þau þá niðr ok tǫluðu*) and “They talked aloud for a long time” (*Þau tǫluðu lengi hátt*). By thus freezing the moment for us, giving us a static portrait of their external appearance, the author raises a suspicion that their attraction is superficial. What was said during this long conversation is less important than what they looked like.

As Sävborg has shown us, formulas describing lengthy conversations between a man and a woman are, in the rhetoric of the sagas, an indication of strong attraction. In this case, however, the lack of accompanying formulas and the emphasis on appearance undercut the intimacy of this scene.<sup>31</sup>

When their conversation (was it all devoted to Gunnarr’s exploits?) is finally opened up to the reader it proves to be worth examining in detail, if only because there are few developed proposal scenes in the sagas, and because this is the only extended dialogue between Gunnarr and Hallgerðr presented in the saga. After their unrecorded conversation, Gunnarr shows his ignorance once more, asking whether she is married. A simple “no” would do as an answer, but she adds, candidly—and at this point, in the middle of her speech, the dialogue moves into direct discourse—that “there aren’t many who would want to take the risk.” This is an unexpected response, which Gunnarr has trouble dealing with. If she had said “I don’t plan to marry,” his next remark would be an appropriate response. But that is not what she said, and a fitting answer to what she actually said would be “Why is that? Why would no one want to take a chance with you?” But that would be an inquiry into her background, of which Gunnarr is ignorant and willing to remain so. This lack of curiosity, combined with a bit of competitiveness, causes him to ask: “Is there no one good enough for you?”<sup>32</sup>

Her response to his question is magnificently ambiguous: “It’s not that . . . but I’m very demanding when it comes to men.”<sup>33</sup> The

31. One might wonder about the possible significance of their talking aloud. Does it too suggest a lack of intimacy? Or are we to assume that they spoke audibly during their long unrecorded conversation and then dropped their voices for the exchange that follows? Intimate conversation is sometimes explicitly quiet: in ch. 23 of *Laxdæla saga* Óláfr pái and Þorgerðr talk for a whole day outside the hearing of others.

32. 33.85: “Þykki þér hvernig fullkosta?”

33. 33.85–86: “Eigi er þat . . . en mannvond mun ek vera.”

adjective *mannvond* (“demanding”) can mean both that she is indeed hard to please (this would answer Gunnarr’s question) and that she is very difficult towards men.<sup>34</sup> If he understood the second meaning, Gunnarr pays it no heed and presses on to a proposal of marriage. In both of her complex answers Hallgerðr is offering to open herself up, to explain to Gunnarr why she is a risky marriage bet and what makes her a difficult woman. But Gunnarr, who started this conversation in ignorance, not knowing her name or marital status, continues in blissful ignorance, moved more by the challenge which this enigmatic woman presents than by a concern to understand her. He turns directly—carelessly, we might add—to his proposal, couched hypothetically at first: “How would you answer if I were to propose to you?”<sup>35</sup> She responds, equally coyly, by questioning his seriousness,<sup>36</sup> but he—now in the indicative voice—states that in fact he is serious.<sup>37</sup> She responds by reverting once more to the conditional (is she mimicking him?)—“if this is what’s on your mind”<sup>38</sup>—and directs him to her father, like a proper daughter (she was not always so proper).

This dialogue is far from straightforward. Twice the phrase “*Eigi er þat*” (That’s not so) is used, once by each of the speakers, to reverse the direction of the previous, negative remark (“*Pykki þér hvergi fullkosta?*”, “*Þat mun þér ekki í hug*”). *Duplex negatio affirmat*. Gunnarr’s remarks, although not always “correct” according to the rules of discourse, are conventional and predictable. Hallgerðr, with her use of the unexpected and the ambiguous, is the more subtle conversationalist, and it is possible that her gestures at self-revelation (few men would risk marrying her, she is hard on men) are designed to stimulate Gunnarr to rise to the challenge of marrying a difficult woman.

The arrangement with her family is more by concession than by whole-hearted approval. Hǫskuldr, always short of good counsel, wisely refers the matter to Hrútr, who recognizes that Gunnarr has

34. Suggested by Dronke, “The Role of Sexual Themes,” pp. 19–20.

35. 33.86: “Hversu munt þú því svara, ef ek bið þín?” Bolli’s initial proposal to Guðrún in *Laxdeala saga* is similarly hypothetical: “Eitt sinn spurði Bolli Guðrúnu, hversu hon myndi svara, ef hann bæði hennar.”

36. 33.86: “Þat mun þér ekki í hug.”

37. 33.86: “Eigi er þat.”

38. 33.86: “Ef þér er nokkurr hugr á . . .”

no control over himself and that this is a match based on desire which cannot be prevented.<sup>39</sup> Then, in a way that is not flattering to the bride but is at least an honest attempt to come clean, he points out the weaknesses of Hallgerðr: “Hrut told Gunnar, without being asked, everything about Hallgerðr’s character, and though it seemed to Gunnar at first that there were many faults, it finally came about that they made an agreement.”<sup>40</sup> Hallgerðr’s earlier remarks about no one wanting to take a chance with her, and about her being *mannvond*, anticipate Hrútr’s warning and rob it of its force: Gunnar has already heard, from herself, that Hallgerðr is a difficult match, and in both cases he regards the hinted-at or explicit flaws as a challenge rather than as a matter for serious consideration. This comes close to comedy: the prospective bridegroom hears unfavorable information about his chosen one but persists in his determination to ignore negative signals. He is also, of course, likely to distrust Hrútr, whom he had earlier humiliated.

