

Performing Gender in the Icelandic Ballads

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In his 1982 book-length study, *The Traditional Ballads of Iceland*, Vésteinn Ólason addressed the major philological questions regarding Icelandic ballads, principally concerning their origins.¹ First collected and preserved in seventeenth-century manuscripts,² could these ballads be considered medieval, and if so, when and from where did they first reach Iceland? Vésteinn argued the case in detail for each of the 110 ballads that had just been given their first modern edition by Jón Helgason.³ By comparing Icelandic ballad stanzas with their close verbal parallels in Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Faroese ballads,⁴

1. See Vésteinn Ólason, *The Traditional Ballads of Iceland: Historical Studies* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1982), henceforth *Traditional Ballads*.

2. The earliest ballad manuscript was copied by Gissur Sveinsson (1604–1683) in 1665. See the facsimile *Kvæðabók séra Gissurar Sveinsson: AM 147, 8vo*, Íslenzk rit síðari alda 2a-b (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fræðafélag, 1960). “Kvæði af Ólafi liljurós,” discussed below, was first recorded in this manuscript, while “Elenar ljóð” was first recorded in a manuscript dated ca. 1680. See Jón Helgason, ed., *Íslenzk fornkvæði: Íslandske Folkeviser*, 8 vols., Editiones Arnarnagænanæ B10–17 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1962–1981), henceforth JH, 3:xiii. See also the facsimile of the page containing this ballad in Vésteinn Ólason, ed., *Sagnadansar*, Íslensk rit 5 (Reykjavík: Rannsóknastofnun í bókmenntafræði við Háskóla Íslands, 1979), henceforth *Sagnadansar*, 2.

3. See above. The first, nineteenth-century edition, *Íslenzk fornkvæði*, ed. Svend Grundtvig and Jón Sigurðsson (Copenhagen: det nordiske Literatur-Samfund, 1854–1885), henceforth ÍFk, is partly available online. Vésteinn Ólason compiled a one-volume edition with an introduction in 1979 (see previous note). For the sake of brevity I will typically refer to the ballads by their ÍFk numbers, given in Grundtvig and supplemented in JH.

4. Ballads in these languages are classified and grouped together in Bengt R. Jonsson et al., eds., *The Types of the Medieval Scandinavian Ballad: A Descriptive Catalogue* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1978).

he argued which of them might have come from Norway by about 1500, and which came from Denmark after the Reformation midway through the sixteenth century. Along the way, Vésteinn pointed toward some possible new directions for ballad study, such as a closer, more comprehensive linguistic analysis of the Danish element in ballad language, including (I would add) of the seventeenth-century literary translations of Danish ballads that were preserved alongside the putative oral-traditional ones.⁵ Other kinds of new approaches, such as those incorporating postmodern theoretical concerns, had yet to be envisioned. One promising new direction, however, was adumbrated when Vésteinn and others following him asked whether the Icelandic ballads might in some sense have been a form of “women’s poetry.”⁶

Evidence for this hypothesis is found first of all in the preponderance of women cited as singers of ballads.⁷ In 1708, Snæbjörn Pálsson had written a letter to the famous manuscript collector Árne Magnússon (1633–1730), commenting on an important ballad-book then owned by his wife, Kristín Magnúsdóttir:⁸

Fornkvæðabókin þykir mér ekki svo rík af fornkvæðum sem hjörtu og brjóst átræðra kerlinga hef ég vitað, nær ég var barn, en þær með þeim fróðleik eru flestar í jörð grafnar nú.⁹ (*Sagnadansar* 19)

5. These translated ballads are printed in a smaller font in JH. On linguistic importations, see *Traditional Ballads* 97–100, and *Sagnadansar* 23.

6. *Traditional Ballads* 24–25; *Sagnadansar* 82; See Helga Kress, “Searching for Herself: Female Experience and Female Tradition in Icelandic Literature,” in *A History of Icelandic Literature*, ed. Daisy L. Neijmann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2006), 510–11; Nína Björk Elíasson, “Eru sagnadansar kvennatónlist?” in *Konur skrifa til heiðurs Önnu Sigurðardóttur*, ed. Valborg Bentsdóttir et al. (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1980), 143–54.

7. We have no record of who sang (and first composed?) ballads in medieval times, nor does the earliest ballad MS in the seventeenth century (see above) mention its sources. Women performers of the (originally) oral-traditional ballads might compose or adapt them to their own tastes and concerns, although on the other hand later singers especially (male or female) might transmit much of the ballad texts memorially. See *Traditional Ballads* 25–29; *Sagnadansar* 40–50.

