The Native Romance of Gunnlaugr
and Helga the Fair

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It is commonly held that Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu is a late text that partakes of the romantic tonalities which accrued in Iceland from foreign models during the thirteenth century. This view goes back to a study by Björn M. Ölsen, who not only emphasized the romantic components but provided a detailed comparison of the text to other sagas, notably Hallfreðar saga, Bjarnar saga Hútkælakappa, and Egils saga Skallagrímssonar. He concluded that the author of Gunnlaugs saga made use of these and other sagas in his composition, which must therefore be a relatively late phenomenon in the literary chronology. As far as I can determine, Björn M. Ölsen’s analysis has gone largely unchallenged and has now enjoyed widespread acquiescence for nearly a century. In this paper I undertake a belated critique of his view, arguing that Gunnlaugs saga is more likely to be very early, specifically that it did not make use of Hallfreðar saga, Bjarnar saga, and Egils saga, but rather served as a source for these texts. Furthermore, the romantic inflections are not borrowed from foreign narratives but replicate native romance as it was known in Iceland in the early thirteenth century.

Gunnlaugs saga and Hallfreðar saga

We may begin with Hallfreðar saga because it has the most obvious link to Gunnlaugs saga. In chapter 10, about two thirds of the way through the text, Gunnlaugs saga relates Gunnlaugr’s visits to several northern
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courts. He travels from the court of King Olaf of Sweden to England, where he is well received by King Ethelred II but is eager to return to Iceland to honor his betrothal to Helga the Fair. King Ethelred detains him for a time because of an impending invasion by the Danes. Once released, he goes to the court of Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson in Norway hoping to find passage to Iceland. At first it appears that all the ships bound for Iceland have departed, but then it emerges that the ship belonging to the skald Hallfreðr “vandræðaskáld” Óttarsson is not yet on the high seas. Jarl Eiríkr therefore arranges for Gunnlaugr to reach his ship, and Hallfreðr gives him a warm welcome.

During the passage Hallfreðr reveals that Gunnlaugr's rival Háfrn has asked for the hand of Helga the Fair. When Gunnlaugr belittles Háfrn in a dismissive stanza, Hallfreðr wishes him better luck with Háfrn than he himself has had. He then tells the story of how he withheld payment from one of Háfrn’s workers and how Háfrn cut his ship’s cable and stranded his ship, thus extracting self-judgment from him. The same story is told in substantially abbreviated form in the last chapter of *Hallfreðar saga*. In adjacent columns the texts run as follows:

**Gunnlaugs saga** (ÍF 3.84–85)

Eiríkr jarl let þá flytja Gunnlaugh út til Hallfreðar, ok tók hann við honum með fagnaði, ok gaf þegar byr undan landi, ok váru vel káttir. Þat var sín sumars. Hallfreðr mælti til Gunnlaugs: “Hefir þú frétt bónordið Háfrns Ónundarsonar við Helga ína fógru?” Gunnlaugr kvezk frétt hafa ok þó ogórla. Hallfreðr segir honum slíkt sem hann vissi af ok þat með at margir menn mæltu þat, at Háfrn væri eigi órökvarir en Gunnlaugr: Gunnlaugr kvað þá visu:

Rækik lít, þótt leiki,
létt veðr es nú, þéttan

**Hallfreðar saga** (ÍF 8.196)

Ok at sumri för Hallfreðr út til Íslands ok kom skipi sínu í Leiruvág fyrir sunnan land [Fl. neðan heidi]. Pá bjó Ónundr at Mosfelli. Hallfreðr átti at [gjælda] hálfa mork sífrs húskarlí Ónundar ok svaraði heldr háröliga. Kom húskarlinn heim ok sagði sín vandráði. Háfrn kvæð sliks ván, at hann myndi lægra hlut bera í þeira skipum. Ok um morgunin eptir reð Háfrn til skips ok ætlaði at höggva strengina ok stóðva brottrierð þeira Hallfreðar. Síðan áttu menn hlut í at sæta þá, ok var goldit hálfu meira en húskarl áttu, ok skilðu at því.

Annt sumar eptir áttu
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Jarl Eiríkr had Gunnlaugr conveyed out to Hallfreðr’s ship, and he welcomed him gladly. There was a prompt offshore breeze, and they were in good spirits. It was late in the summer. Hallfreðr addressed Gunnlaugr: “Have you learned of Hrafn Ónundarson’s wooing of Helga the Fair?” Gunnlaugr said he had heard something but not in detail. Hallfreðr told him what he knew about it and added that lots of people were saying that Hrafn was no less a man than Gunnlaugr. Gunnlaugr recited a stanza: “I care little whether the east wind

heir Hallfreðr ok Gunnlaugr 
ormstunga ferð saman ok kómu 
á Melrakkasléttu; þá hafði 
Hrafn fengit Helgu. Hallfreðr 
sagði Gunnlaugi, hversu honum 
hafði vegnat við Hrafn.

Hallfreðr mælti þá: “Þess þyrfti, 
félagi, at þér veitti betr [en] mér 
málín við Hrafn. Ek kom skipi 
minu í Leiruvág fyrir neðan Heiði 
fyrir fám vetrum, ok átta ek at 
gjalda hálfa mörk silfrs húsíkarli 
Hrafnis, ok hell ek því fyrir honum; 
en Hrafn reið til vár með sex tigu 
manna ok hjó strengina, ok ræk 
skipit upp á leiur, ok búit við 
skipbroti. Varð ek at séja Hrafní 
þjálfdæmi, ok galt ek mörk, ok eru 
slíkar minar at segja frá honum.”

(In the summer Hallfreðr sailed 
out to Iceland and brought his 
ship into Leiruvagr in the south 
[Fl. below the heath]. At that time 
Ónundr lived at Mosfell. Hallfreðr 
owed one of Ónundr’s men half 
a mark of silver and gave him 
a rather hard answer. The man 
returned home and told of his 
problem. Hrafn said that he could 
expect to come out second best in 
their dealings. The next morning 
Hrafn rode to the ship thinking 
that he would cut the cable and 
prevent the departure of Hall- 
freðr and his men. Then others 
tervened to make peace between
blows stiffly at the snowshoe of the promontory [ship] during this week—there is clear weather now; I fear the report more that I am not considered as Hrafn’s equal in courage—a treasure breaker [outstanding man] does not await (expect) old age.” Then Hallfreðr said: “Companion, you would need to come out better against Hrafn than I did. I sailed my ship into Leiruvágr [Mud Bay] south of the Heath a few years ago and I owed a half mark in silver to one of Hrafn’s men. I withheld it from him. But Hrafn rode at us with sixty (or seventy-two) men and severed the cable so that the ship pitched up on the mud and it almost came to a shipwreck. I had to give Hrafn self-judgment and pay a mark, and that is my experience with him.”

That the two passages are interdependent is suggested not only by motival and verbal similarities but by other factors as well. Both passages are bipartite; they tell on the one hand of the poets’ shared voyage to Iceland and on the other hand of Hallfreðr’s run-in with Hrafn on a previous occasion. It seems unlikely that this particular collocation would recur twice independently and more likely that one text is reproducing the other. That the joint voyage and the encounter between Hallfreðr and Hrafn are connected is explained by the fact that Hallfreðr reports the incident to Gunnlaugr in a conversation during the voyage. Gunnlaugs saga provides a fuller account, while the report in Hallfreðar saga appears more in the light of a summary.¹

¹ See W. Van Eeden, De overlevering van de Hallfreðar saga, Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam, afdeling letterkunde (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1919), nieuwe reeks, vol. 19, no. 5: “[U]it den excerptachtigen stijl waait ons een pergamentlucht tegemoet …” (p. 95).
That the incident is more at home in *Gunnlaugs saga* is also suggested by the appearance of Hrafn, a co-protagonist in *Gunnlaugs saga* but only a momentary extra in *Hallfreðar saga*. The conversation in *Gunnlaugs saga* is about Hrafn’s personal distinction. That has no place in *Hallfreðar saga* and is accordingly suppressed. Indeed, the incident is tacked on at the last moment in *Hallfreðar saga* and seems to be an oddment that the author picked up as an afterthought.