When the terms of the wedding are settled, Gunnar rides to Njáll at Bergþórshváll, and there is nothing comical about their meeting: Njáll is depressed to hear of the agreement (*Hann tók þungt á kaupum hans*, 33.87) and simply expresses his grim foreboding, without any attempt to advise or plead. Like Hrútr, he is wise enough to know that the marriage is inevitable. His clairvoyance tells him of the evil fate which lies ahead, also inevitable. Taken as a whole, this scene describes a remarkable decline: the romantic aura of the love-at-first-sight meeting, when seen through the eyes of wiser and older men, becomes a blind venture on the part of two glamorous but foolhardy people.

The wedding feast itself is even more pathetic than the betrothal. For some obscure reason, the saga says that the wedding feast is meant to be a secret, but of course this is an impossibility,<sup>41</sup> and although no time lapse is mentioned, the wedding appears to take place that

39. 33.86–87: “‘Eigi er þat,’ segir Hrútr, ‘meir er hitt, at ek sé, at þú mátt eigi við gera.’” ... “‘Veit ek, at svá mun vera, at ykkur er báðum girndarráð, ok hættið þit mestu til, hversu fer.’”

40. 33.87: “Hrútr segir Gunnari allt um skaplyndi Hallgerðar ófregit, ok þótti Gunnari þat fyrst ærit mart, er áfátt var, en þar kom um síðir, at saman fell kaupmáli þeira.” Hrútr was similarly frank and cautionary when responding to Glúmr’s proposal (13.42).

41. 33.87: “Skyldi þetta boð vera at Hlíðarenda ok skyldi fara fyrst leyniliga, en þó kom þar, er allir vissu.” One wonders from whom the wedding is to be kept secret; in ch. 8 of *Kormáks saga* it is explicit that Kormákr was not to know of Steingerðr’s marriage to Bersi.

same fall. When it does (in ch. 34), we are first introduced to the sons of Sigfúss and then given a description of the seating arrangement. Following that, an unusual event takes place: Þráinn Sigfússon, taken by the beauty of Hallgerðr's fourteen-year-old daughter Þorgerðr, is criticized by his wife for ogling. Þráinn, who did not care much for his wife anyway, leaps across the table and declares himself divorced—not exactly a favorable omen for a wedding feast. Stranger still, he immediately asks for the hand of Þorgerðr, and is approved unquestioningly by both Hrótr and Njáll, the same two men who had recently had doubts about the other wedding, the one supposedly being celebrated at this feast. Now there are two weddings instead of one, and the signs are that the suddenly introduced one will be more successful: approval is gained from all concerned, financial arrangements are worked out, and the ominous final sentences of the chapter tell us that while Hallgerðr was bountiful (*fengsöm*) and assertive (*atkvæðamikil*) in running the household at Hlíðarendi, Þorgerðr was simply a good housewife (*góð húsfreyja*) at Grjótá. The author makes no further remarks about the Þráinn-Þorgerðr relationship, but it clearly endures, in spite of Þráinn's flaws, and produces the most idealized person in the saga. In every way the Gunnarr-Hallgerðr wedding has been upstaged by that of Þráinn and Þorgerðr.

### Woman with a past

Romance marriages often come at the end of the story, after a long series of trials, and the bride is often virginal, though this is by no means always the case in a literature where men tend to fall in love with married women. Laudine, in *Yvain*, is a widow, whose husband is in fact slain by the man who then marries her (cp. the marriage of Kári and Hildigunnr at the end of *Njáls saga*). But no romance heroine—and no saga heroine either—has a past to match that of Hallgerðr, who has been twice married and twice been the cause of her husband's death. Her experience in the erotic realm is much more extensive than Gunnarr's, concerning whom we have only a one-sentence remark about his falling in love with a kinswoman of Hákon jarl: "Gunnar fell in love with Bergljot, the earl's kinswoman, and it was often apparent that the earl would have married her off to Gunnar

if he had asked for this.”<sup>42</sup> Two of the indications of love that Sävborg analyses appear here, the phrase *leggja hug á* (fall in love with) and the view of others that this is a viable relationship which the earl would have sanctioned. But *leggja hug á* does not necessarily point to a sexual relationship, and in this case the view from outside does not testify to the intensity of their love, but to the earl’s attitude.<sup>43</sup> One suspects that the Gunnarr-Bergljót episode, like the Kjartan-Ingibjörg episode in *Laxdoela saga*, chs. 41–43, was innocent.<sup>44</sup> In any case, it is clear that Gunnarr’s previous erotic experience was significantly less than Hallgerðr’s.

Both of her first two marriages follow the same pattern, which is later repeated in her marriage to Gunnarr: a domestic quarrel leads to the husband slapping his wife, and this leads to the death of the husband.<sup>45</sup> In the first two marriages the slayer is Hallgerðr’s foster-father Þjóstólfr, and yet, despite the repeated pattern, the contrast between the marriages could not be greater. Hallgerðr married Þorvaldr against her will and without her consent, never cared for him, and did nothing to stop Þjóstólfr from taking vengeance for the slap. She married Glúmr willingly and by her own consent, loved him, and told Þjóstólfr specifically *not* to take vengeance. When he did so anyway, she took vengeance for her husband and had Þjóstólfr killed.

The contrast between the first two marriages provides us with important information about Hallgerðr’s character, by showing us what a different person she can be, depending on how she is treated. 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

42. 31.83: “Gunnarr lagði hug á Bergljótu, frændkona jarls, ok fannsk þat oft á, at jarl mundi hana hafa gipta Gunnari, ef hann hefði nokkut þess leitat.”

43. Contrast *Laxdoela saga*, ÍF 5, p. 112: “Þat var allra manna mál, at með þeim Kjartani ok Guðrúnu þætti vera mest jafnræði þeira manna, er þá óxu upp.” Cited in Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, p. 346.