8. The manuscript, V, is now lost but known through two copies (V¹ and V²) located, respectively, in the Ny kongelig Samling, Royal Library, Copenhagen, Denmark (Ny kgl. sml. 1141 fol) and in the Jón Sigurðsson collection, National and University Library of Iceland, Reykjavík (JS 405 4°). The original manuscript was written down in 1699 and 1700 by Magnús Jónsson of Vigur (in the Westfjords) and two of his scribes. After Magnús died in 1702 the manuscript passed on to his daughter Kristín (d. 1712), who married Snæbjörn (see JH 1:ix, xviii–xx).

9. Normalized; quoted in the original orthography in JH 1:xx and *Traditional Ballads* 18.

The ballad-book does not seem to me as rich in ballads as the hearts and minds of eighty-year-old women I knew when I was a child, but most of them are now dead and buried, and their knowledge along with them.

Árni Magnússon for his part named only one ballad singer he collected from, a woman named Guðrún Hákonardóttir, who provided him with five ballads in the early eighteenth century.¹⁰ In the next century (1858–9), scholar, scribe, and collector Gísli Konráðsson (1787–1877) transcribes seventeen ballads “eptir mynni gamalla kvenna” (from the memory of old women),¹¹ while Sr. Benedikt Þórarinsson in 1848–50 says he learned ballads from a woman named Björg Pétursdóttir (1749–1839), of whom he says “hún var fróð kona, minnug og óskreytin” (she knew much lore, had a good memory and did not alter anything).¹² Ballads in manuscripts collected in the nineteenth century are most often recorded by men from performances by women.¹³ The named performers include Sigríður Jafetsdóttir (b. 1819, ÍFk no. 1, JH 6:150–51); Guðríður (Benediktsdóttir?, b. 1791; nos. 34, 38, 39, JH 7:6–10, 11–14); Helga Tjörvadóttir (b. 1781, no. 39, JH 7:10–11); Málfríður Jónsdóttir (who learned from her mother Þorbjörg Pétursdóttir, who learned from her mother Snjófríður Jónsdóttir; nos. 92, 60, 21, JH 7:14–19); Ingibjörg Pálsdóttir (1807–91, nos. 34, 39, 35, 60, 48, 37, 68, 61, JH 7:56–81); Gunnhildur Jónsdóttir (1787–1866, nos. 11, 39 and 61, JH 7:82–91); Anna Sigríður Pálsdóttir (b. 1845, no. 92, JH 7:98–99); and Guðrún Guðjónsdóttir (1816–1902, no. 60, JH 7:151–53). When ballads were recorded on tape in the 1960s and 1970s, fifty-one singers were women, and fifteen men.¹⁴ For comparative purposes, one can

10. *Traditional Ballads* 22, citing JH 4:xli–xlvi. Other informants mentioned but not named by Árni were also women, including two old women from Álftanes in southwestern Iceland (*Traditional Ballads* 22; JH 4:xxxviii). Guðrún’s ballads are ÍFk nos. 3, 47, 48, 72, and 82, edited in JH 4:156–77. Surprisingly, no. 82 is the lone copy of one of only two Icelandic ballads that have been classified as “heroic.” The ballads recorded from “old women” are ÍFk no. 78 (a religious ballad) and no. 81 (the other heroic ballad), edited in JH 4:106–13.

11. JH 6:xviii.

12. JH 6:xxx1; translated in *Traditional Ballads* 22.

13. *Traditional Ballads* 23.

14. According to an unpublished handlist of recordings, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar. I thank Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir for providing me with this handlist and providing me with certain sound files.

mention that women were sometimes the sources for Scottish and Appalachian ballads and Norwegian ballads from Telemark.¹⁵ In the Faroe Islands, on the other hand, men recite the famous heroic ballads about legendary male figures such as Sigurd the Dragonslayer, while the villagers dance. Nonetheless, one Faroese informant disclosed that while the men were resting after completing these long-winded performances, women would often sing their own sorts of ballads.¹⁶ Similarly, Malan Marnersdóttir states that in the Faroes, the “lead singer most frequently was a man, but women, too, lead ballads” although they “have tended to lead shorter ballads.”¹⁷

Within the ballad texts themselves, women often take on prominent roles as strong characters, something rather to be expected in a (putatively) medieval Icelandic genre, judging by women’s roles in the sagas and Eddic poetry.¹⁸ In his earlier and complementary study (*Sagnadansar* 68), Vésteinn had briefly mentioned as examples of strong women in the ballads the protagonists of “Ingu kvæði” (ÍFk 66) and “Kvæði af Kristínu og Ásbirni” (ÍFk 55). If we turn to the latter example, for instance, we find that Kristín makes fine clothes and sends them to Ásbjörn, who is so impressed he asks her to be his bride.¹⁹ While she performs the heavily gendered activity of sewing and

15. *Sagnadansar* 82. The Norwegian ballad *Draumkvedet* (Jonsson, *Types*, B 31), for instance, was earliest copied down from a version sung by a Telemark woman, Maren Ramskeid. See Velle Espeland, “Oral Ballads as National Literature: The Reconstruction of Two Norwegian Ballads,” *Estudios de Literatura Oral* 6 (2000): 1. For Scottish ballads, collector Robert Jamieson credited especially “Mrs Brown of Falkland,” who “learnt most of them before she was twelve years old, from old women and maid-servants.” Robert Jamieson, ed., *Popular Ballads and Songs* (Edinburgh: Constable, 1806), viii-ix.