That the author of *Hallfreðar saga* is referring not just to the incident but knows *Gunnlaugs saga* as a whole, is indicated by the information to which he appears to have access but does not himself convey. *Gunnlaugs saga* explains Gunnlaugr’s delay in detail and relates specifically that Gunnlaugr in effect caught the last ship to Iceland. The author of *Hallfreðar saga* accounts for none of this detail, but it clearly underlies his story because he adds at the last moment that “Hrafn had already married Helga.” That presupposes the chronology of *Gunnlaugs saga*.

We can observe further that there is a particular drift in *Hallfreðar saga*’s revision of the incident as it is told in *Gunnlaugs saga*. The author of *Hallfreðar saga* is clearly intent on improving the image of his protagonist. In *Gunnlaugs saga* Hallfreðr explicitly withholds payment from his creditor (“helt ek því fyrir honum”), but the author of *Hallfreðar saga* shrinks from making him a debt defaulter and refers more generally to hard words (“Hallfreðr átti at [gjalda] hálfa mörk sílahru húskarið Ónundar ok svaraði heldr harðliga”). In *Gunnlaugs saga* Hrafn cuts Hallfreðr’s ship’s cable and strands his ship, but in *Hallfreðar saga* he merely intends to do so (“aðlaði at hóggva strengrina”). That modification reduces the seriousness of the damage done to his protagonist. Finally, in *Gunnlaugs saga* Hallfreðr is forced to surrender self-judgment (“Varð ek þá at selja Hrafni sjálfráðmí”), but in *Hallfreðar saga* he saves face because others intervene to settle the matter (“Síðan áttu menn hlut í at sætta þá.”). It makes sense to suppose that the author of *Hallfreðar saga* intervenes on his hero’s behalf, but much less sense to believe that the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* revised *Hallfreðar saga* in such a way as to derogate a figure who is quite peripheral in his story.

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All critics seem to agree that this episode is more original as it stands in *Gunnlaugs saga* and is secondary in *Hallfreðar saga*. At the same time, this recognition has posed a considerable problem for critics like Björn M. Ólsen, who considered *Gunnlaugs saga* to be a much later composition than *Hallfreðar saga*. The only escape from this impasse was to view the shared episode as a later interpolation in *Hallfreðar saga*, and B. M. Ólsen tries to reinforce this supposition by interpreting two other verbal correspondences as loans from an original *Hallfreðar saga* into *Gunnlaugs saga*. In a certain sense, we may accept the idea of an interpolation; the episode involving Hallfreðr and Hrafn is tacked onto the end of *Hallfreðar saga* in a rather mechanical way and looks superimposed. On the other hand, the interpolation seems to be more the work of the saga author, with an overview of *Gunnlaugs saga* and a definite partisanship on behalf of his protagonist Hallfreðr, rather than the work of a later interpolator making a small mechanical addition.

The invocation of an interpolator is often a desperate remedy and prompts skepticism. The alternative in this case is that *Gunnlaugs saga* is older than *Hallfreðar saga* and that the author of the latter drew on the former. That possibility runs counter to the thesis advanced by B. M. Ólsen, who argued for a late date for *Gunnlaugs saga*, at least in the middle of the thirteenth century and, allowing for the possibility of a loan from *Njáls saga*, perhaps as late as 1300. B. M. Ólsen’s argument seems to have convinced almost all later critics, and there is no doubt that his monograph is an extraordinarily thorough investigation, remarkable for an unmatched familiarity with all the sources. It should

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3. See B. M. Ólsen, p. 39; Van Eeden, *De overlevering*, p. 95; Sigurður Nordal in *Íslensk fornrit* 3 (Reykjavik: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), p. L. Hereafter *Íslensk fornrit* will be abbreviated *ÍF* with volume and page numbers.
5. See B. M. Ólsen, pp. 53–54.
nonetheless be reviewed in some detail on the chance that *Gunnlaugs saga* might after all be dated earlier.

**Gunnlaugs saga and Egils saga**

According to B. M. Ølsen’s analysis, easily the most important source for *Gunnlaugs saga* is the neighboring *Egils saga*; indeed, he considers *Gunnlaugs saga* to be a sort of continuation of *Egils saga* (p. 30). This hypothesis rests to a large extent on the supposition that *Gunnlaugs saga* borrows genealogical material from *Egils saga* (pp. 141–9). By now the fallacy in this thinking has become rather clearer than it was a century ago. B. M. Ølsen and many of his successors in Iceland approached the sagas with the idea that genealogies were derived from written rather than oral sources, notably from *Landnámabók*. B. M. Ølsen’s long series of papers on *Landnámabók* and various sagas is predicated on this supposition, and the monograph on *Gunnlaugs saga* carries the argument one step further.7

Where *Egils saga* fails as a genealogical source, direct loans from *Landnámabók* do service instead (pp. 131–9). Only where both *Egils saga* and *Landnámabók* fail does B. M. Ølsen allow for the possibility of oral transmission (as in the case of Hrafn’s two brothers) or authorial invention (as in the case of two cousins). Helga’s second husband, Torkell Hallkelsson, is also not to be found in written sources and is therefore given the benefit of oral transmission (p. 19). The difficulty in this system is that when oral transmission can be invoked to explain the presence of minor characters, it seems strained to invoke only written sources for the major characters. B. M. Ølsen is inclined to argue that one loan from *Landnámabók* justifies the assumption of other loans by analogy (e.g., p. 15), but we could just as well argue that the loan of two brothers, two cousins, and Helga’s second husband from oral tradition also justifies other loans from oral tradition.

B. M. Ølsen posits literary as well as genealogical loans from *Egils saga*. Thus he argues that the description of Helga’s father, Þorsteinn Egilsson, in *Gunnlaugs saga* (chap. 1; IF 3.51) is borrowed directly from *Egils saga* (chaps. 79–84; IF 2.274–93).

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**Egils saga**

Porsteinn, sonr Egils, þá er hann óx upp, var allra manna friðstr sínum, hvítr á hár ok bjarrta álitum; hann var mikill ok sterkr, ok þó ekki eptir því sem faðir hans. Porsteinn var vitr maðr ok kyrllatr, hógvær, stilltr manna bezt.

Porsteinn var maðr órefjusamr ok rétlatr ok óaleitinn við menn, en helt hlut sínum, ef aðrir menn leitdu á hann, enda veitti þat heldr þungt flestum, at etja kappi við hann.

(Egill’s son Porsteinn was a very handsome man when he grew up, with blond hair and a bright countenance. He was tall and strong, though not to the same degree as his father. Porsteinn was a wise and peaceable man, gentle and very calm. Porsteinn was an unbelligerent man, just and unaggressive toward others, but he could hold his own if others challenged him. And indeed, anyone who took issue with him was likely to suffer the consequences.)