44. Of the two relationships with Norwegian royal women, Kjartan’s has the greater claim to being sexual, to judge from Ingibjörg’s parting gift and their heartfelt farewell. I am grateful to Daniel Sävborg for a helpful discussion of this and other matters.

45. Anna Cornelia Kersbergen has shown many parallels between Hallgerðr’s first two marriages and those of Guðrún in *Laxdoela saga*, arguing convincingly that *Njáls saga* was influenced by the earlier saga. See *Litteraire motieven in de Njála* (Rotterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 1927), pp. 90–93. Both first husbands are named Þorvaldr, and both women are free spenders, etc., but their characters are quite different.

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.”<sup>46</sup> Translators have been said to be too harsh on Hallgerðr,<sup>47</sup> 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.

When Þorvaldr tells his father of his intention to marry Hallgerðr, Ósvífr warns him that “she’s a strong-minded woman, and you’re hard and unyielding.”<sup>48</sup> Þorvaldr persists, and when he raises the matter with Hǫskuldr he is warned again: “I won’t mislead you. My daughter is hard to get along with, but as for her looks and manners you can see for yourself.”<sup>49</sup> Even before she has been tested in action, her unyielding character is clearly delineated.

When the first test comes, she considers it offensive to be betrothed to Þorvaldr, both because she had not been consulted and because Þorvaldr, though prosperous, is of an inferior family. And since she is a *skaphorð* woman, she does not hesitate to tell her father of her displeasure on both scores. Hǫskuldr says she has too much pride (*ofmetnaðr*), and she retorts that if she does, it comes from her family (10.31).

The marriage develops as can be expected from an open-handed woman of firm character and a miserly, hot-tempered man. When springtime comes and there is a shortage of flour and dried fish, Þorvaldr complains that in the past the same amount of supplies lasted into the summer. He seems to overlook the fact that there are at least two more mouths (Hallgerðr and Þjóstólfr) to feed than before, though

46. Dronke, “The Role of Sexual Themes,” p. 17; Heather O’Donoghue, “Women in *Njáls saga*,” in *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*, ed. John Hines and Desmond Slay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1992), p. 88.

47. Carol Clover, “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,” *Speculum* 68 (1993), p. 371, fn. 30. Some other translations: Dasent has “lavish and hard-hearted,” N. M. Petersen “rundhaandet, men hæftig af Sind,” Andreas Heusler “verschwenderisch und trotzigem Sinnes,” Bayerschmidt-Hollander “headstrong and of harsh disposition,” Magnusson-Palsson “impetuous and willful.” The word *skaphorð* is used of two other women in the saga, Bergþóra (20.57) and Hildigunnr (95.239).

48. 9.30: “hon er kona skapstór, en þú harðlyndr ok óvægin.”

49. 9.31: “en ek vil enga vél at ykkir draga, at dóttir mín er horð í skapi. En um yfirlit hennar ok kurteisi meguð þit sjálfir sjá.”

the saga does make a point of her lavishness: “Hallgerðr was bountiful and high-spirited and demanded to have whatever the neighbours had and squandered everything.”<sup>50</sup> This is unambiguous and shows how her natural generosity can go too far. When Þorvaldr complains, she responds as we would expect, proudly and insultingly: “It’s none of my business if you and your father starved yourselves to get rich.”<sup>51</sup> Though the insult was probably deserved, Þorvaldr becomes so angry that he strikes her in the face, drawing blood—and he quickly pays for that with his life.

Hallgerðr’s second marriage is a contrast in every way, so much so that one writer, Magnús Sigurðsson, thought that this section, with its markedly changed atmosphere, had a different source from the other stories concerning Hallgerðr.<sup>52</sup> But instead of re-creating another version of the saga, as some writers on Hallgerðr tend to do, we will do better to deal with the saga solely in its present form. It is true that Hallgerðr seems to be another person in her second marriage, but surely the point is that she has more sides than one, that she is capable of change, depending on the way she is treated.

As before with Þorvaldr (and later with Gunnarr), the suitor is not to be put off by bad signs—in this case by his brother’s pointing out the fact that she had her first husband killed, and by Hǫskuldr’s admission that the first marriage ended in misfortune. Hǫskuldr seems to have learnt from that experience and this time insists that her approval be sought. She is sent for, and appears in her best finery and with lady-like behavior to match it. The entire betrothal scene (13.42–45)—her agreement, the concern for proper legal form, the valuing and determining of property—is carried out with a finesse and politeness unusual in the family sagas. It might be more at home in a romance. Moreover, the new couple live harmoniously: she declines to run the household, and we read that she “controlled herself very well that winter, and people were not displeased with her”<sup>53</sup> an understatement.

50. 11.33: “Hallgerðr var fengsöm og stórlynd, enda kallaði hon til alls þess, er aðrir áttu í nánd, ok hafði allt í sukki.” Her underlying generosity is evident when she moves back to her father after Þorvaldr’s death and first distributes gifts to all the household at Fell (12.36).

51. 11.33: “Ekki fer ek at því, þóttú hafir svelt þik til fjár ok faðir þinn.”

52. Magnús Sigurðsson, “Hallgerður í Njálu,” *Tímarit Þjóðræknisfélags Íslendinga* 13 (1931), pp. 75–88; see especially pp. 78–9.

53. 14.45: “Hallgerðr sat mjök á sér um vetrinn, ok líkaði við hana ekki illa.”

ment that says much. She remains “lavish and bountiful” (*qrlynd og fengsöm*, 14.46), as we have learned to expect, but in the context of a loving marriage her extravagance presents no problem.<sup>54</sup> She yields graciously when Þórarinn proposes to take over the farm at Varmalækr if Glúmr should die before him (14.47), and, as cited above, both the author and Hallgerðr herself make explicit comments about the strength of the love between Hallgerðr and Glúmr. When an outside force (Þjóstólfr) introduces disharmony, the husband’s slap is brought on not by an insult but by her well-intentioned plea for her foster-father.