16. The informant Jens Holm is quoted in a letter from Faroese scholar Mortan Nolsøe to Vésteinn Ólason (*Traditional Ballads* 24–25), who provides an English translation. Jens refers specifically to the Faroese analogue of ÍFk 14, “Margrétar kvæði,” a chivalric ballad. Icelandic ballads are predominantly chivalric (62), followed by (among those classified in Jonsson’s *Types*) the supernatural (11), jocular (10), religious (5) and heroic (2).

17. “Women and Ballads: The Representation of Women in Faroese Ballad Tradition,” *Scandinavica* 49 (2010): 29. Marnersdóttir (36–46) goes on to discuss the ballads collected from one female informant, Birte Sofie Jacobsdatter (1805–74), and how they differ from the heroic ballads typified by *Sjúrðar kvæði* (The Ballad/s of Sigurd the Dragonslayer).

18. See, e.g., Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

19. JH 1:192–5, 3:252–4, 4:236–7, 5:3–6, 6:188–90, and fragments (see JH 8:179); *Sagnadansar* 126–28 (two versions). English-language summaries of each ballad in turn are provided in *Traditional Ballads*; for “Kristínu,” see pp. 315–16. Briefer comparative summaries of Scandinavian ballads are provided in Jonsson’s *Types*. For a bibliography of English translations of the Icelandic ballads, see Larry E. Syndergaard, *English*

embroidery, Kristín also takes on the customarily masculine role of initiating courtship. The contrast is clearer when we compare Danish versions, in which Ásbjörn asks for Kristín in marriage but insists that she first prove her ability to make clothes for him.

Following up on Vésteinn's observations, Nína Björk Elíasson asks in an article from 1980, "Are the [Icelandic] Ballads Women's Poetry?" ("Eru sagnadansar kvennatónlist?")—see note 6 above). She surveys the ballads edited in JH volumes 6 and 7, collected in the nineteenth century by men from female singers (as noted above). She notes a focus on extramarital pregnancies, resulting from love trysts but also rape (often incestuous rape), in ballads such as "Ásu dans" (ÍFk 61), "Kvæði af Imnar og Elínu" (ÍFk 79), "Tófu kvæði" (ÍFk 35), "Kvæði af Loga Þórðarsyni" (ÍFk 88), "Ólöfar kvæði" (ÍFk 34 and 80), "Kvæði af syndugri konu" (ÍFk 77), "Þorkels kvæði Þrándarsonar" (ÍFk 62), and "Ebbadætra kvæði" (ÍFk 30). As other topics that may indicate a particular (but of course not exclusive) interest for women, she discusses instances of young women's dreams for marriage ("Draumkvæði," ÍFk 39); of maternal or wifely compassion ("Stjúpmóður kvæði," ÍFk 11, and "Kvæði af Ingu lífstuttu, ÍFk 25); and of mockery of men in comic ballads ("Skeggkarls kvæði," ÍFk 99). Nína's survey begins to address a scholarly desideratum that Vésteinn in his 1982 monograph expressed thus:

In no other type of poetry from the late Middle Ages or the subsequent centuries do women play such a decisive role. Nor is their fate elsewhere described with as much sympathy as in the majority of the ballads. A detailed thematic study of ballads in relation to this is called for. (*Traditional Ballads* 24)

Helga Kress, writing on women in literary tradition for the 2006 *History of Icelandic Literature*, adds her own characterization, namely that "[the] ballads are mainly concerned with women's lives, and women mainly play a major role in these stories. Common themes are violence against women, forbidden love, rape and incest, and concealed childbirth and infanticide as well as women's solidarity and

Translations of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballads: An Analytical Guide and Bibliography (Turku: The Nordic Institute of Folklore, 1995), 161–66.

friendship, their concern for their children, and their revenge against evildoers.”²⁰ She notes for instance that the daughters who are raped in “Ebbadætra kvæði” (ÍFk 30) go on to take their own revenge. One can add that one of the daughters had first said she wanted to kill herself in shame, but that she and her sisters instead conspired for seven weeks and then beheaded one of the brothers Judith-style by grabbing him by the hair, outside the church door.