**Gunnlaugs saga**

Porsteinn hét maðr; hann var Egilsson, Skalla-Gríms sonar, Kveld-Úlf’s sonar hersis or Nóregi; en Ásgerðr hét móðir Porsteins ok var Bjarnardóttir. Porsteinn bjó at Borg í Borgarfjörði; hann var auðigr at fé ok höfðingi mikill, vitr maðr ok hógvær ok hófsmáðr um alla hluti. Engi var hann afreksmaðr um vóxt eða afl sem Egill faðir hans, en þó var hann it mesta afarmenni ok vinsæll af allri alþýðu. Porsteinn var vann maðr, hvítr á hár ok eygr manna bezt.

(There was a man named Porsteinn, the son of Egill, who was the son of Skalla-Grím, who was in turn the son of Kveld-Úlf, a chieftain in Norway. Ásgerðr was the name of Porsteinn’s mother, and her father was named Björn. Porsteinn lived at Borg in Borgarfjörð. He was a wealthy man and a great chieftain, gentle and moderate in all respects. He was no superman in stature or strength, like his father Egill, but nonetheless he was an outstanding man and popular with everybody. Porsteinn was a handsome man, blond and with a fine look in his eyes.)

One could argue that important saga characters are described consistently throughout the corpus; thus Snorri goði is recognizably the same personality whatever saga he appears in. The characterizations of Porsteinn above are, however, somewhat more than consistent.
It is particularly the phrasing, “vitr maðr ok kyrðlátr, högværr, stillr manna bezt” or “vitr maðr ok högværr ok höfsmaðr um alla hluti” and the feature that Þorsteinn is big and strong but not to the same degree as his father that suggests more than a general similarity. But if one passage echoes the other, is *Egils saga* necessarily the lender and *Gunnlaugs saga* the borrower? The other direction for this borrowing would in fact be easier because the author of *Egils saga* had only to look at the first page of *Gunnlaugs saga* to draw his portrait. It is slightly more cumbersome to imagine that the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* pieced his opening paragraph together from late chapters in *Egils saga*. But we may leave the question in abeyance for the moment.

Another close parallel between *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Egils saga* is found in the well-known remark that there were two contrary strains in the family of the Mýramenn, one notably handsome and the other no less ill-favored. This observation is formulated as follows (*Gunnlaugs saga* [Stockholm 18 4to], chap. 1: ÍF 3.51; *Egils saga*, chap. 87: ÍF 2.299–300):

Svá segja fróðir menn, at margir í ætt Mýramanna, þeir sem frá Agli eru komnir, hafi verit menn vænstir, en þat sé þó mjók sundrgreiniligt, því at sumir í þeira ætt er kallat, at ljóðastir menn hafa verit. Í þeiri ætt hafa ok verit margir argörismenn um marga hluti, sem var Kjartan Óláfsson pá ok Víga-Barði ok Skúli Þorsteinsson. Sumir váru ok skáldmenn miklir í þeiri ætt: Björn Hítdælakappi, Einarr prestr Skúlason, Snorri Sturluson ok margir aðrir.

Frá Þorsteini er mikil ætt komin ok mætt stórmenni ok skáld myrg, ok er þat Mýramannakyn, ok svá allt þat er komit er frá Skallagrími. Lengi helzk þat í ætt þeiri, at menn váru sterkr ok vígamenn miklir, en sumir spakir at viti. Þat var sundrleitt mjók, því at í þeiri ætt hafa þeir þeir menn, er friðastir hafa verit á Íslandi, sem var Þorsteinn Egilsson ok Kjartan Óláfsson, systursour Þorsteins, ok Hallr Guðmundarson, svá ok Helga in fagra, dóttir Þorsteins, er þeir deildu um Gunnlaugr ormtunga ok Skáld-Hrafn; en fleiri váru Mýramenn manna ljóðastir.

(Wise men relate that many men in the family of the Mýramenn, descended from Egill, were (Þorsteinn had many descendants, many important men and many poets. They make up the family
very handsome, although there were major differences, because some men in this family are said to have been very ugly. In this family there were also outstanding men in many respects, for example Kjartan Ólafsson Peacock and Warrior-Barði and Skúli Porsteinsson. Some in the family were also great skalds: Björn Híðeðakappi, Einarr Skúlason the priest, Snorri Sturluson, and many others.)

There can be little doubt that these passages are copied one from the other, but there are special considerations that complicate the question of priority. The passage is found only in one of the two manuscripts of Gunnlaugs saga. B. M. Ólsen thought that it was part of the original saga, but the editors of the Íslenzk fornrit edition, Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, thought that it was an interpolation in Stockholm 1840 and printed it as a footnote. If it is an interpolation, it is certainly easier to believe that it was interpolated from Egils saga, where it is conspicuously located at the very end of the saga.

On the other hand, the passage is very logically placed in Gunnlaugs saga. The previous sentence states (ÍF 3.51): “Porsteinn var vænn máðr, hvitr á hár ok eygr manna bezt” (Porsteinn was a handsome man, blond and with a fine look in his eyes). The topic is therefore good looks, and it would make perfect sense for the author to continue in the same vein by generalizing about the history of good and ill-favored

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looks in the family as a whole. It would make particularly good sense if we believe that the author of Egils saga knew chapter 1 of Gunnlaugs saga and had already made use of the preceding sentences. We would not expect him to include the generalizing comment in his earlier description of Porsteinn because he is not yet writing about the family as a whole and over time. He therefore reserves the generalization for the final summation.

It is of course perfectly possible that the author of Gunnlaugs saga fashioned his first chapter from scattered passages toward the end of Egils saga, but there are some indications that Gunnlaugs saga provides the original text. In the first place, Gunnlaugs saga is centrally about Porsteinn and his beautiful daughter; Porsteinn in Egils saga is a marginal and even slightly effete character. The real source on his life is Gunnlaugs saga and it is that source to which a writer on his ancestry might turn. As B. M. Ólsen points out (p. 21), the theme of personal beauty is also at the core of Gunnlaugs saga and is memorably embodied in Helga. The theme of beauty and idealized appearance is therefore more at home in Gunnlaugs saga than in Egils saga and is more likely to have originated in the former. Last but not least, the author of Egils saga concludes the passage by reminding the reader of the quarrel between Gunnaugr and Hrafn over Helga, as he has already done once before in chapter 79 (ÍF 2.276). In effect he is referring to Gunnlaugs saga, and it might very well be the written Gunnlaugs saga we know since he echoes the text so closely.

If Egils saga is indeed referring to the written Gunnlaugs saga, and the chances that this is the case seem to me rather better than even, that does not help greatly with the absolute date of Gunnlaugs saga. Even if Egils saga was written by Snorri Sturluson, it could still be as late as 1240, and Gunnlaugs saga only slightly earlier, but a date around 1235 is not substantially different from B. M. Ólsen’s earlier alternative of ca. 1250. We must therefore explore other literary relationships.

Gunnlaugs saga and Bjarnar saga Híðdekkakappi

Among the distinguished poets in the Mýramenn clan mentioned at the beginning of Gunnlaugs saga (in Stockholm 18 4to) is Björn Híðdekkakappi. According to B. M. Ólsen (p. 23), this mention suggests that the author of Gunnlaugs saga was familiar with Bjarnar saga
Hitdøelakappa. Without argument, he goes on to express certainty that Bjarnar saga is the older of the two (p. 32), and he proceeds to trace the influences in Gunnlaugs saga. He notes first of all that Skúli Porsteinsson is assigned the same role in both sagas. In Bjarnar saga Skúli is Björn’s host and patron at Borg: “He grew up with Skúli at Borg” (IF 3.112). Skúli outfits him for a voyage abroad, seconds his wooing of Oddný Þorkelsdóttir, and, when he is ready to sail, Skúli gives him a gold token as an introduction to his “friend” Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson. Accordingly, Björn is made welcome at Eiríkr’s court.