The blow itself is less violent than the other two she receives from angry husbands: “Glum struck her with his hand”<sup>55</sup> The verb used here, *drepa*, is less strong than *ljósta*, used of the slaps administered by Þorvaldr and Gunnarr, and in addition it is not certain that the blow was directed at the face, as it was explicitly with the other two. Glúmr’s gesture may have been little more than a brusque shove.<sup>56</sup> And immediately after the blow, whatever it was, the author states that “she loved him greatly and was not able to calm herself, and wept loudly.”<sup>57</sup> Her reaction is that of a woman in love, not that of an abused wife grimly set on vengeance. There are no negative signs in her relationship with Glúmr, and surely the point of the episode is to show this important and positive side of her character.

By the time Gunnarr comes along, Hallgerðr has been run through an emotional mill, first by a wretched marriage, thankfully ended, and then by a harmonious marriage which ended tragically. If, like Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, she were to be asked at the end of her life which of her three husbands she loved the most, the answer would have been unambiguous: Glúmr. Her readiness to marry a third time must have more to do with a desire to stabilize her position in society—she is still

54. Anne Heinrichs, “Hallgerðs Saga in der Njála: Der doppelte Blick,” in *Studien zum altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1994), pp. 327–53, points out on pp. 347–8 that the term *fengsöm* (lavish) is used of Hallgerðr in all three marriages, but coupled differently: with Þorvaldr she is *fengsöm ok stórlynd* (11.33), with Glúmr she is *qrlynd ok fengsöm* (14.46), and with Gunnarr she is *fengsöm ok atkvæðamikil* (34.90). Of the three pairs of adjectives, only the one relating to her marriage with Glúmr (*qrlynd*) has an unambiguously positive connotation.

55. 16.48: “Glúmr drap til hennar hendi sinni.”

56. This point has been anticipated by Heinrichs, “Hallgerðs Saga in der Njála,” p. 348: “Glúmr’s Ohrfeige ist, verglichen mit Þorvalds, fast nur ein Streicheln.”

57. 16.48: “Hon unni honum mikit ok mátti eigi stilla sik ok grét hástöfum.”

a fairly young woman, perhaps in her late thirties or early forties and apparently living at Laugarnes with her fourteen-year-old daughter and a small household. She is not poor, but a good marriage would strengthen her social position, and she is sufficiently aware of her attractiveness to know that she can tempt the best catch in Iceland. And so she does, but without any illusions that this will be a love marriage. That part of her life is over.

### A compatible couple?

We saw above that two highly-regarded outsiders viewed the sudden engagement of this infatuated couple with some alarm: Hrútr commented on her mixed nature<sup>58</sup> but deferred to the couple's determination, while Njáll's reaction was a simple condemnation: "Every kind of evil will come from her when she moves east."<sup>59</sup> This powerful statement resembles Hrútr's comment in ch. 1 on Hallgerðr'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.

Although there are hardly any direct comments on their incompatibility, the indirect indications are clear, for example in Gunnarr's remarks to Sigmundr cited above: "You're not at all like me: you are given to mockery and sarcasm, while I am not. You get along well with Hallgerðr, because you have more in common with her." Another hint comes in the descriptions of their two children, as unlike each other as their parents. "Gunnar and Hallgerd had two sons. One was called Hogni and the other Grani. Hogni was an able man, quiet, not easily persuaded and truthful."<sup>60</sup> The unexpected silence

58. 33.86: "hon er blandin mjök, ok vil ek þik í engu svíkja." The term "mixed" may best apply to what we have been examining: her variable behavior depending on how she is treated. A different reading is offered by Zoe Borovsky, who examines the use of *blanda* in Eddic poetry, especially in *Lokasenna*, and concludes that "Hallgerðr comes to stand for a 'giant' past that disrupts and 'mixes,' taints, or poisons the new, more peaceful order." See "'En hon er blandin mjök': Women and Insults in Old Norse Literature," in *Cold Counsel. Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson with Karen Swenson (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1–14, citation from p. 11.

59. 33.87: "Af henni mun standa allt it illa, er hon kemr austr hingat."

60. 59.150: "Gunnarr ok Hallgerðr áttu tvá sonu; hét annarr Hogni, en annarr Grani. Hogni was maðr gerviligr ok hljóðlyndr, tortryggr ok sannorðr."

about Grani gives rhetorical emphasis to the fact that he is quite a different person from Hogni. Later this sharp distinction is specifically related to the parents: “Gunnar’s sons, Hogni and Grani, were now young men. They were quite different from each other: Grani had much of his mother’s character, but Hogni was a fine person.”<sup>61</sup> And shortly afterwards a third gloss is given when Gunnarr, sensing his forthcoming end, asks Njáll to look after Hogni: “I want to ask you one thing, though—that you keep an eye on my son Hogni. About Grani I have nothing to say, for he does many things that are not to my liking.”<sup>62</sup> Grani is described in these statements primarily in terms of the absence of the good qualities that Hogni possesses. The third of these comments, by Gunnarr rather than the narrator, tells us that Grani’s character has already led him to commit (unspecified) acts antithetical to Gunnarr’s nature—just as Hallgerðr did in her feud with Bergþóra and in the theft at Kirkjubær. Taken together, these three comments on Grani emphasize the incompatibility between Gunnarr and Hallgerðr.