In this article I take up on Vésteinn’s call for further investigation of the role of gender in Icelandic ballads, focusing on the ballads numbered one and two in the standard collection (ÍFk). The first of these, “Kvæði af Ólafi liljurós” (The Ballad of Olaf Lily-Rose),” is the best-known ballad in modern Iceland, while the other, “Elenar ljóð” (The Song [or Ballad] of Elen) portrays its young heroine in a particularly exemplary way. (I append below my translations of these two ballads.) As my title suggests, I will modify Vésteinn’s approach somewhat by invoking the idea advanced by Judith Butler and others of gender as a performance, not so much (in Butler’s view) a freely chosen individual performance but a response to culturally repeated prior performances.²¹ The idea has a particular relation to the ballads because the genre was itself performed, or so it is usually argued, on repeated occasions, as lyrics sung by a balladeer, with refrains sung perhaps by a community of dancers, or in other participatory ways.²²

“The Ballad of Elen” in fact begins with a reference to just such a

20. “Searching for Herself,” 510–11.

21. “As anthropologist Victor Turner suggests in his studies of ritual social drama, social action requires a performance which is repeated . . . gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual, as some post-structuralist displacements of the subject would contend . . . just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.” “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40 (1988): 526. Butler repeats some of her observations in her monograph *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), but this prior article makes a few more explicit comparisons (and contrasts) between gender performance and other forms of artistic performance. Marnersdóttir (“Women and Ballads,” 29), writing about women and Faroese ballads, similarly cites Butler, as well as Pierre Bourdieu (42), concerning “schemes of habitus that set the socially accepted gender roles which are constantly reproduced.”

22. On the relation between ballad and dance, see *Traditional Ballads* 35–42 and *Sagnadansar* 79–80. Faroese ballads famously are still performed while villagers (or their equivalent) participate in a “chain dance”; Marnersdóttir (“Women and Ballads,”

ballad and dance event.²³ Elen asks her father if she can go to a *vaka* or “wake,” an all-night entertainment where dancing and ballad singing would have figured prominently. Her father refuses permission on the grounds that Elen would be stared at by fools (“þig kann margur dárinn sjá”; st. 3), adding that her absent mother would never have behaved in such a way. Elen airily dismisses the imputation, stating that a fool will behave as he must (“Fari dárinn sem hann kann”; st. 4), and then she goes off to the dance. There she sings so loudly (while she dances—perhaps in a communal performance of ballads?) that she attracts the attention not just of (presumably) the gawking Icelandic locals, but also of a monstrous suitor, a *nykur* or creature of the deep, who abducts her, tying her to his horse (st. 8).²⁴ When she asks for a rest, the merman says he will grant it if she vows to wed him (st. 10), at which she makes, again, an utterly nonplussed refusal, saying “Eg því ekki nenni” (st. 11); that is, she does not “just say no” but rather something like “I can’t be bothered” or “I’d rather not.” In so doing she accidentally names the creature, since *nennir* is an alternate word for *nykur*,²⁵ which makes him magically vanish, as we learn also from later Icelandic folktales. Other Scandinavian versions of the ballad often end badly for the heroine.²⁶ In the Icelandic version, however,

28) quotes Christian Matras as saying that one cannot adjudge Faroese ballads without taking the dance into account.

23. My discussion follows version A in *Sagnadansar* 93–4, normalized from a text copied down ca. 1680 (see above); see JH 3:249–50. The only other copy, version C (version B records the first stanza only) was recorded ca. 1850, calls its heroine Kristín, and adds stanzas describing her retinue as she starts riding towards a *gleði* (party). The *nennir* hears her riding (rather than singing). She names him and he disappears.

24. In Icelandic folktales, the *nykur* is himself a kind of horse or centaur. See Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*, 2nd ed., 6 vols. (Reykjavík: Þjóðsaga, 1954–1961), 1:129–32; Jacqueline Simpson, trans., *Icelandic Folktales and Legends* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972; repr. Stroud: Tempus, 2004), 110–14. “The nykr is the Proteus of the Northern tales, and takes many shapes,” according to Richard Cleasby and Guðbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic–English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), *s.v.*

25. According to Cleasby and Vigfusson, *nennir* is “prob. an assimilated form, qs. Neknir . . . the popular name of the nykr”; there follows a reference to Maurer’s *Isländische Volkssagen* of 1860. Presumably the word is not attested in medieval sources (it is not to be found in the online *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*); the online database of the *Orðabók Háskólans* (ed. Bjarni Einarsson) locates its earliest citation in the seventeenth century. *Elenar kvæði*, written down ca. 1680 (JH 3:xiii), must have been composed fairly late if the word *nennir* is itself late (and not just unattested), given that the poem (or at least its ending) turns on a pun on that word.

26. Jonsson, *Types*, A 48.

Elen refuses any responsibility for the bad actions of aggressive males. In a more misogynistic version, she would have been punished, and indeed she is carried off under the water in the Danish version A.²⁷ Admittedly Elen is something of a comic figure, who succeeds in part because of her youthful innocence. But what is the gender lesson to be learned from this performance?