In Gunnlaugs saga, Skúli becomes Gunnlaugr’s protector at the court of the same Eiríkr when Gunnlaugr delivers his famous rejoinder to the effect that Eiríkr should make no dire predictions at his expense but rather wish for a better death than his father had (IF 3.69). Only Skúli’s intervention saves Gunnlaugr’s life. Aside from the fact that Skúli is located at his father’s farm in Iceland in one case and at Eiríkr’s court in Norway in the other case, and that he functions as a reference in one case but as a rescuer in the other, the motif of intervention by a friend or relative on behalf of a man who has incurred a monarch’s wrath is commonplace in the sagas. The parallel is not close enough to suggest borrowing.

In both sagas, the rival skalds and ultimately wooers, Gunnlaugr and Hrafn in Gunnlaugs saga and Björn and Bóðr in Bjarnar saga, meet at a foreign court. Here, too, B. M. Ólsen (p. 34) believes that one meeting has influenced the other but once again there are significant differences. In Gunnlaugs saga, the two skalds meet at the court of King Olaf of Sweden and compete with their panegyrics in a lively scene that aligns their poetry with their characters. In Bjarnar saga the skalds Björn and Bóðr meet at the court of Jarl Eiríkr of Norway and manage to live on companionable terms despite earlier frictions; there is no rival presentation of praise poetry. As we know from the Legendary Saga of Saint Óláfr, simultaneous visits to royal courts by more than one skald were not unusual and such double visits in the skald sagas may not be striking enough to suggest a literary connection.

B. M. Ólsen (p. 35) also saw a significant similarity between Björn Hitdøelakappi’s gift of a cloak presented to him by King Óláfr Haraldsson (IF 3.134) to Oddný (IF 3.159) and the cloak given to Gunnlaugr by King Ethelred in England (IF 3.71) and later presented to Helga (IF 3.90).
Guðni Jónsson, have pointed out, however, that the cloak given by
King Óláfr to Björn is not the same as the one he gives to Oddný.\(^9\)
Quite apart from that discrepancy, the parallel is not close enough
to carry conviction. It is an inconspicuous moment in \textit{Bjarnar saga}
but a highly significant moment in \textit{Gunnlaugs saga} because Helga's
dying gesture is to unfold the cloak and gaze at it (IF \textit{3.107}). It does
not therefore appear that B. M. Ólsen was able to make loans from
\textit{Bjarnar saga} into \textit{Gunnlaugs saga} plausible.

If we reverse the procedure, however, and explore the possibility
that \textit{Bjarnar saga} made use of \textit{Gunnlaugs saga}, the result is a little
more promising.\(^{10}\) Both Gunnlaugr and Björn go abroad with the
understanding that the betrothed woman will wait for three years. The
stipulation is more clearly spelled out in \textit{Bjarnar saga} (IF \textit{3.114}):

\begin{quote}
Fórur þá þegar festar fram, ok skyldi hon sitja í festum þrjá vetr, ok
þó at Björn sé samlendr fjórða vetrinn ok megi eigi til komask at
vitja þessa ráðs, þá skal hon þó hans bída, en ef hann kemr eigi til
á þriggja vetr frísti af Noregi, þá skyldi Porkell gipta hana ef hann
vildi. Björn skyldi ok senda menn út at vitja þessa ráðs ef hann mætti
eigi sjálfri til koma.
\end{quote}

(The engagement was contracted, and [it was stipulated] that
she would remain engaged for three years. Even if Björn was in
the country [Iceland] in the fourth year but unable to revisit his
engagement, she should still wait for him. But if he did not arrive
from Norway within the three-year period, Porkell would be free
to marry her off if he wished. [It was also stipulated] that Björn

\(^9\) See IF \textit{3.150}\textit{m}.
\(^{10}\) This possibility has already been explored in detail by Bjarni Guðnason in “Aldur
ok einkenni Bjarnar sögu Hítshelakappa” in \textit{Sagnafæng helegð Jónas Kristjánssynj siðtugum
He took the view that \textit{Bjarnar saga} implicitly measures its protagonist against such saga
heroes as Gunnlaugr ormstunga, Björn Breiðvikingskapp, and Kjartan Ólafsson (p. 76).
Despite earlier views assigning priority to \textit{Bjarnar saga} (see p. 78, notes 28–29), Bjarni
argued that \textit{Gunnlaugs saga} served as a model. In particular, he suggested Gunnlaugr's
combat with Porormr in England as the prototype for Björn's single combat with Kaldmar
in Russia (p. 78). He did not, however, use this evidence to date \textit{Gunnlaugs saga} early;
instead he argued that \textit{Bjarnar saga} drew on ten different sagas, including \textit{Njáló saga}, and
was not written until 1300 or a little later. I persist in believing that \textit{Bjarnar saga} is early,
but \textit{Gunnlaugs saga} even earlier.
should dispatch men out [to Iceland] to revisit the engagement if he
could not make the trip himself.)

The provisions seem a trifle over-specific, as if there were in fact
some expectation that Björn will not appear at the appointed time.
If he returns in three years but cannot make a personal appearance,
Oddný must wait a fourth year. If he does not return in three years,
Porkell is free to marry his daughter to someone else, unless Björn
sends delegates to confirm the arrangement.

These provisions recapitulate in a nutshell the circumstances in
Gunnlaugs saga, although the stipulations are not nearly so precise in
the latter case. Under pressure from Gunnlaugr’s father Illugi, Helga’s
father Porsteinn agrees to an informal marriage commitment for three
years but not to a formal betrothal (ÍF 3.67–68): “Pá skal Helga vera
heitkona Gunnlaugs, en eigi festarkona, ok bíða þríjá vetr; ... en ek
skal lauss allra mála, ef hann kemr eigi svá út ….” (Helga should be
committed to Gunnlaugr, but not be his fiancée, and should wait three
years; ... but I will be released from all commitments if he does not
come out [to Iceland] ...). These general terms are then more precisely
articulated when Gunnlaugr is delayed and Hrafn makes his bid for
Helga’s hand (ÍF 3.81–82):

Porsteinn svarar: “Hon er áðr heitkona Gunnlaugs, ok vil ek halda
óll mála við hann, þau sem mælt váru.” Skapti [the lawspeaker Skapti
Þóroddsson, who is acting on Þóroddr’s behalf] mælti: “Éru nú eigi
liðin þrír vetr, er til váru nefndir með yðr?” “Já,” sagði Porsteinn,
“en eigi er sumarit líðit, ok má hann enn til koma i sumar.” Skapti
svarar: “Én ef hann kemr eigi til sumarlangt, hverja ván skulu vér
þá eiga þessa mál?” Porsteinn svarar: “Hér munu vér koma annat
sumar, ok má þá sjá, hvat ráðligast þýkkir, en ekki tjár nú at tala
lengr at sinni.”

(Porsteinn replied: “She was committed to Gunnlaugr before, and
I wish to maintain all the commitments that were stipulated with
him.” Skapti said: “Have the three years not passed that were
agreed on by you?” “Yes,” said Porsteinn, “but the summer has not
passed, and he could still make it here during the summer.” Skapti
answered: “But if he does not arrive during the summer, what is to
be our expectation in this matter?” Porsteinn answered: “We will come here next summer and look into what seems most advisable, but there is no point in talking further for the time being.”