In contrast to Hallgerðr’s firm character stands Gunnarr’s softer one.<sup>63</sup> In his opening description (ch. 19) he is first and foremost a superb athlete and warrior, with ideal blond looks; he is also said to be generous and even-tempered and a loyal and judicious friend. His exploits abroad show his fighting skills at their best, and it is significant that his ability to leap both backwards and forwards and to wield his sword so that there seem to be three in the air at once only figure in his battles abroad (see ch. 30), never in his fights in Iceland. His disappointing career at home, consisting of responses to provocations by lesser men (as Njáll predicted, 32.84) may be characterized in part by a statement he makes to Unnr when she asks him to recover her property from Hrútr: “I’m daring enough to try to get the money, but I don’t know how to take up the case.”<sup>64</sup> Long on courage, short on know-how. At Unnr’s prodding, he turns to Njáll, as he will again and again. Although he is fortunate in having

61. 75.182: “Þeir vǫru frumvaxta synir Gunnars, Hogni ok Grani. Þeir vǫru menn óskapglíkir: hafði Grani mikit af skapi móður sinnar, en Hogni var vel at sér.”

62. 75.184: “En þess vil ek biðja, at þér sjáið á með Hogni, syni mínum. En ek tala ekki um Grana, því at hann gerir mart ekki at mínu skapi.”

63. In contrast to the adjective *skapþorð* used for Hallgerðr, Gunnarr is said by Bergþóra, when she whets her sons, to be *skapgóðr* (44.114).

64. 21.58: “Þora mun ek . . . at heimta fé þetta, en eigi veit ek, hversu upp skal taka málit.”

the country's greatest lawyer as his friend, from whom it is natural to seek advice and help, the overall impression is that Gunnarr lacks the intelligence to match his prowess and modest good nature.<sup>65</sup> Comments by characters within the saga point to a general apprehension that if Gunnarr makes an intelligent move, the inspiration must have come from Njáll. [Hǫskuldr:] "Gunnar did not come up with this by himself. Njal must have planned it all." "Valgard said it must have been at Njal's advice and that this would not be the end of the advice Njal had given him."<sup>66</sup> Worse than his dependence on Njáll is that he repeatedly neglects to follow Njall's advice—most crucially the advice about not killing twice in the same family and not breaking a settlement made by good men (see chs. 55, 73, 74)—and this leads to his death.

The true nature of the relationship between Hallgerðr and Gunnarr is defined by Hallgerðr when Bergþóra has treated her insultingly at the feast at Bergþórshváll: "There's little use to me in being married to the most manly man in Iceland if you don't avenge this, Gunnar."<sup>67</sup> She measures Gunnarr by the extent to which he lives up to her notion of how "the most manly man in Iceland" should behave; sadly, he does not always fulfill her expectations, beginning with this very feast at Bergþórshváll. During the ensuing feud between the two wives she is disappointed at Gunnarr's willingness to make a peaceful settlement with Njall for every slaying, and we are even treated to a rare domestic scene on this score:

Hallgerd was very cross with Gunnar for having settled the slaying peacefully. Gunnar said that he would never turn against Njal or his sons, and she went on raging. Gunnar paid no attention.<sup>68</sup>

65. Hans E. Kinck, in *Mange slags kunst* (Kristiania [Oslo]: Aschehoug, 1921), p. 42, stressed Gunnarr's lack of intelligence. See also Matthías Pétursson, "Þrír karlar og þrjár konur í Njálu," *Góðasteinn. Héraðsrit Rangæinga* 42 (2006), pp. 29–45, esp. pp. 29–31, who describes Gunnarr as a figure designed to meet the heroic expectations of young people.

66. 23.65: "... ok mun eigi Gunnarr einn hafa um ráðit. Njáll mun þessi ráð hafa til lagt"; 65.161–2: "Valgarðr kvað þetta vera mundu ráð Njál's ok þó eigi öll upp komin, þau sem hann mundi hafa ráðit honum."

67. 35.91: "Fyrir lítit kemr mér ... at eiga þann mann, er vaskastr er á Íslandi, ef þú hefnir eigi þessa, Gunnarr."

68. 37.99: "Hallgerðr leitaði á Gunnar mjök, er hann hafði sætzk á vígit. Gunnarr kvezk aldri bregðask skyldu Njáli né sonum hans; hon geisaði mjök. Gunnarr gaf eigi gaum at því."

Slightly later, in a passage already cited, she tells Gunnarr that both he and Njall are “soft,” and indeed Gunnarr later reveals that side of himself to Njall in a famous passage: “What I don’t know is whether I am less manly than other men because killing troubles me more than it does them.”<sup>69</sup> Such speech reveals a sensitivity unexpected in heroic figures, and an uncertainty about himself which is likely to be reflected in other areas, most especially in his role as a husband. Ignoring her ill-tempered raving, turning his back, was probably a typical way of dealing with her. Unfortunately, a man who has to ignore his wife and has no control over her is not fully a man.

Once 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 Gunnarr’s life, only surfacing again when he is under siege at Hlíðarendi. Her only appearances in the events narrated in chs. 52–75, involving antagonists from Kirkjubær and Þríhyrning and Sandgil, are the following:

- When Gunnarr takes up his halberd and rides off to seek vengeance against Otkell and Skammkel, she says “Good. Now they can find out whether Gunnar will go away from them crying.”<sup>70</sup>
- The birth of her grandson is announced, and she proposes the name Høskuldr. Her sons Grani and Hogni are first mentioned. (59.149)
- When Gunnarr and Kolskeggr return triumphantly to Hlíðarendi after fighting off the ambush at the Rangá, we read that “Hallgerd was pleased at the news and praised them for what they did.”<sup>71</sup>
- When Gunnarr changes his mind about going abroad to carry out his sentence of outlawry, “Hallgerd was pleased that Gunnar returned home.”<sup>72</sup>

In all of these scenes but the second, Hallgerðr carries out her self-appointed role as the wife of “the most manly man in Iceland,” pleased at his seeking revenge, proud of his killings at the ambush (even though killing Þorgeirr Otkelsson means that Gunnarr has killed

69. 54.138–9: “Hvat ek veit . . . hvárt ek mun því óvaskari maðr en aðrir menn sem mér þykkir meira fyrir en öðrum mönnum at vega menn.”