Vésteinn Ólason has hypothesized that in a danced version of the ballad, a young girl, impersonating Elen, might have been taken by the hand by a man, impersonating the merman, and led out of the ring of dancers (*Sagnadansar* 360). If we imagine further that the ballad is sung by a woman, with the girl perhaps singing Elen's stanzas, then the gender message embodied in her performance is not that girls who disobey their fathers inevitably get punished, but rather that women's words, in the magical world of the dance at least, have the power to make unwanted men simply disappear. The female and male dancers would return to the ring, to the safety and support of the community, which no doubt often did have the effect of ensuring that the romantic interludes at such occasions ended happily, even when young women danced in the company of men, or when physically aggressive males were rejected by the young women. Interestingly the Icelandic churchmen, like Elen's own father, were less sanguine about the effects of communal dances and actually did succeed in enacting the prohibition of dancing in the eighteenth century. In its later reception then, perhaps by a silent reader rather than a performer, "The Ballad of Elen" would have provided access to dancing as a private, perhaps even guilty pleasure.

Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir has in fact made a comparable argument recently for a related genre, Icelandic folktales, arguing that the dances of elves and of the *huldufólk* (hidden folk) in some of these tales represent a return of the repressed scene of communal dancing.²⁸ The other ballad I wish to consider, "Kvæði af Ólafi liljurós"²⁹

27. Svend Grundtvig et al., eds., *Danmarks gamle folkeviser* (Copenhagen: Samfund til det danske literaturs fremme, 1853–1976), no. 39, 2.59–60. The Danish version B, which is not very closely related textually, ends with the advice that pretty young maids should not go to dances pridefully (2.60–63).

28. "How Icelandic Legends Reflect the Prohibition on Dancing," *Arv: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 61 (2005): 25–52.

29. ÍFk 1; Jonsson, *Types*, A 63.

(The Ballad of Olaf Lily-Rose), does in fact portray promenading if not dancing elves,³⁰ but unlike “The Ballad of Elen,” it does not end happily. When I first began to formulate this study, I wrote (in an unpublished abstract) that this ballad, by contrast with “The Ballad of Elen,” “follows a typical male quest pattern and is saturated with distrust for female sexuality.” I have since considered that the ballad, even though it does follow the adventures of a young man and the elfin maids who “done him wrong,” is not a typical quest romance in ballad form. Derek Brewer, writing on Middle English romances, has called them “symbolic stories” that reenact the psychosexual development of young men on the road to adult (hetero)sexuality and marriage.³¹ “The Ballad of Olaf Lily-Rose” begins, it would seem, in such a way; “Ólafur reið með björgum fram” (Olaf rode out along the cliffs, st. 1) and stumbled upon a place where elves live (in the folklore, they are often said to reside in rocks, such as the rocky elfin “cathedral” at Tungustapi).³² In the earliest version of the refrain to this ballad, Olaf has an errand and destination; he is on the way to a *byrðing* or merchant ship. Probably because the word *byrðing* was archaic, all other versions refer to *byrinn*, the breeze, which blithely blows, oblivious of the misadventures of Olaf and his kind.³³ In these versions, Olaf is riding aimlessly simply because

30. In a Swedish version, the elves are dancing: “Herr Olof rider för bergia, / finner en dans med elfver” (quoted in *Traditional Ballads* 117). So also in a Faroese version, Ólafur is invited to come into the dance and recite for the elf-maids (ibid). We might contrast this with the Icelandic version, st. 6, where Ólafur is invited to go into the elf-maids’ dwelling and drink with them (version A) or go into the rock and dwell with them (version D). On elves and the hidden folk, see further Tom Shippey, “*Alias Oves Habeo: The Elves as a Category Problem*,” in *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm’s Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. Tom Shippey (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 157–87.

31. *Symbolic Stories: Traditional Narratives of the Family Drama in English Literature* (London: Longman, 1988). Contrast also Olaf’s experiences in the ballad with the accounts discussed by Ruth Mazo Karras of young men growing up as knights, as university students, and as craft workers. She concludes that “In all cases young men were training for a share in power, a place in the hierarchy from which they could be unlike women. In all cases they were competing against each other or their elders.” *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 151.

32. See Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur*, 1:32–35; *Icelandic Legends Collected by Jón Árnason*, trans. George E. J. Powell and Eiríkr Magnússon (London: Bentley, 1864), 35–41.