The theme here, as in Bjarnar saga, is the matter of extensions; Gunnlaugr has not returned, but may still do so. Even if he does not, Porsteinn wants to hold the agreement open for a fourth year. In both cases there are two back-up positions to prevent foreclosing the agreement prematurely. The difference is that the author of Bjarnar saga anticipates all the contingencies at once, perhaps a less realistic alternative. It looks as though Gunnlaugs saga has provided him with an overview of the possible contingencies and the author of Bjarnar saga has availed himself of the blueprint.

B. M. Olsen thought that a significant shared feature in the two sagas was the intermediary role of Skúli Porsteinsson at Jarl Eirikr’s court, but perhaps a greater similarity can be found in the way the skalds are introduced at court. Gunnlaugr introduces himself, but the jarl immediately turns to Skúli to ask about him (IF 3:69):

“Herra,” segir hann, “takid honum vel; hann er ins bezta mans sonr á Íslandi, Illuga svarta af Gilsbakka, ok fóstbróðir minn.”

(“Sir,” he said, “give him a good welcome; he is the son of an excellent man in Iceland, Illugi the Black from Gilsbakki, and he is my foster brother.”)

In Bjarnar saga he turns to Björn to get information on the newly arrived þóðr (IF 3.116):

Jarl spurði Björn, ef honum væri kunleiki á þóðr. Björn kvazk gorla kenna þóðr ok kvað hann vera skáld gott,—“ok mun þat kvaði rausnaræmligt, er hann flytr.” Jarl mælti: “Þykk þér þat ráð, Björn, at ek hlýð kvaðinu?” “Þykk mér vísst,” segir Björn, “því at þat mun báðum ykkir til særðar.”

(The jarl asked Björn if he know þóðr. Björn said that he knew þóðr very well and said that he was a good poet—“and any poem that he presents will be splendid.” The jarl asked: “Do you think that it
would be advisable for me to listen to the poem?" "I do indeed," said Björn, "for it will be a source of honor for both of you.")

In both cases the acceptance of the guest is by recommendation, though in Bjarnar saga there is an ironic undertone, voluntary or involuntary, because the referee and the beneficiary of the reference become bitter rivals and deadly enemies.

After Björn and Þórir have spent a sociable winter at Jarl Eiríkr’s court, Björn resolves to go harrying, but Þórir advises against it in the following terms (IF 3.118):

fat synisk mér óráðlít, fengit nú áðr góða sæmd ok virðing, en hætta sér nú svá, ok far þú miklu heldr með mér í sumar út til Islands, til frænda þinna göfugra, ok vítið ráðahags þins.

(It seems to me inadvisable, now that you have gotten honor and respect, to take such a risk. [You should] much rather travel with me out to Iceland this summer to your distinguished kinsmen, in order to revisit your engagement.)

This advice is either illogical or deeply hypocritical because Þórir presumably already has it in mind to make off with Björn’s betrothed. That option becomes more plausible the longer Björn stays away from Iceland, and the advice to return home therefore contradicts Þórir’s intention. The delayed return is also a prominent feature in Gunnlaugs saga and is formulated one final time in the following terms (IF 3.82):

Þósteinn gekk þá til Skapta, ok keyptu þeir svá, at brúðlaup skyldi vera at vetrnáttum at Borg, ef Gunnlaugr kem á út á því sumri, en Þósteinn lauss allra mála við Hrafn, ef Gunnlaugr kem á til ok vítiði ráðsins.

(Þósteinn then went to Skapti, and they arranged that the wedding should take place at the beginning of winter at Borg if Gunnlaugr did not come out [to Iceland] that summer, but that Þósteinn should be free of all commitments to Hrafn if Gunnlaugr arrived and revisited his engagement.)
The phrase “vitja ráðs” (or “ráðahags”) is a very slight echo, but it is precisely what both suitors fail to do. Both betrothal stories are centered on the failure of the grooms to appear at the appointed time, but the author of Gunnlaugs saga handles the theme more logically. There may, therefore, be a suspicion that the author of Bjarnar saga took it over mechanically and failed to make the necessary logical adjustments.

The final impediment to prompt arrival is that it is late in the summer and all the ships have already sailed from Norway to Iceland. Jarl Eiríkr informs Gunnlaugr in the following words (ÍF 3.84): “Nú eru òll skip í brottu, þau er til Íslands bjuggsk” (now all the ships that were readied for Iceland have sailed). But the bad news turns out to be premature, and Jarl Eiríkr is able to get passage for Gunnlaugr with Hallfreðr (ibid.):

Eiríkr jarl lét þá flytja Gunnlaug út til Hallfreðar, ok tók hann við honum með fagnaði, ok gaf þegar byr undan landi, ok váru vel kátir. Þat var síð sumars.

(Jarl Eiríkr had Gunnlaugr conveyed out to Hallfreðr’s ship, and he welcomed him gladly. There was a prompt offshore breeze and they were in good spirits. It was late in the summer.)

The departure of all the ships to Iceland and the lateness of the season are duplicated when Björn returns to Norway from Kiev (ÍF 3.122): “Ok er hann kom þar, váru òll skip gengin til Islands, ok var þat síð sumars” (and when he got there, all the ships had sailed to Iceland, and it was late in the summer).

One final similarity occurs at the end of Bjarnar saga, when Bóðr overcomes Björn in a notably one-sided combat and must bring his wife Oddný the news, along with a torque belonging to Björn (ÍF 3.205). At the sight of it, Oddný falls back unconscious and lapses into an illness that leads to her death. Her fate is not a little reminiscent of Helga’s final moments as she unfolds and gazes at the cloak given her by Gunnlaugr. In both scenes the woman is described as gazing at the treasure and collapsing (ÍF 3.107: “hnei hon aprtr”; ÍF 3.205: “hneig hon aprtr”).

The echoes in these texts are not unambiguous; it can still be argued that both authors are working from literary commonplaces. Even if we
believe that the echoes are textual, there is not much to suggest which
text has the priority. I would nonetheless argue that Gunnlaugs saga is
more likely to have set the tone. It is more thoroughly constructed on
and pervaded by the theme of the procrastinating groom. In Bjarnar
saga, on the other hand, this theme is confined to the first four short
chapters and the death of Oddný at the end. The body of the saga,
which is about twice as long as Gunnlaugs saga, has no reminiscences
of this theme and is focused single-mindedly on the exchange of
stanzas and the hostilities between Björn and Pórdr. Here the author
seems entirely dependent on the stanzas and whatever tradition may
have accompanied them. My own sense of the composition as a whole
is that the author was intent on telling the story of the feud between
Björn and Pórdr but preaced and concluded that core story with a
romantic frame inspired by Gunnlaugs saga.

Further textual correspondences

Other echoes detected by B. M. Ólsen are slight in comparison. I
mention only two cases because they were accepted by Sigurður
Nordal.11 Chapter 1 of Gunnlaugs saga notes the marriage of Pórsteinn
to Jófríðr, daughter of Gunnarr Hlífarson. The Stockholm manuscript
provides a comment on Gunnarr not found in the other manuscript
(IF 3.52):

Gunnarr hefir bezt vígr verit ok mestr fimleikamaðr verit á Íslandi
af búandmönnum, annarr Gunnarr at Hlíðarenda, þríði Steinþórr
á Eyri.

(Of all the farmers in Iceland Gunnarr was the most stalwart and
agile next after Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, and Steinþórr at Eyrr was
the third.)