70. 54.136: “Þat er vel. . . nú munu þeir reyna, hvárt hann gengr grátandi undan þeim.”

71. 72.177: “Hallgerðr fagnaði þessum tíðendum ok lofaði verkit.”

72. 75.183: “Hallgerðr varð fegin Gunnari, er hann kom heim.”

twice within the same family), and happy that he will face his enemies at home rather than go into safe exile (even though this too will mean his death).<sup>73</sup> These reactions define her relationship toward Gunnarr: she does not love or value him for himself, but for the unflinchingly heroic, vengeance-seeking side of his nature. Unfortunately for their marriage, there is more to Gunnarr than that.<sup>74</sup>

### More sinned against than sinning

The antipathy of the author of *Njáls saga* for Hallgerðr is obvious: the mention of “thief’s eyes” in the opening scene, and the repeated references to her hair are obviously designed to focus attention on the two scenes which most clothe her in shame: the theft at Kirkjubær and the refusal to give Gunnarr hair for his bowstring. Many writers—more popular than scholarly—have nonetheless tried to redeem Hallgerðr, sometimes by creating an alternate version of the story to the one set down in the only existing version of the saga. Hans Kinck assumed that the author had to adapt his story for an audience that was not capable of a deep understanding of the female psyche. His unprovable assumption was that behind the fictional Hallgerðr stood a different and “real,” historical Hallgerðr. The original reason for Hallgerðr’s refusal of her hair, for example, stems from her dislike of Gunnarr’s mother Rannveig, a constant and oppressive presence in the house at Hlíðarendi. Gunnarr requested that the two women work together at twisting Hallgerðr’s hair into a bowstring, but unfortunately—according to Kinck—the idea of cooperating with Rannveig was repugnant to Hallgerðr.<sup>75</sup> To take one other example: Magnús Sigurðsson claimed that Gunnarr bought the slave Melkólfr in order to have him burn down the shed at Kirkjubær and thus avenge himself on Otkell. He deliberately dishonors and slaps Hallgerðr in front of guests in order to distract attention from himself and place the blame on her.<sup>76</sup>

73. Heinrichs, “Hallgerðs Saga in der Njála,” pp. 349–50, observes that in each of these three scenes Hallgerðr’s view is contrasted with that of Rannveig, whose maternal concern is for Gunnarr’s life, not his heroic status. We might almost guess that Rannveig’s role in the saga is to highlight, by contrast, Hallgerðr’s one-dimensional view of her husband.

74. In the terms of Ármann Jakobsson’s article on “Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*,” Hallgerðr represents the false ideology of masculinity which overshadows the saga.

75. Kinck, *Mange slags kunst*, pp. 47–9.

76. Magnús Sigurðsson, “Hallgerður í Njálu,” pp. 82–5.

It is possible, however, without reading things into the text which are not there, to find extenuating circumstances which will at least allow us to understand Hallgerðr, if not to pardon her (the French expression *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner* suggests that the two are close together). For one thing, the real cause of Gunnarr's death lies in the conflicts provoked by Otkell and by the men of Sandgil and Þríhyrning, and the devious plotting of Mǫrðr. Hallgerðr was not involved in these events, and her contribution to his death is minimal.

We have seen that Hallgerðr's proud character reacts differently to different circumstances. For some reason which is not altogether clear, the reception she gets from the family at Bergþórshváll is vehement. Njáll's statement to Gunnarr that "Every kind of evil will come from her when she moves east," though based on his gift of foresight, seems a personal and harsh outburst—in contrast, say, to his calm prediction that the cause of his death will be something that people would least expect (55.139). Equally vehement is Bergþóra's hostile and insulting treatment of the new wife of their good friend Gunnarr, when he brings his bride to Bergþórshváll for what will be the last of the winter feasts exchanged by the households. By any fair standard, Hallgerðr's record should be "clean" by now: her first husband's death was amply compensated, and she herself saw to it that the slayer of Glúmr—to whom she was a good wife—was avenged.

Most readers agree that Bergþóra is deliberately offensive when she tells Hallgerðr to give up her seat for the late arrival Þorhalla, but there are different opinions as to why Bergþóra does this. Adeline Rittershaus sees it as the natural antipathy of a simple, solid, hard-working woman for an elegant and indolent younger woman.<sup>77</sup> Ursula Dronke sees a deeper resentment, one based on a conception of a wife's role: "Hallgerðr was a traitor to her first husband, she had him killed. She betrayed the principle that a wife should live by: she did not build her life upon the marital bond."<sup>78</sup>

In more extended form and indeed as a central thesis in her book, Rósa Blöndal has argued that Bergþóra's harsh rudeness towards

77. Adeline Rittershaus, *Altnordische Frauen* (Frauenfeld und Leipzig: Huber & Co., 1917), p. 159.

78. Dronke, "The Role of Sexual Themes," pp. 22–3.

Hallgerðr comes from the great disappointment at Bergþórshváll when Gunnarr took a bride from another district rather than from the farm of his best friend.<sup>79</sup> The saga reports in ch. 20 that Njáll had three daughters, without naming them. Later we learn that one of them, Þorgerðr, married Ketill Sigfússon of Mörk (34.88), and still later that a second, Helga, married Kári Sölmundarson (90.225). According to Rósa, it was the hope at Bergþórshváll that the third, unnamed daughter would marry Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi. When things turned out otherwise, this daughter stayed at home with her grief and disappointment rather than go to the wedding of Gunnarr and Hallgerðr; this explains why only her sisters Þorgerðr and Helga are mentioned as being present (34.88).