33. Version A has þar lá búinn byrðing, “there lay ready a ship”; B and C have þá var /

young men must do so, they ride forth (*fram*), heedless of danger.³⁴ Four elf maids come out in succession, revealing their ornamental attributes: a golden hairband, a silver pitcher, a silver waistband; the fourth one speaks and invites Olaf in (st. 6). He declines on religious grounds: “Eg vil ei með álfum búa, heldur vil eg á guð minn trúa” (I will not dwell with elves; rather I will have faith in my God; st. 7).³⁵ Christianity disapproves of the very belief in elfin maids, not to speak of sleeping with them, for that is what their invitation implies. The elf maid suggests Olaf can have it both ways, echoing (or twisting) his words (incremental repetition at its most effective): “Þó þú viljir með álfum búa / samt máttu á guð þinn trúa” (Though you might want to dwell with elves, you still can have faith in your God; st. 8). Any reply Olaf might have made is elided, and in the next stanza she asks him to wait while she goes into a green grove (a *græna lund*—never a good thing in Icelandic ballads).³⁶ She goes over to a chest and drapes a cloak over her shoulders, presumably to hide her intentions (st. 10). She next goes over to a coffer, grabs hold of and removes a keen-edged dagger (here the incremental repetition provides a hallucinatory doubletake on her evil errand). Famously (for anyone who knows the ballad—and *everyone* in Iceland knows the ballad),³⁷ she says he must spare her just one kiss (st. 12). When

þar lá búinn byrinn, “then was / there lay ready the breeze”; D and E have a different refrain (see *Sagnadansar* 92–3, version II); version F and the best known modern version, descending from A. P. Berggreen, *Folke-Sange og Melodier* (Copenhagen: Jaeger, 1845), have *Blíðan lagði byrinn*, “the breeze lay (or blew) gently.” (Variant versions are labelled A–Z, and page references given for JH volumes, in *Traditional Ballads* 112.)

34. Thus in Grundtvig’s paraphrase, “Olav rider *frem* langs med klipperne.” In Icelandic, *með* can collocate with *fram* to mean simply “alongside,” and some of my informants have suggested it be translated that way. However, with *fram* isolated at the end of the line and repeated again at the end of the refrain (emphatically, after a delay), I think the sense of “onward” is at the very least suggested. In performance, the word sounds almost like a drone, underscored by the stomping feet of the participants (I refer the reader to the version by Voces Thules mentioned below).

35. In Faroese and Norwegian versions, he declines because he is engaged to marry (quoted in *Traditional Ballads* 118).

36. Cf. “Kvæði af vallara systrabana” (Ífk 15; *Sagnadansar* 246–47), st. 25, in which Ása says she is going to a green grove, when in fact she is going to fetch her father to seize the thief who raped and killed her sisters.

37. Icelanders often learn the ballad in elementary school, along with other folksongs; indeed, most Icelanders probably think of “Olaf” as a folksong, rather than as a ballad in particular. The ballad is the first to have been printed in an anthology of Icelandic poetry. See Gísli Magnússon and Jón Þórðarson Thóroddsen, eds., *Snót: Nokkur kvæði*

he leans down from his horse to do just that (half-heartedly, in almost all versions, but whole-heartedly in the earliest version), she stabs him, the incremental repetition again making the action appear to happen twice (st. 14–15). To refuse the sexual invitation of the elves is to invite death, even a double death in successive stanzas.

Back home, Olaf knocks on his mother's door and asks her to let him in, to his proper abode rather than an elfin one, where he belongs and which in a sense he never should have left. His mother asks why he looks the way he does, as if the elves have had some sport with him (“sem þú hafir verið í álfaleik”; st. 20). He has to admit that indeed, the elf maid deceived him (“álfamærin blekkti mig”; st. 21); she “done him wrong.” He asks his mother to get him a soft mattress, to return that is to the comfortable bed of his prepubescence. He asks his sister to bind his wound, the bloody token of his exogamous adventure. His mother leads him into bed and then kisses him, but by then he is dead. In the last line of the earliest version, we are told three bodies were buried the next day (st. 24); apparently Olaf's elfin adventure proves to be the death of every member of this fatherless family: mother, son, and sister.³⁸

“The Ballad of Olaf Lily-Rose” is often sung by men's choirs, or by groups of young men waiting outside the dance clubs of modern-day Reykjavík. The final word of each stanza, *fram*, meaning “onward, ahead,” recurs as a kind of bass drone urging the poem along to its conclusion. It may be in part because I had heard the poem performed in this way that I first associated it with men's voices. As a particularly noteworthy example, one might listen to the ballad as sung by members of the Icelandic folk group Voces Thules (currently available on YouTube).³⁹ One also hears the singers stamp their feet

eptir ýmiss skáld (Copenhagen: Kvisti, 1850), 200–206. From here it was reprinted in Icelandic school songbooks (see JH 7:lii–liii). “Olaf” is not unknown in English, having been translated in full four times (see Syndergaard, “*English Translations*,” 162); part of the original was included in *Songs of the Philologists*, a collection of songs (thirteen of them by Tolkien) sung by faculty and students at Leeds University during the 1920s (see *An Illustrated Tolkien Bibliography* online: www.tolkienbooks.net).