B. M. Ólsen (p. 26) saw no reason to consider the passage to be an
interpolation and viewed it as a combination of a passage in Hœnsa-
Póris saga and another in Eyrbyggja saga. Hœnsa-Póris saga comments
as follows (IF 3.44):

11. See IF 3:XLIX, LII-V.
“Ja,” sagði Gunnarr, “svá er þat,” ok gengr heim til bojarins ok tók boga, því at hann skaut allra manna bezt af honum, ok er þar helzt til jafnæt, er var Gunnarr at Hlíðarenda.

(“Yes,” said Gunnarr, “that is so.” He went back to the house and took his bow, because he was the best of shots, and Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi is the best comparison.)

The passages are not close enough to suggest first-hand borrowing; one is about general athleticism, the other specifically about bowmanship. It is easy to believe that there were general traditions about comparative prowess, as there may have been about Barði Guðmundarson and Grettir Ásmundarson.\textsuperscript{12} The following passage from \textit{Eyrbyggja saga} illustrates the same point (IF 4.212–2):

Steinþórr var framast barna Porráks; hann var mikill maðr ok sterkr ok manna vápnfimastr ok inn mestí atgørvismaðr; hógværr var hann hversdægila. Steinþórr var til þess tekinn, at inn þríði maðr hafi bezt verit vígr á Íslandi með þeim Helgi Droplaugarsyni ok Vémundi kógur.

(Steinþórr was foremost among Porrákr’s children. He was a tall man, strong and most accomplished with weapons, a man of prowess, though he was gentle on a daily basis. Steinþórr was considered to have been the third greatest warrior in Iceland along with Helgi Droplaugarson and Vémundr kógurr.)

Steinþórr recurs in this passage but is compared to entirely different men. Once again the echo is too thin to carry conviction.

A few pages later B. M. Ólsen (p. 29) identifies another loan from \textit{Eyrbyggja saga}. When Gunnlaugr asks Þorsteinn for the hand of his daughter and is turned down, he responds in his characteristically undiplomatic fashion by telling his potential father-in-law that he is a lesser man than his own father Illugi. As a case in point he refers to Illugi’s triumph over Þorgrímur Kjálkason at the Pórsnesþing (IF 3.66):

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} See IF 7:106–7.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Eða hvat hefir þú í móti því, er hann deildi kapp við Porgrím goda Kjallaksson á Pórsness þingi ok við sonu hans ok hafði cinn þat, er við lá?

(Or what can you compare to his having contested against the chief-tain Porgrím Kjallaksson and his sons at the Pórsnes Assembly, with the result that he won the whole stake?)

The exchange develops into a little flyting, but Porsteinn soon appreciates that it is foolish and disengages.

The dispute between Illugi and Porgrím Kjallaksson is narrated in a little greater detail in *Eyrbyggja saga* (ÍF 4.31–33). We learn that the dispute was over the marriage portion of Illugi’s wife Ingibjörg Ásbjarnardóttir. It came close to armed conflict, but the money was finally paid out on Illugi’s terms. It is quite unlikely that the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* needed to refer to *Eyrbyggja saga* for this information, especially because the event was commemorated in a praise poem by a certain Oddr and titled “Illugadrápa.” Two stanzas are quoted in the retelling of *Eyrbyggja saga*, and the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* could just as well have taken the reference from the poem. The author in fact treats it as general knowledge that any reader could be expected to have.

B. M. Ølsen (p. 36) nonetheless argues for the influence of *Eyrbyggja saga* in yet a third passage. In *Gunnlaugs saga* Illugi visits Porsteinn at Borg to support Gunnlaugr’s wooing of Helga. Porsteinn suggests that they walk up to the overhanging hill (borg) in order to talk (ÍF 3.67): “Gongum upp á borgina ok tóllum þar” (let us climb the hill and talk there). This scene reminds B. M. Ølsen of a scene in *Eyrbyggja saga* in which Víga-Styr (Arngrím Porgrímsson) visits Snorri godi at Helgafell to ask for advice on his troublesome berserks. Snorri suggests that they climb up Helgafell to discuss the matter (ÍF 4.71–72):

Snorri spurði, ef hann hefði nokkur vandamál at tala. “Svá þykki mér,” segir Styr. Snorri svarar: “Ðá skulu við ganga upp á Helgafell; þau ráða hafa síst at engu orðit, er þar hafa ráðin verit.”

(Snorri asked if he had any problems to discuss. “I think I do,” said Styr. Snorri replied: “Then we should climb Helgafell; the plans forged there have been least likely to come to nothing.”)

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During the consultation on Helgafell Snorri hatches a plan that will enable Styrr to kill off the two berserks. Part of the secret deal is that Snorri will then get the hand of Styrr’s daughter in marriage. Thus the situation in both sagas revolves around a marriage negotiation. B. M. Ólsen acknowledges that there is no mention of the idea that Borg, like Helgafell, is auspicious for consultations, but he believes that the idea is implied, even though the betrothal of Gunnlaugr and Helga is anything but auspicious. This parallel too seems less than compelling, and I can find no strong evidence that Gunnlaugs saga echoes Eyrbyggja saga.

Far more interesting is the case to be made for our author’s having known Laxdæla saga. He cites that saga explicitly in chapter 5 (ÍF 3.64):

Reið Illugi þá heiman skjótt ok keypti skip hálft til anda Gunnlaugi, er uppi stóð í Gufuárósi, at Auðuní festargram. Pessi Auðunn vildi eigi útan flyrja sonu Ósvífrs ins spaka eptir vig Kjartans Óláfssonar, sem segir í Laxdæla sögu, ok varð þat þó síðar en þetta.

(Illugi rode off from home quickly and purchased half a ship in Gufuáross from Auðunn festargramr. This Auðunn did not want to give passage to the sons of Ósvífr the Wise after the killing of Kjartan Óláfsson, as it is told in Laxdæla saga, but that happened after this [i.e., after what is told here].)

There would seem to be no good reason to believe that this is not a reference to the written Laxdæla saga and no good reason to believe that the reference in Gunnlaugs saga is interpolated (ÍF 3.6411). B. M. Ólsen was in no doubt that the author of Gunnlaugs saga made use of Laxdæla saga, although the reference above is not precise. Laxdæla saga (ÍF 5.158–59) does not state that Auðunn refused passage to the sons of Ósvífr, only that he made a dire prediction about their survival. The remark in Gunnlaugs saga that “the latter [the passage of Ósvífr’s sons abroad] was later than this [Gunnlaugr’s voyage abroad]” is also peculiar. Looking at the reconstructed chronologies in the Íslensk fornrit editions, we can observe that modern scholars estimate that
Gunnlaugar went abroad in 1002 and Ósvífr’s sons probably in the summer of 1003.\footnote{See IF 3:LIX and IF 5:LIX.} That medieval authors or scribes would have made such a narrow calculation is indeed surprising and difficult to explain. It is more likely that the sequence is based on a vague tradition than on a written source.

Apart from this passage, the evidence that the author of \textit{Gunnlaugs saga} made use of \textit{Laxdæla saga} is again very thin. B. M. Ólsen (p. 23) believed that the reference to Kjartan Óláfsson in the first chapter of \textit{Gunnlaugs saga} presupposes a knowledge of \textit{Laxdæla saga}, but surely a reference to one of the most famous heroes of the Saga Age does not equate to the knowledge of a particular text. B. M. Ólsen (p. 27) also supposed that the mention of the spouses Óláfr pá and Þorgeir Óslódóttir in chapter 3 rested either on \textit{Egils saga} or on \textit{Laxdæla saga}, probably the latter. Again, the mention of these Saga Age notables hardly requires a written source. In addition, B. M. Ólsen urges a verbal echo in the introduction of Óláfr pá (IF 3:57):

\begin{quote}
Ok þá reið Þorsteinn til heimbóðs vestr í Hjarðarholt, til Ólafs pá, mágs síns, Þóskuldarsonar, er þá þótti vera með mestri vírðingu allra höfðingja vestr þar.
\end{quote}

(Then Þorstein rode to a feast west in Hjarðarholt, at the residence of his kinsman Óláfr Peacock Þóskuldarson, who at that time was reputed to be the worthiest of all the chieftains there in the west.)