There are many useful insights in Rósa's book, but such speculation has little support from the text, where we would in fact expect considerable clarity if the matter were as important as Rósa claims. As things stand, the hostility of the couple at Bergþórshváll toward Hallgerðr is one of the many unexplained details in the saga.<sup>80</sup>

Hallgerðr's sharp response to Bergþóra's insult comes as no surprise. She gives a flat "no" to the request to move aside, leading Bergþóra to assert her authority in blunt language more appropriate to a drill sergeant than to a hostess at a feast with old friends: "I decide things here."<sup>81</sup> At this point, a sensitive and loving husband would have noticed the offensiveness of Bergþóra's demand;<sup>82</sup> Gunnarr, on the other hand, remains silent (as does Njáll), and the two women are left to fight it out on their own. We remember that the adjective *skaphorð* was used for Bergþóra (20.57) as well as for Hallgerðr; what we are now witnessing is a quarrel between two *skapharðar* women, each bringing out the worst in each other. What follows—Hallgerðr's insults about Njáll's beardlessness and Bergþóra's fingernails, and Bergþóra's

79. Rósa Blöndal, *Leyndar Ástir í Njálu* (Reykjavík: Vasaútgáfan, 1987). See also her later article in *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 27. janúar 1996: "Hvað hétu dætur Njáls og Bergþóru?"

80. Some other unanswered questions: Why does Njáll invent the elaborate and unnecessary scheme for summoning Hrútr (ch. 22)? Why doesn't Gunnarr go to Njáll for food and hay, rather than to Otkel? Why does he buy the slave Melkólfr from Otkel (ch. 47)? Why doesn't Skarphéðinn go abroad with his brothers (ch. 75)? Why does Njáll add a silk robe and a pair of boots to the pile of money collected to compensate for the death of Hoskuldr Þráinsson? Why does he not acknowledge having done so (ch. 123)?

81. 35.91: "Ek skal hér ráða."

82. We recall that in ch. 46 of *Laxdæla saga*, a gentler saga in many ways, Kjartan insists that his wife Hrefna occupy the best seat.

accusation that Hallgerðr arranged the death of Þorvaldr<sup>83</sup>—is the verbal prelude to the extended bloody feud that follows, in which these women initiate a series of six reciprocal slayings between the two households.

Bergþóra initiated the hostility with her demand that Hallgerðr give up her seat. It is Hallgerðr, however, who initiates the series of killings, by arranging to have Kolr kill Svartr: she believes in vengeance, and in her mind Bergþóra's accusation that she arranged the death of Þorvaldr calls for vengeance. Hallgerðr's immediate response to that accusation was to appeal to Gunnarr, in the lines cited above (see n. 67). Taken literally, the word *hefna* ("avenge") means that she wants Gunnarr to kill her friends, but even the vengeance-minded Hallgerðr cannot mean anything as ludicrous as that. More likely, her utterance reflects her confused and angry state—it is a desperate cry to her husband to support her, in one way or another. But instead of taking her side, or at least trying to mediate between both sides, he chooses unequivocally the side of Bergþóra and Njáll, and even adds to the insults already delivered: "it would be best for you to pick quarrels with your servants, and not in the dwellings of others,"<sup>84</sup> implying that she is a quarrelsome housewife at Hlíðarendi. His foolish and intemperate remarks are accompanied by a dramatic display of agility, leaping across the table. This of course recalls Þráinn's similar acrobatics at the wedding in the preceding chapter, where the leap across the table was followed by a divorce. It is not going too far to say that Gunnarr's is also a divorce-leap, in effect: he has now taken a side firmly against his wife, and so it will remain. From this point on they are at odds, and their marriage is effectively over. Her only remaining pleasure will be the moments when he lives up to her ideal of heroism.

Gunnarr mistreats her again over the matter of the theft of food at Kirkjubær—this too is a public humiliation, in the presence of guests who have stopped at Hlíðarendi for a meal on their way home from the Althing (ch. 48). This slap is worse than those delivered by her first two husbands, both because it is public rather than private and because it is accompanied by an accusation of thievery. There is no question that

83. 35.91: "en eigi var skegglauss Þorvaldr, bóndi þinn, ok rétt þú honum þó bana."

84. 35.91: "... ok er þat makligast, at þú sennir við heimamenn þína, en eigi í annarra manna hífýlum."

theft was regarded as a mean and low offense, symptomatic of a flawed character,<sup>85</sup> but the motivation in this case (a wife fighting for her husband's honor) is a noble one. The public humiliation is particularly hard to bear because her act of vengeance against Otkell was intended to make up for the public humiliation that Gunnarr endured at his hands. It must have been particularly galling to this honor-conscious wife that Gunnarr—after his fair offer to buy food and hay was rudely refused, and after determining not to appropriate what he needed (apparently an acceptable procedure in emergencies)—agreed without hesitation to buy an unknown slave from the man who had just humiliated him. Even if Gunnarr could not, she herself could hear, at least in her mind, the guffawing and snickering from Otkell's followers, particularly Skammkell, at this ill-advised move.<sup>86</sup>

Hallgerðr's keen sense of honor, both hers and her husband's, and a willingness to carry out its obligations, led her to a strong response to this third marital slap: "Hallgerðr said she would remember this slap and pay it back if she could."<sup>87</sup> Her opportunity comes when Gunnarr's bowstring breaks; her ensuing behavior has earned her enduring infamy, as both Gunnarr and Rannveig predict (77.189). We must not forget, however, that her action is the fulfillment of the vengeance she swore when Gunnarr slapped her in the presence of their guests. She says so explicitly when Gunnarr asks for two locks of her hair and tells her that his life hangs in the balance: "Then I'll recall the slap you gave me, and I don't care whether you hold out for a long or a short time."<sup>88</sup>

85. See Theodore M. Andersson, "The Thief in *Beowulf*," *Speculum* 59 (1984), pp. 493–508.

86. Gunnarr's purchase of Melkólfr has long been a puzzle—see the "solution" by Magnús Sigurðsson above—but perhaps it was added simply to show how far Gunnarr was ready to be humiliated, and thereby to justify further his wife's honor-motivated retaliation against Kirkjubœr.