38. In other versions in other languages, Olaf was engaged to be married; hence Vésteinn's comment that “it spoils the ballad that the impending wedding is left out” (*Traditional Ballads* 113). While I think it is often worthwhile and illuminating to consult other versions, my aim in this study has been to make sense of the first recorded Icelandic version on its own terms.

39. One can also hear on YouTube versions of the related Faroese ballad, Ólavur

in what I am told (by Shaun F. D. Hughes, fellow contributor to this volume) is more typical of the Faroese heroic ballad performance style.⁴⁰

But Olaf Lily-Rose, his epithet suggesting perhaps some sort of floral panache, is not much of an emblem of questing masculinity. The one time he leaves home, intending to get some items off a merchant ship, he loses his way. He knows enough not to enter the rocky home of elves, from which he may never return; he has heard the relevant cautionary folk tales, perhaps from his own mother. But he is not experienced enough to know one cannot risk even a token kiss with these strange women; you never know where it might lead. One gender lesson this ballad imparts, then, is perhaps best understood as a mother's lesson, or a parental lesson at least: young men must be very careful when they first venture outside the domestic circle. There are other lessons, of course: a boy's best friend is his mother; there's no place like home; be careful when riding out among the rocks and lava plains of Iceland. There is even a misogynistic pleasure to be had in encountering beautiful *femmes fatales* in the safety of lyrical fiction.

Vésteinn (*Sagnadansar* 82) notes that some scholars have suggested that ballads might have been sung by mothers to their children “að stytta börnum stundir og fræða þau” (to pass the time for children and to instruct them); in his view, however, the subject matter was inappropriate and the ballads' more likely venue was the *kvöldvaka* or evening entertainment. Nonetheless, as Nína Björk has pointed out,⁴¹ Hreinn Steingrímsson reported from nineteenth- and twentieth-century informants that they had learned the texts and melodies from their mothers, who had hummed the tunes to their children (“Það var raulað við krakka”), as Jakobína Þorvarðardóttir (b. 1886) says of “The Ballad of Olaf Lily-Rose.”⁴²

Riddararós, with heavy metal (or “folk metal”/“pagan folk”) inflections, by the Faroese bands Týr and Valravn.

40. According to Marnersdóttir (“Women and Ballads,” 28), the chain-dance “is simple, consisting of three steps: two to the right and one to the left.”

41. “Eru sagnadansar kvennatónlist?” 150.

42. In Hreinn's *Appendix* to *Sagnadansar* (432); said of melody d, printed in *Sagnadansar* (406). Melody c of “Olaf” is the earliest recorded Icelandic ballad tune, printed by Berggreen in 1845 (*Folke-Sange og Melodier*, 12–13) as a parallel to Danish versions (Berggreen's first edition is rare and was not cited by Hreinn; I thank Susan

In contrast to the macho performance style of *Voces Thules*, then, one can listen to a number of older women performing the ballads *a cappella*. Their recordings are kept at the Arnamagnæan Institute in Iceland, and some of these are available online at Ísmús (Folkloric Sound Archive), including the one of “The Ballad of Olaf Lilyrose” by Jakobína, who makes the comment about *krakkar* (children) at the end.⁴³ The wavering voices of these singers, who sometimes forget where they are midway through the ballad, may provide some approximation of those eighty-year women in whom the ballad tradition lay for Snæbjörn Pálsson back in the seventeenth century. And while late medieval young men and women may well have had the gender lessons of the ballads imprinted on their very bodies as they performed like the other dancers around them,⁴⁴ they may first have felt the ballad tunes hummed into their infant ears, and heard the ballad lyrics spoken to them in their mother’s voice.

Boynton for helping arrange for me to see a copy at the Royal Library, Copenhagen). Hreinn publishes all known melodies for ballads ÍFk 1, 15, 35, 39, 45, 60, 83, 86, 88, 92, and 98. Concerning female performers, cf. also p. 432, tune IIb, learned from an old woman, Rannveig Gísladóttir (d. 1899); c, performed by Andrea Jónsdóttir (b. 1902) who learned it from her mother; d, Guðný Jónsdóttir (b. 1884), who learned it from her mother (so also III, Vd, VIb, VIIb); e, Ástríður Thorarensen (b. 1895), who learned it from a housemaid; g, Hjaltína Guðjónsdóttir (b. 1890), whose mother hummed the tune to her babies day and night; p. 433, tunes Ve and f, learned by a brother and sister (b. 1891) in childhood from their mother; j, Hulda Kristjánsdóttir (b. 1909), who learned it from her mother; Vla, Þórunn Bjarnadóttir (b. 1884), who learned it when she was eight from her fostermother; p. 434, VIId, Stefanía Sigurðardóttir (b. 1879), who learned it at her father’s and mother’s home, where it was often performed for the children; e, Þórunn Ingvarsdóttir (b. 1888), who learned it from her mother; f, Kristín Pétursdóttir (b. 1887), who learned it from women at their spinning wheels; VIII, Þorbjörg Pálsdóttir (b. 1885), who learned it from her kinswoman Þorbjörg; X, Hildigunnur Valdemarsdóttir, who learned it from her mother; and p. 435, XIa, Björg Björnsdóttir (b. 1913), who learned it from Guðrún Sigurjónsdóttir.