It is theorized that we can find the source for this description in chapter 24 of \textit{Laxdæla saga}, where there are remarks such as “gerðisk hann höfðingi mikill” (he became a great chieftain) (IF 5:66) and “óxu nú mjók metorð Óláfs” (Óláfr’s reputation was now greatly increased) (IF 5:68). Once more, the similarity is too approximate and the sentiment too general to allow for such a conclusion.

On p. 32 B. M. Ólsen associates Þorsteinn’s memorable dream forecasting his daughter’s marriages with Guðrún Ósvísfrsdóttir’s fourfold dream visions of her marriages in \textit{Laxdæla saga}, but we will see below that there is a considerably closer parallel in the Eddic material. Since the plot of \textit{Gunnlaugs saga} can be documented for a prior tradition...
because of various references to it, B. M. Ólsen (pp. 31–32) does not subscribe to the view that the author invented the romantic plot under the influence of Laxdala saga. Indeed, it seems more likely that both authors owe their romantic impulses to the Eddic antecedents, but B. M. Ólsen (p. 46) mentions only two Eddic echoes from Helgakviða Hundingsbana II and Atlamál. We will see that the Eddic substratum can be construed to yield a good deal more.

In summary, B. M. Ólsen was convinced that the author of Gunnlaugs saga was palpably influenced by Hallfredar saga, Egils saga, Bjarnar saga Hitdœlakappa, Eyrbyggja saga, and Laxdala saga. In the first three cases I believe that the influence ran not to Gunnlaugs saga but from it. In the case of Eyrbyggja saga and Laxdala saga, I find the evidence inadequate, although the direct reference to the latter poses a real puzzle. B. M. Ólsen also believed in influences from Heiðarvíga saga, Hœnsa-Börís saga, and Njáls saga, but Sigurður Nordal considered that the case had not been made and I will not pursue it further.15

The romantic undertone

Readers of Björn M. Ólsen’s treatise, after a few years’ time, are more likely to remember his general assessment of the romantic flavor in Gunnlaugs saga than the details on the possible influences from other sagas, even though his treatment of the romantic streak is very brief (pp. 10–11). He speaks of the “chivalric-romantic undertone that pervades the saga from beginning to end,” although he qualifies that description by suggesting that the tone is downplayed to accord with normal saga style. He detects the romantic tone in Þorstein’s conferral of the name “Helga the Fair” and in her golden tresses, but also in the chivalric sensibilities of the male protagonists. It emerges most emphatically in the motif of unquenchable love until death and the sentimental conclusion. B. M. Ólsen sums up the evidence by labeling Gunnlaugs saga a “chivalric romance against a Norse backdrop” and the male protagonists “knightly figures in disguise.” In particular he judges the description of Helga’s golden hair (“fagrt sem barit gull”) to have undergone the influence of chivalric romance.

15. See B. M. Ólsen, pp. 23, 26, 36–37, and Sigurður Nordal in IF 3:XLIX.
One need not resort to foreign romance to find models for beautiful, lovelorn, and grief-stricken women, and we will locate more immediate models presently. Generally speaking, however, it appears in retrospect that B. M. Ólsen’s emphasis on chivalric romance was considerably exaggerated. This criticism was voiced most forthrightly by Vésteinn Ólason:16

It has often been maintained that the Saga of Gunnlaug bears the marks of the influence of a fashionable literary genre of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the French chansons de geste and romances of chivalry that were being translated into Norse and enjoyed considerable popularity in the later part of the thirteenth century at least among the upper classes. In fact this influence was quite limited and not very profound.

Vésteinn tries, for example, to moderate the glorification of Helga’s beauty and align it with other sagas. The most memorable detail is probably the comparison of Helga’s hair to “barit gull” (beaten gold). B. M. Ólsen (p. 11) takes the phrase to reflect chivalric style, but his two examples are not from chivalric texts; one is from Pidreks saga and the other is from a curious little text in Flateyjarbók titled Hauks þátr hábrókar. These instances are the only ones recorded in the dictionaries and are a thin basis for arguing chivalric style.17

Whether Gunnlaugs saga is chivalric and inspired by foreign models or not, most critics can agree that in some sense it is a love story. The less it is judged to partake of foreign influence, the more it constitutes


17. Susanne Kramarz-Bein’s recent and compendious book Die Pidreks saga im Kontext der altnorwegischen Literatur (Tübingen and Basel: A. Francke Verlag, 2002), especially pp. 207–63, associates Pidreks saga with chivalric romance, but I continue to believe that it was translated from a Low German text composed in Soest ca. 1180 at a time when chivalric romance had hardly begun in Germany. The phrase “barit gull” could reflect an original Low German or High German “gehemertes golt” or the like. The Hauks þátr hábrókar to which the dictionaries refer, not to be confused with the Hauks þátr hábrókar in Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, Editiones Arnamagnæanae, Ser. A, vol. 3 (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 2000), pp. 104–5, is found only in Flateyjarbók. It is printed in Fornmanna sögur, 12 vols. (Copenhagen: S. L. Møller, 1825–1837), vol. 10,
The Native Romance of Gunnaugr and Helga the Fair

Evidence for a native tradition of love stories. That such a tradition existed is borne out by the existence of love stanzas and a variety of love anecdotes pertaining to both kings and commoners, not least of all skalds such as Pormóðr Bersason and Kormákr Ógmundarson. The chief guarantee of a native romantic tradition is the legend of Brynhild and Sigurd, with a blighted love story at its core. Romantic blight seems in fact to be the preferred mode in the native tradition, in which a happy outcome is quite unknown. The wrong match is the rule; the passionate swains never get the beloved, and the objects of their affection, passionate in action in the poetry but passionate only in grief in the sagas, become so many mal mariées.

Both the women and the men differ greatly in verse and prose. The men of heroic poetry are decisive, Sigurd in his wooing and the Burgundian brothers in their action against Sigurd. The men in the sagas, on the other hand, are curiously irresolute; it is as if they had all partaken of Grimhild’s potion of forgetfulness and lost track of their commitments. The women of heroic poetry waver even less than the men; Brynhild contrives the death of Sigurd, and Gudrun avenge him with unexampled ferocity. The women in the sagas by contrast wither away in melancholy.

And yet there are similarities that suggest a continuity. The common theme is the thwarted marriage with tragic consequences. The sagas rarely attain the high passion of the Eddic poems, although Gísla saga and Laxdæla saga come close and Gunnlaugs saga has high moments in the encounter between Gunnaugr and Hrafne and the death of

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Helga. Without rivaling the poems, the sagas do have certain devices, gestures, and phrasings that are reminiscent of them.

Both the heroic legend (most likely in the largely lost *Sigurdarkvida in meiri* now preserved only in the prose of *Völsunga saga*) and *Gunnlaugs saga* begin with elaborate premonitory dreams. In the legend, Gudrun dreams of holding a hawk with golden feathers, which she values above all things. When she seeks counsel from Brynhild, she recounts another dream (Finch, p. 46) in which she sees a stag with a golden coat, also valued most highly, but which Brynhild strikes down at her feet. No less explicitly predictive is Horsteinn’s dream about two eagles succumbing in a fight over a beautiful swan in *Gunnlaugs saga*. The prophetic eagles are in fact matched in one of the premonitory dreams that warn Kostbera of the fate that awaits the Burgundian brothers if they travel to Hunland (Finch, p. 67). She dreams of an eagle flying through the hall splattering blood. For a chivalric parallel we can of course resort to the *Nibelungenlied*, but the Norse parallels are closer to hand.