87. 48.124: "Hon kvazk þann hest muna skyldu ok launa, ef hon mætti."

88. 77.189: "Þá skal ek nú . . . muna þér kinnhestinn, ok hirði ek aldri, hvárt þú verr þik lengr eða skemr." This episode has had more than its share of interpretations; a recent ingenious one is that of Kristján Jóhann Jónsson, *Lykillinn að Njálu* (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 1998), pp. 132–3, who places the exchange between husband and wife in the category of the defiant and ironic statements made by heroes who are about to die. Reconciled at last, Gunnarr and Hallgerðr speak to each other with dark humor and nonchalance, both of them pretending that her hair will save him from his fated end, and both of them knowing in fact that it cannot. This is an unlikely inference, though it has been pointed out that Gunnarr's request is unrealistic—hair would not have been suitable in any case. See, for example, Sigurður Guðmundsson, "Gunnar á Hlíðarenda," *Skírnir* 92 (1918), pp. 63–88, 221–51, esp. pp. 85–6.

Gunnarr had no chance of surviving the assault, but as a result of Hallgerðr's refusal, his end will come sooner than otherwise. The main difference between "sooner" and "later" is that the slap is now avenged. The troubled life together of Gunnarr and Hallgerðr is over, but at least it ended on a note of honor. She has paid him, as she vowed, for his slap, and he died as a true hero in her view, taking vengeance on those who arranged a sentence of outlawry, a sentence which both husband and wife must have found unfair.<sup>89</sup>

### Conclusion

Daniel Sävborg has given us a thorough analysis of how the love between Kjartan and Guðrún (in *Laxdæla saga*) is depicted in the characteristic style of the Sagas of Icelanders.<sup>90</sup> He explicates carefully all the relevant scenes and formulas and demonstrates convincingly that their love is presented as mutual and strong, and that it plays a fundamental role in the saga's plot, initiating its central feud.<sup>91</sup> This view, as stated at the outset of this paper, has not been dominant among saga scholars, who have preferred to see honor and vengeance as the chief motivating forces.

I have attempted to analyse the presentation of another famous, but quite different saga couple. Both relationships have tragic consequences: Guðrún's frustration and bitterness at Kjartan's harassment and her jealousy of Hrefna bring her to arrange his death, which initiates a feud that leads to her husband Bolli's death and that of others.

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89. Concerning the settlement which Njáll arranges, the saga reports that "Gunnarr gave no indication that he thought this settlement unfair" ("Gunnarr lét ekki á sik finna, at honum þætti eigi góð sættin," 74.180]). The wording raises and leaves open the possibility that Gunnarr, in his own mind, found the settlement unfair, and this may be the reason he failed to go abroad. After all, he was ambushed by the two Þorgeirs and killed them in self-defense. Njáll could have presented this in Gunnarr's defense, but instead chose to submit the case to arbitration, and the arbitrators decided on exile. One can readily imagine that Hallgerðr, and very likely Gunnarr too, were not happy with this outcome.

90. Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, pp. 340–62.

91. Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, pp. 260–1: "Det är sammanfattningsvis tydligt att kärlek (och därmed relaterade känslor) har fundamental betydelse för konfliktens uppkomst, för kränkningar och motkränkningar, mord och hämnd. Men samtidigt måste man ge Meulengracht Sørensen rätt när han påpekar att det finns fler motiv till konflikten än de erotiska. Stölden av svärdet har således ingen rimlig koppling till Guðrúns och Kjartans kärlek—händelsen tycks vara en konsekvens av Ósvifrsönernas avundsjuka på Kjartans make—till skillnad från stölden av motren... Sagan laborerar med dubbla motiv till konflikten, både erotiska och ickeerotiska.

Hallgerðr's frustration and bitterness bring her to initiate the hostility between Þráinn and the sons of Njáll, when she persuades Þráinn to be present at the slaying of their foster-father (41.107); this leads to the central feud of the saga, to the Burning, and beyond.<sup>92</sup> She also contributes to the death of her husband Gunnarr. Both relationships have a powerful effect on the events of the saga.

As for the internal workings of these relationships, however, the two sagas are totally different. Kjartan and Guðrún were in love and by all rights should have spent their life together; had it not been for Bolli's selfish intervention they would have married and, as the cliché goes, lived happily ever after. As things were, they had to live with the bitterness of seeing their true love married to another. Gunnarr and Hallgerðr, on the other hand, did marry, but they did so rashly, taking no time to develop a viable relationship. They proved to be a seriously incompatible couple. Hallgerðr's bitterness, more evident than Gunnarr's, came from her disappointment in the man she married, because he failed to live up to the social role that she—widowed twice and no longer capable of love—wanted her husband to play. In this sense, *Njáls saga* is an answer to *Laxdœla saga*: it shows that a failed affair, a relationship devoid of love, can be as effective and potent as true love in shaping a saga.

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92. For an analysis of this feud see William I. Miller, "Justifying Skarpheðinn," *Scandinavian Studies* 55 (1983), pp. 316–44.

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