43. In addition, two ballad recordings (ÍFk 35 and uncat., see *Sagnadansar*, no. 88) by a male singer (Brynjólfur Sigurðsson) appear on the 1998 CD *Raddir*. For a professional recording (by a female singer) of five traditional ballad melodies (and four new ones), see Anna Pálina, *Sagnadans* (2004).

44. Judith Butler emphasizes the relationship between gender and the body: “Consider gender, for instance, as a *corporeal style*, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body” (*Gender Trouble*, 139–40). Butler has less to say, however, about the occasions in which such bodily attitudes are apprehended and rehearsed (such as, in this case, Icelandic ballad dances), or about the particular mental attitudes that are assimilated concurrently (as in Icelandic ballad lyrics).

Appendix: Translations

“The Ballad of Elen”

Translated by Paul Acker

Source: *Elenar ljóð*, in Vésteinn Ólason, *Sagnadansar* 93–94 (also see JH 3:249–50)

1. Little Elen sang so loud
(the leaf is on the linden)
a merman heard her 'neath the flood.
(’tis harder to untangle than to bind)
2. Elen asked her father once:
“Let me step out to the dance.”
3. “You shall not to this dancing go
where many a fool can ogle you.”
4. “Let fare the fool as best he can,
I shall betake me to the dance.”
5. Farewell, farewell, dear daughter mine;
your mother ne’er did such a thing.
6. Little Elen sang so loud
a merman heard her 'neath the flood.
7. The merman took his charger bold
set on it a saddle gold.
8. He took Elen by the hand,
tied her to his saddle-band.
9. As they rode beside a lake,
Elen craved a rest to take.
10. “I’ll gladly grant a rest to thee
if thou will vow to marry me.”

11. “Marry you, *mere man*? I’d rather not.”
—The merman vanished from the spot.

12. Elen made her way back home,
(the leaf is on the linden)
thanked God she had escaped from harm
(’tis harder to untangle than to bind).

“*The Ballad of Olaf Lily-Rose*”

Translated by Paul Acker

Source: *Kvæði af Ólafi liljurós*, in Vésteinn Ólason, *Sagnadansar* 91–92 (cf. Berggreen, 406; see also JH 1:24–28)

1. Olaf along the sea cliffs rode,
(the fire was burning red)
came upon an elves’ abode.
(a ship lay ready waiting ’neath the sea cliffs ahead)

[Berggreen version:

Olaf along the sea cliffs rode
(lost his way, found his way)
came upon an elves’ abode
(where fire was burning red; a gentle breeze was blowing ’neath the
sea cliffs ahead)]

2. There came out an elfin maid,
gold was woven in her braid.

3. Then came out a second one,
a silver pitcher in her hand.

4. Then came out a third young maid,
a silver sash about her waist.

5. Then came out a fourth young maid,
Straightaway these words she said:

6. "Welcome, Olaf lily-rose,
come inside and drink with us."
7. "I will not dwell among the elves
but rather trust in God himself."
8. "Though you dwell among the elves
you still may trust in God himself.
9. Wait for me a while or so
while I into the greenwood go."
10. She walked on over to a chest,
draped a cloak across her breast.
11. She reached into the coffer deep
took in hand a dagger keen.
12. "You must not ride away from us
until you spare me just one kiss."
13. Olaf leaned down from his steed
kissed the maid whole-heartedly.
14. She thrust the knife into his breast,
next his heart the blade did rest.
15. Much pain did Olaf then abide
when she stabbed him in his side.
16. Olaf saw his own heart's blood,
at his horse's feet it stood.
17. Olaf pricked his horse with spur
rode up to his mother's door.
18. He struck the door with open hand:
"darling mother, let me in."

19. “Where do you come from now, my son,
why are your cheeks so pale and wan?”
20. You look so black, you look so blue,
as if the elves had sport with you.”
21. “I cannot hide from thee for long;
an elfin maid has done me wrong.
22. Mother, lend me an eiderdown,
sister, a cloth to bind my wound.”
23. She led her son up to his bed;
When she kissed him, he was dead.
24. There was more weeping than delight:
(the fire was burning red)
three dead were buried in one night.
(a ship lay ready waiting ’neath the sea cliffs ahead).⁴⁵

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