Saga readers remember Helga as the quintessential, almost proverbial, beauty. The theme of beauty has also put critics in mind of chivalric models; the figure of Enid in the romances of Chrétien and Hartmann might illustrate this tradition. It is true that feminine beauty is not much dwelt on in the sagas, but here again the heroic legend fills the gap. When Sigurd first sees Brynhild in her remote tower, he is captivated by her beauty (Finch, p. 42): “ha ser hann eina fagra konu ok kennir at þar er Brynhildr. Honum þykkir um vert allt saman, fegr hennar ok þat er hon gerir” (then he sees a fair woman and realizes that it is Brynhildr. He is altogether struck by her beauty and by what [the work] she is doing). He reports the vision to his companion

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Alsvidr; then, when he makes his first visit, he kisses Brynhild and praises her unique beauty (Finch, p. 43): “Enga kona hefir þér fegri fæðk” (no woman more beautiful than you has been born).

The chief symptom of love in both legend and saga is melancholy. Sigurd’s first view of Brynhild depresses his spirits and prompts a sympathetic inquiry from Alsvidr (Finch, p. 42):

“Hví eru þér svá fálátir? Þessi skipan þín harmar oss ok þína vini. Eða hví màttu eigi gleði hálta? Haukar þínir hnípa ok svá hestrinn Grani, ok þessa fám vér seint bót.”

(“Why are you so taciturn? This change of heart grieves us and your friends. Why can you not keep your spirits up? Your hawks are downcast and your horse Grani too, and it will take a time for us to recover.”)

When Brynhild learns what has happened, her lovesickness takes on more epic dimensions (Finch, p. 51): “Brynhildr for heim ok mælti ekki orð um kveldit” (Brynhild returned home and said not a word in the evening). What follows is a long sequence of efforts to rouse her from her catatonic state. Her condition is described as illness (Finch, p. 53): “Brynhildr er sjúk” (Brynhild is ill). A series of interviews remains without effect on her, other than providing an opportunity for Brynhild to vent her indignation and grief, a venting with analogues in Gudrunarkvida fyrsta and Gudrunarkvida Ónnur.

In Brynhild’s case there is no question of consolation, although Gudrun entertains the vain idea that returning to the hall and taking up her needlework might cheer her. She instructs one of her companions accordingly (Finch, p. 54): “Vek Brynhildi, göngum til bôða ok verum kátar” (awaken Brynhild and let us go to our embroidery and be of good cheer). In the case of Guðrún this strategy actually succeeds. She takes refuge with King Hálfr in Denmark after Sigurd’s death and stays there for seven years, during which time Þóra Hákonardóttir distracts her with embroidery (Finch, p. 62):

[H]on sló bôða fyrir henni ok skráði þar á morg ok stór vérk ok fagra leika er tíðir váru í þann tíma, sverð ok brynjur ok allan konungs búnað, skip Sigmundar konungs er skráðu fyrir land fram.
Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland

Ok þat byrðu þær er þeir borgðusk Sigarr ok Siggeirr á Fjóni suðr. Slikt var þeira gaman ok huggaðisk Guðrún nú nokkut harms síns.

(She embroidered and pictured many a great deed and fair pursuits that were customary at that time, swords and byrnies and all the royal accouterments, King Sigmund’s ships that sailed along the coast. And they embroidered Sigarr and Siggeirr south on Fyn. This was their amusement and Gudrun was somewhat consoled in her grief.)

This passage is guaranteed for the poetic record by stanzas 14–17 of Guðrúnarkviða önnur.23 Perhaps the consolation afforded by needlework echoes in Helga’s death scene in Gunnlaugs saga where the point is made that Helga’s only consolation was to unfold and gaze at the cloak given her by Gunnlaugr.

It will be recalled that it is precisely at one of these moments that she falls back and dies (ÍF 3.107):

Ok er skikkjan kom til hennar, þá settisk hon upp ok rakði skikkjuna fyrir sér ok horði á um stund. Ök síðan hné hon aprí í fang bóna sínum ok var þá ørend.

(And when the cloak was given her, she sat up and unfolded the cloak before her and gazed at it for a time. And then she collapsed back into her husband’s arms and expired.)

The falling back also echoes Eddic passages. As Brynhild commits suicide, she too falls back against the cushions (Finch, p. 60)—“hneig upp við dýnur.” Guðrún duplicates this posture when she sees her slain husband in Guðrúnarkviða fyrsta (st. 15):

þá hné Guðrún  höll við bólstri;
Haddr losnaði,  hlýr roðnaði,
Enn regns dropi  rann niðr um kní.

(Then Gudrun collapsed athwart the cushions; Her hair was loosened, her cheek was reddened, And liquid drops ran down her lap.)

We do not need to have recourse to chivalric models to explain the romantic inflections in Gunnlaugs saga. Most of them are anticipated in the heroic and elegiac poems of the Edda. The elegies are particularly revealing, although they do not shed any light on the dating. If they are late, as Heusler thought, they could have been part of a new literary wave at the time Gunnlaugs saga was written, let us say 1210 to 1220. If they are part of an earlier heritage, as Daniel Sävborg has argued, they could have been available at almost any time before that period, a feature of the general tradition rather than the current literary scene.24

Conclusion

We do not need to take recourse to the flowery meadows of medieval chivalry to account for Gunnlaugs saga. The passion and melancholy of the native poetic tradition are more apposite. Consequently there is no need to posit a late date for the saga. Bjarni Einarsson in particular was convinced that there must have been an early Gunnlaugs saga available to the author of Egils saga.25 That led him to posit one version early in the century and one version considerably later, but there is not much evidence that sagas were rewritten for the sake of different styles. Nothing stands in the way of supposing that there was only one Gunnlaugs saga and that it was written early.

The most likely progression of saga writing in Borgarfjörður appears to me to be first Gunnlaugs saga, then Bjarnar saga Hítdeikakappa, and finally Egils saga. The tone of Gunnlaugs saga, the premonitory dream, the misdirected marriage, and the lovesickness are all drafts on the heroic elegies of the Edda, which were probably being committed to parchment in the same period. The author of Bjarnar saga Hítdeikakappa borrowed these effects, not without awkwardness, from Gunnlaugs saga and cast them as a frame for the rivalry between

25. See Bjarni Einarsson, Skáldsögur (as in note 8), pp. 267–70.
Björn Arngeirsson and Þórðr Kolbeinsson. Both sagas are anchored at Borg and both are skald biographies, perhaps elaborations of the skald anecdotes included in the Oldest Saga of Saint Óláfr. Egils saga stands in the same tradition but greatly expands every aspect by adding a great deal more verse, creating a far fuller biography, and enlarging the historical context.

This little slice of literary history from Borgarfjörður may serve to demystify ever so slightly the miracle of Egils saga. If it really was composed as early as the 1220s, it is a prodigy of the first order that such a fully formed and perfected composition could have come into being at the dawn of saga writing.26 If we consider it as an incomparably more ambitious elaboration of the skald saga form as the author found it in Gunnlaugs saga and Bjarnar saga, there is at least the semblance of a historical progression, although the mystery of narrative genius can never be satisfactorily dispelled.

Bibliography


